all i know is, we're all in the dance

by aRegularJo

Summary

Because they both know by now that nothing is inevitable

or

Tessa always did like the epics

(now (even more) complete)

Notes

Hi (waves!) Insert mandatory disclaimer that I can't believe I made it over to RPF. I'm honestly not sure how I'm going to get to where I know this is going, but I really wanted to play around with the dichotomy of personalities here; the lines between is public and what is private and what is real and what is constructed; the stories we tell ourselves and what it says about us (and the person listening); the tension between choice and destiny; and the juxtaposition of the messiness and greatness that pokes through in all their public appearances. And somehow I've got forty pages of notes and timelines and vignettes fewer than two weeks later.

Obviously, beyond the publicly-confirmable dates everything is completely made up, and I hope it's all plenty fictional. 'Today' is ca. 2019, but hopefully that is clear.

Title is from a Feist song. I own nothing. Literally nothing.

See the end of the work for more notes
you think your dreams are the same as mine

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from "Poison and Wine" by the Civil Wars, aka the most popular song on this tag (for good reason).

NOTE NOVEMBER 2018: Post-completion, I added substantial notes on process, etc., to the end of each chapter. These are all *process* driven, about writing and managing plot, etc., and (again) not about the real people. It's like The Crown, I've decided. Anyways. Don't read unless you're looking for spoilers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

We all go round and round

Partners are lost and found

Looking for one more chance

All I know is

We're all in the dance

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i. Yesterday, Scott

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Tonight and tomorrow, there will be toasts and boasts (and a lot of roasts) about inevitability. Aunt Carol will say I knew it the first time they stepped onto the ice; her mother will point to her utter commitment to Scott at age nine and utter lack of commitment to any guy since that point in time (which, Kate, sure, that’s a little revisionist, but whatever). Poje and Chiddy and his brothers, with varying levels of explicit/or humilitating details, will dive into his dating track record from 2003 to 2015; that one time he slugged a douche hitting on Tessa at a Korean karaoke club post-Four Continents; and a few drunken soliloquies that, frankly, he had never remembered anyways, as proof positive that no other girl would ever measure up to ‘his T.’ The CBC will air an hourlong documentary, complete with commentary from every coach they ever had (including his hockey coach! The one he’d ditched for ice dance twenty-one years ago) providing ample evidence to support this hypothesis. Meryl will text Tessa I told you so.

They’ll laugh along with the stories, shake their heads at these proclamations, exchange silent conversations when people make a particularly outlandish claim. His arm will tighten around T’s neck, her hand will slide where it’s casually resting on his knee up closer to his thigh, fingerpads gripping his slacks until her knuckles whiten. They’ll shrink into each other, tighter and tighter into a protective ball.

Because they both know by now nothing is inevitable.

But they also know that once upon a time, a boy reached out his hand, and a girl tugged them
forward, and together they skated into their future.

And they didn’t let go.

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**ii. Nine Years Before Today, Tessa**

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Tessa had always been a quick study, strategic and unusually good at reading people and situations and reacting cannily and quickly and astutely. She had always suspected the reason she and Scott worked so well together was because she was analytical as a person and artistic as a performer, whereas he was a much more emotive person but a more technically gifted skater. Not that she wasn’t a damn good skater, thank you very much, but they were both very different and very perfectly balanced, as skaters (life was always another story. In life, they were a seesaw). It was one reason why she much admired the work of another Audrey-obsessed brunette, one Blair Waldorf, every Monday night while snacking on calorie-depleted air-popped popcorn with Meryl (Meryl liked Blair too, which was honestly the thing Tessa liked most about Meryl).

Put simply, Tessa hustled, hard and fast. So when Canada exploded after the Vancouver win, and they were suddenly awash in promotional opportunities and interview requests and reality-TV show pitches, she saw an opportunity where he saw distractions from reaping the mutual benefits of fame and hard work. There was a story to tell, to sell, and she knew she could prove as adept at creating a narrative as Canada’s sweethearts as she was at telling the story of star-crossed young lovers during a dance.

Maybe the stories weren’t too dissimilar, really.

“It’s how we stay on top,” she said to Scott, laying her case out sensibly as they drove back to Canton in early April. It was their first time together alone in literal months, certainly since winning the Games; before that, probably since Christmas. Hell, she could count on two hands the number of times they’d been totally alone since her surgery.

She missed him, even when he was right next to her always.

They’d just hung up a speakerphone conference call with a press rep from Skate Canada and the agent, Tom, and PR pro, Julia, that her dad had hired for them to discuss endorsement deals and appearance opportunities and the book they were now writing. Post-Olympic interviews had been conducted mostly in the week after the Games wrapped; while the brief circuit through early-morning shows from studios in Vancouver and then Toronto enabled them to beam into homes across North America, they’d wrapped relatively abruptly to get back to training for Worlds. And after Worlds, there had been some interest, and they had felt on top of the damn world, but they really were back to being virtual nobodies. Which was great, on a personal level, on a focus-on-skating-and-getting-healthy-level.

But. “It’s how we stay relevant.” She liked Meryl and Charlie just fine (well, Meryl was kind of a bitch, but most girls were bitches. It was fucking figure skating.). But if they wanted back-to-back golds in Sochi—which Scott definitely did, so they did—she already saw the two of them being the underdogs, the seeds already planted for a new narrative of beating their archrivals. Back-to-back golds was interesting enough, but it wasn’t hometown-kids-make-good, like they had been, and it wasn’t a comeback, like Meryl and Charlie would be. They didn’t have the best narrative. That might work against them.
One Olympic gold medal wouldn’t pay off Scott’s family’s second mortgage or buy her failing legs any extra time on the ice, but capitalizing on it could alleviate some of the problems caused by both.

He shifted, wary. “So, what, we get on a bunch of cereal boxes and use a certain cell phone, I put on makeup for a few magazine shoots, we go to parties and don’t get too drunk, talk about ourselves, and people … pay us?”

“And go on tour,” she reminded him. That had been settled weeks ago.

“And go on tour,” he amended. “That … that doesn’t sound so bad.” At the end of the day, Scott was the most competitive person she knew—she was the second, but he beat her in that department by a lot, whether it was on the ice against Charlie or in pickup hockey against Fedor and Ben or at charades against Meryl because Meryl loved charades and he thought it was funny that she cared so much or sometimes just against himself on a bike pretending he was Lance Armstrong. If this was what it would take, he would be there. There was one thing to make sure he knew, though.

“But it’s the story that’s important, you know. It’s not just talking to magazines or holding our medals and smiling. That’s why we do this. Not the money. I mean, it won’t be, like, hockey-player money, but it’ll be good. But the story is the major thing. We’ve got to keep them interested. In us.” Her eyes were wide, trying to capture his entire reaction.

“In us,” he repeated.

“Yes. Give the people what they want, and all.”

He snorted, an are you kidding here expression in his eye. “And what, exactly, is it that they want, Tutu?” Ah, yes, her favorite sexless nickname of his. Scott, as he did with almost everything, got bored of her name easily, and over the years had invented so many nicknames for her that she was pretty sure he could use one a day for a month and not repeat. Which one he chose to trot out clued her into how he was feeling about her at any given moment in time, and Tutu was particularly grating, had been since even before Gothenberg.

She considered her response. They wanted love, they wanted intimacy, they wanted a fairy tale, they wanted Canada’s sweethearts, they wanted a bit of intrigue, they wanted to feel invested and close and yet like they were left wanting. “A good story,” she replied after a beat, her tone firm. She leaned over to massage her throbbing right shin, encased in useless compression pants, her thumb bumping along a scar. Everything just … ached. Were you supposed to feel this tired at twenty?

“Well,” he said, finally warming to the idea. Or maybe he was just excited that they were finally a kilometer from a Tim Horton’s and could get some coffee. She could never really tell these days. “We’ve always been good for that, haven’t we, T?”

He grinned his stupid Scott grin, teasing and light and stunning and inviting. It was the one that had made her take his hand at seven and made her stomach flip at nine and made her bashful at eleven and made her follow him to Kitchener at thirteen and Canton at fifteen and made her cry at nineteen. But there was also regret, and a hint of guilt, the same undertones that had haunted his smile for so long and she thought she had made disappear for good because of the gold.

She wondered, for the first time, if this was actually a good idea.

But instead she smiled back, a resolute and satisfied line that exposed zero teeth, and nodded. “Good. I think this is a really good idea. And it’ll be good for us. To maximize this opportunity.”

She could do this.
They could do this.

He pulled into the Tim Horton’s. “Last stop before we cross the border. Let’s go.”

(Later, that comment felt like a metaphor.)

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iii. Four Years Before Today, Scott

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His relationships all failed because of Tessa, but not in the way the Internet people thought. They failed first and foremost because she was his job, and he cared about his job above all else.

(Side note, he never got why people didn’t get that. They saw the goofy kid from Ilderton, the open salt-of-the-earth country bro who liked to skeet shoot and drink a beer while watching a hockey game, and believed that version of him so easily, even when they know he left his home and his family as a kid to chase a fucking ice dance dream with a pretty girl he (mostly) viewed as a sister; even though logic dictated that if he didn’t love what he did, didn’t love it more than any one person, didn’t know that it was bigger than his individual wants and needs, why the fuck would he do any of that, make any of the choices he had made after the age of fifteen? He may not be Tessa-brilliant but dammit, he contained multitudes.)

He knew the looks and the touches and the performances and the closeness—and, fine, his mouth and attitude, and Tessa’s desire to constantly cultivate public interest for PR purposes—meant that the fan-boards and sometimes the media constantly speculated that whoever he was dating was jealous of Tessa, or that Tessa had it out for whoever he was seeing.

(Though honestly, for the record, part of that was Tessa’s ‘genius’ plot decision for that damn show, and yes, Cassandra had broken up with him after everything went to shit after Paris and she found out, well, everything—but that was because he had treated them both terribly, was a total asshat of a boyfriend to Cass. In retrospect, he would have thought a lot less of her if she had stayed with him).

Personally he always found a certain level of crazy-pants-ness in the jealousy theories: did anyone think the thought of dating Tessa *hadn’t* ever crossed his mind, not once in 17 years, or that he was a genuinely, intentionally cruel enough person to just cheat on both a girlfriend and his skating partner repeatedly? Did they not think the two of them were self-aware to see what everyone said was obvious, maybe interrogate it a little bit?

They had, and they knew. There was nothing to be jealous of—and hell, maybe a substantial amount to pity. Nope, at the end of the day, his success in life was inextricably coupled to hers, and any girlfriend would come second. That simple, irrevocable fact created a pretty fucked-up dynamic, no matter who he was dating.

(Tess eventually made him watch The Crown right around the time they, you know, actually being together, and when Queen Elizabeth’s dad told Philip She is the job, he totally got it.)

But he also got the assumption, he really did. There were plenty of consequences to the sacrifices demanded of a successful skating partnership—emotional, physical, financial—but the practical one was that in order to work with each other their individual needs were subsumed, selflessness and thoughtfulness toward each other flourished. Knowing her—frequently, better than he knew himself—was just second nature, on and off the ice. He enjoyed being around her, knew exactly how to make her laugh, felt more centered when she was around. At this point, after so many coaches and
therapists and competitions and physical injuries and emotional hurts, they couldn’t help it. Fuck, sometimes they didn’t even like it—when they would list out each and every way they were incredibly different people for a TV interview, they weren’t kidding; they had so little in fucking common that stretching toward each other’s perspectives was harder than the most complicated lift half the time. There was a reason they had spent half their partnership in therapy. Had they met any later than seven and nine, or spoken at all that first year at the rink, he doubted they would’ve lasted a season skating together.

(But when he took a step back and considered how Tessa chose him, how she stuck by him—in the early years, it really was her, making a decision and going for it with that preternatural vintage-Tessa determination, even at 8, that she would be an Olympian and it would be by his side—it overwhelmed him. Made his chest crack open. The enormity, day in, day out, of their lives twining around each other, stretching and growing together, was sometimes simply like astrophysics—the more you learned, the more wondrous and overwhelming and vast and solemn and accidental it felt, all at once. She had always shown faith in him; in turn, he would always trust her).

All of that made his decision inevitable, really. He told himself this as he packed up his Winnipeg life neatly in four suitcases to follow Tessa, yet again. He said this out loud to Kaitlyn, who was appropriately skeptical as she, open-mouthed, watched him pack.

Because Kaitlyn wasn’t jealous, and he wasn’t in love with Tessa, but jealousy and love would have been a lot easier to explain to the girlfriend he was currently dumping.

“So let me get this straight,” Kaitlyn, who was pretty and fun and great in bed and, honestly, in possession of a far easier and more compatible personality than Tessa, said again. She sighed and flattened a crease between her eyebrows. “When we started dating, and I said ‘so everyone in Canada thinks you’re fucking your partner,’ and you said—”

“Everything I said was completely true,” he emphasized. It was the first time he has subscribed to that policy and after 2013, he had wanted to get that right.

“I believed you. You said that it had been, at times, pretty messy between you, that you had slept together, and that it had indirectly led to your breakup with Cassandra.”

“Yes.” That had all been true. “And then you said, you two were retiring, partly because it had been seventeen years and you fucking needed to move on with your lives.”

“Also all true.”

“So that while you guys would do shows and promotional stuff, anything else was completely off the table, you were done with messy, and you weren’t looking back. At all.”

“Yes.” He pulled a line of shirts out of his closet and kind of …. rolled them together into a suitcase. His mom, and then Tessa, had always handled his packing; he’d never gotten very good at it.

“And Tessa and I became friends. I like Tessa. She gives you shit, she’s hilarious, she’s smart.”

“She likes you too.” He’d half-expected Tessa to filet her in Scotland, simply because Tessa was so goddamned smart and she could and she had before, but she didn’t; in fact, they’d done dramatic readings from *Outlander* with each other on an hourslong bus ride, giggling hysterically and yelling “SASSENACH” the entire time.

“And you guys were … I heard things, you know. And the looks, the touching, during the performances. But you were completely friendly, off ice. Well, minus when you two would start
gossiping about everyone around you. But. You treated her the way you treated Kaitlyn Weaver.”
Her voice trailed off.

“She was a totally platonic friend.”

“Is.” Kaitlyn’s tone was sharp.

“Is,” he amended quickly. 2013 had been good for one thing: when they had both tried to restart their
lives, they had had genuinely good intentions. They were grim and determined and crisped-up inside
and outside. They weren’t looking back.

“And now …. you are coming out of retirement, moving to Montreal, and breaking up with me.
Because you owe it to her. That’s what you said.”

Tessa had used those words first, but it was completely true so all he could do was wince and nod.
“Yeah.”

“But you … you are not dumping me for her?”

“When I said Tessa and I would never be together, that’s … that was always completely true, and it
still is.”

“I believed you then, I believe you now.” She scrutinized him. “The goddamn thing is I can’t figure
out why. On either account—why you’re doing this and why I believe that you’re not leaving to
shack up with her. And I … I can’t figure how I’m supposed to feel. Am I mad? Betrayed? Sad?
Guilty? Should I have done something different? Like … I genuinely don’t understand what is
happening here. You’re moving for a job and you’re acting like you had an affair with an ex.”

“Listen, without Tessa, I’m just an ex-ice dancer who’s going to ride out tours for the next couple of
years and then go back home to Ilderton and coach. Hell, without Tessa, I never left Ilderton and I’m
one of about fifty Moirs. With Tessa? I’ve got three Olympic medals, and a shot at two more
medals.” He grinned bracingly, cockily. “And I want those medals.”

“But, why do we need to break up?” Only a few months earlier, they’d laid on a mattress in a fixer-
upper he’d bought on a lake outside London (a lake that Tessa had loved as kids). Sketched out a
future, two beers warming on the floor next to them as they whispered.. “If you’re not going to be
with her, why does this affect us?”

And that …. is much harder to explain. “Because Tess and I need to do this right. Hell, I need to do
this right. And I need … I need to treat you right, too. I’d be a shitty boyfriend, Kait. Tessa and I … I
… fucked up a lot of things, before we retired, and our friendship, our partnership —business,
artistic, all of the above—was pretty close to collateral damage. It wouldn’t be fair to try and be with
you at the same time, and it would eventually—not right away, but eventually—destroy the
comeback if I can’t focus on skating. We have a two-year plan and we’re sticking to it. It sucks—or
fuck, maybe it’s just that I suck—but I know I can’t do both, and I … wanna be better this time. I
know trying to do so wouldn’t be fair to either you or my career.” Not like last time.

“To me or Tessa.”

“Tessa is my career.” When he was with Tessa, he was half of something extraordinary, and he
wasn’t going to apologize for wanting that again. He knew he was willing to follow her to the ends
of the earth for that. And he knew that he missed her, and that he had one last shot to get it right, with
her.

(And honestly, he liked sex—he really really liked sex—but asking him to choose between sex with
anyone else or dancing with Tessa, and it would have been a really close call that actually wasn’t that tough at all.)

(Of course, sex with Tessa topped either of those things, but that was off the table and obviously wouldn’t be mentioned in this context.)

“She was. It doesn’t have to be. After Sochi, you made a choice that she wasn’t going to be.” Really, the choice had been mostly Tessa’s—*I want out Scott, please*—just like the choice after Vancouver had been mostly his, but it wasn’t the time to tell her that. “Right now, you’re choosing her.” She sighed, and stood. “Well, then. This is the most … bloodless breakup I’ve ever had, since I can’t be mad at you. Because I know you believe the bullshit coming out of your mouth, which is why I both believed you and can’t be too totally mad with you, but everyone’s right, about the two of you. You didn’t lie to me, fine, but there’s a difference between truth and honesty, and you failed at the more important one.”

“That’s a little unfair—”

“No, it’s not. I don’t know if you’re actively in love with her now, and what you have with Tessa is special, sure, but it’s really fucked up, and you’re just … really, truly incapable of seeing that. And how it impacts other people. Any of this. I hope, for your sake, however it works out between you two, you get your shit worked out. For you. Because this is kind of sad, and I expected better from you.” Her tone was grim, but resolute.

“She kissed his cheek. “Good luck with this comeback, I guess. See you in Korea.” Honest to gd, it sounded genuine.

Kaitlyn was right; it was hopelessly fucked up; by twenty years of trying to be too many things to each other and hurting each other and therapist-diagnosed codependency and yet persevering through anyways because when they were good, they were Olympians, and that wasn’t something you just threw away when stuff got hard and the shit hit the fan.

So yeah, it was more like, his relationships ended because he always put his career first, and also, he was yoked to Tessa, linked by friendship and responsibility and history and guilt and sure, attraction and love and two decades of chasing a singular dream together, day-in and day-out. Those statements might be interdependent, but they were actually independent issues to deal with, and that made him wish it could just be solved with a catfight in chocolate pudding.

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*iv. Twenty-one Years Before Today, Tessa*

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They kissed twice, when they were ‘dating.’ They rarely spoke, because he was a ten-year-old boy and she was so moonstruck—she had never been good with people (except for him and the rest of the unending sprawl of the Moir clan, somehow), too intense and energetic and introverted, and he was easygoing and gifted and popular with everyone from the time he first learned how to smile (she craved that quality about him, craved *him*, from the time she was too young to know any differently)—that he physically made her too nervous to speak. But they were boyfriend-girlfriend, Cara and Jordan had said, so one day after practice she marched up to him and planted one on him. Almost like an experiment.
He stared at her for a very long minute, and she waited uncomfortably. Then he kissed her again, longer and with a little more force than she had used.

As a grade 3-er, she recognized this as a kiss much more akin to how grown-ups kissed.

After about eight seconds he stopped abruptly, turned, and walked away. The next week his friends called on his behalf to ‘break up’ with her (one of them actually said, We need to focus on our skating partnership). She felt … something (maybe devastation? Maybe disappointment? Maybe a resignation or even a grim satisfaction that some feeling she hadn’t been able to articulate had just been proven right all along?) but when the invitation to the National Ballet School came, official and in a thick envelope, a few months later, she told her mother to throw it away. “I’m going to dance, on the ice, with Scott.”

(If she’d known she was making a choice, she mused years later, she wondered if she would have behaved any differently.)

(She is doubtful she would have.)

Chapter End Notes

SPOILERS AHEAD—These comments were written post-publication and reflect on the whole piece. If you’re here for the first time, skip ‘em and enjoy!

One of the questions I got asked the most in writing this was how I kept it all straight and not lose the thread of the plot. I’ll get into how I mapped the structure in a few chapters, but wanted to speak/write a bit to the origins of the story/why I chose to tell it in what might be a very nonlinear fashion. The backbone of RPF was very much the problem and solution here. While I’d followed figure skating prior (rooted for Davis/White in 2010 and 2014, because patriotism), I didn’t make it here until this year’s Olympics. When I started to read more, I wasn’t seeing a ton that reflected my general take: that there was a deep romance there, as well as a messy, fairly dark history. And there was so much melodrama in the actual story—when I eventually started trying to explain their history to a real-life friend, she said, “Are you fucking shitting me?” at every turn: the childhood friendship between a ballerina and a hockey player; the preternatural ability; the surgeries; Fedor and the Pelletier rumors; the identical girlfriends; the reality show; the rivalries; the judging scandals; the wedding-dress shoot; The Lift; the bucket of rice; the interviews; the Hugs; the Looks. It was a lot. It was super-messy. It was endlessly interesting.

So the story itself felt like there was a lot there, but I wasn’t interested in writing yet. And then I finally watched the TV show. And when Cassandra disappeared after Paris, showing up not at all in the final episode about the Final, I thought, “Well, this is VERY INTERESTING.” And I started thinking. A lot.

The tension between a couple, told in vignettes, is a style I’d done before (see The Newsroom and The Martian). The themes came pretty early too, since they were pre-baked, and aligned to things that are endlessly interesting to me. And I knew that I wanted it to feel a bit mythical (‘Tessa always did like the epics” as a tagline came early, but I didn’t know what to do with it immediately; “because they both knew by now that
nothing was inevitable” started much more intentionally as a theme) and that I wanted some very structural elements to reflect that: three Olympics, three tries at a relationship. Repeated lines. Enough unreliability in the narrative to make you wonder what’s true and what’s not.

But it was also sort of boring to me. Drained of tension. It was like reading the last chapter of a book first. So the feelings became really important, that heady, mixed-up feeling, that evolution, that timelessness, that juxtaposition. And the themes started to take precedence a little too. I wanted to avoid telling the story in the same way we’d heard before, and the juxtaposition of events over time became dramatically interesting in its own right. It became my way of subverting the narrative. My goal was for everything to be entirely plausible underneath what we see publicly (within bounds), but using it as a launching pad to create rich, contradictory, flawed, interesting characters.

I definitely wouldn’t have finished this, at this scope, if there wasn’t the strong RPF backbone, so there’s a big debt there in coming up with the foundations of the story. I knew I wouldn’t get twisted into the story, like Lost did, even as I attempted a puzzle-box format, because I had specific events (Sochi, Montreal) and time hounds. Filling them in because almost like a jazz dance.

The first chapter then really naturally became what I saw as the four major inflection points in the story, and you’ll note that most of what happens is already filled in here: they make a very mature commitment at a young age without knowing what they’re getting into; they make very clear, intentional commitment to selling a narrative in 2010 despite an already-messy romantic history and being in a fraught, emotionally distant place; they make enormous sacrifices to re-prioritize each other in 2015, in what’s clearly a last-ditch attempt at any sort of personal and professional relationship; they get married in 2019. We immediately get a really strong sense of their personalities—they’re both incredibly driven professionals, despite concerted efforts sometimes to appear to the contrary; Tessa’s savvy about The Story, sometimes to an extreme; Scott’s often willfully blind to his own bullshit, but nevertheless pretty emotionally astute and an emotional rock; there’s a deep codependency, a lot of love and laughter, and a very real awareness of the work and sweat, as well as a cognizance of what the public thinks of them. We really have the entire story here already. And since the how and the who and the what and the where and the when are all out of the way, we’re freed to explore the really interesting stuff: the why and the how.
please don't ever become a stranger whose laugh i could recognize anywhere

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for the positive reception! Definitely motivating to get this chapter out. I slightly updated the previous chapters — the parantheticals are supposed to be asides from "today" (which is the wedding day) as they reflect on what's happened, which I don't think was clear. Like, at all. But hopefully a little better now.

Will hopefully get a chance to write more this week. Reviews definitely keep me motivated! So much fun stuff to play around with here.

Chapter title is from "New Year's Day" by Taylor Swift which ... is actually a really really phenomenal song.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

i. Eighteen Years Before Today, Tessa

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Given her general obsession with movie musicals, it was unsurprising that Tessa was adamant that she see Moulin Rouge! and that Scott come for research; at some point, Cara and Jordan were set to chaperone, given that Tessa had just turned twelve. But Jordan bailed because she had much better things to do with her time, and when Scott showed up alone and Tessa expressed surprise, he simply raised his eyebrows and reminded her, "I'm over thirteen, Tutu."

She shifted in her seat in the theatre. It was weird, to spend time alone with Scott. They were always together—took family vacations together; spoke in a coded twinny language of run-on sentences half the time; shared a Marvin the Martian pillow on car rides; held hands for three hours a day—but nearly always with family or coaches or friends. It felt adult, to do this, a preview of how their relationship might look if they ended up moving to Kitchener like they had discussed maybe doing in a season or two. Scott looked older, tougher, almost wary, in his white T-shirt and with the chain around his neck and his fists balled in the pockets of his jeans. He looked cool, almost like a baby punk, just like Charlie. And she definitely saw the looks the other girls in the theatre gave the two of them, felt self-conscious in her pink-and-yellow polo shirt and teal Keds.

Whatever. He was her skating partner. She winked at one of the girls as she followed him, popcorn in hand, into the theatre.

She bounced on the edge of her seat and he warned, "No. Singing. Along." She’d gotten the soundtrack for her birthday and insisted on playing it every day in the car ride from the rink.

"But dancing’s OK?" she smirked, and he groaned. She shimmied her shoulders and nudged him. "Come on. The dancing will be GREAT. We’re going to have to practice some of it this fall."

"Try not to get us kicked out of the theatre, deal?" he replied with a smile as the lights went down. She shoved the popcorn in front of him as a peace offering.

She was so excited by the movie, engaged by the choreo, enthralled by the music, that she didn’t
notice Scott becoming steadily more uncomfortable. But finally, just as Christian and Santine are starting to do it (this movie is so much better than Titanic, she thought), Scott’s hands clapped over her eyes and ears. The heck?


“This is the PG-13 part,” he insisted. “You’re not thirteen.”

“You’re not my brother,” she retorted, elbowing him deeply. It was always her line when he got too protective; what she meant (though she didn’t know it) was I’m not your little sister. “You don’t get to see the good stuff and I don’t.” To make her point more bluntly: “I wanna see the sexy stuff too.”

“We’re all missing the sexy stuff if you don’t shut up and get back to your little middle-school date,” someone in front of them said, turning around to scowl, and Tessa sank back in her seat. Scott—either mortified at the attention or offended to have to watch this next to her—took off for the bathroom.

She chatted mindlessly about how amazing movie was, practiced some of the choreo, as soon as they were out of the movie, waiting for her mom to pick them up, but he barely listened to her. She stopped dancing. Toed the sidewalk with her sneaker. Said, “So what was that?”

He finally looked at her, eyes bright and daring. “You’re too young.”

“Bullshit,” she said, since she was in a phase where she really liked swearing at every opportunity (Out loud, at least. She retained a great affinity for all the best curse words, especially fuck, over the years.). “That’s crazy. You were seeing rated R movies two years ago, so that’s just dumb.” She was always so jealous that he was the youngest of three boys and Alma just had a seen it all attitude about a sip of beer or driving underaged around the farm or seeing R-rated movies, an attitude that Kate would just never possess, especially with her.

“It’s different for you, OK? It just is.”

“That’s so sexist,” she cried, stepping into his space. Jordan had been teaching her about feminism.

“No it’s not, because it’s not for every girl, it’s just for you,” he asserted, not stepping back either. “That means it’s not sexism, it’s just a rule.” Jordan had been teaching him a lot about feminism, too, though Tessa wasn’t sure if it was sticking.

And then he did something she’d never seen before.

Scott Moir blushed.

It was so intense, so sudden, it almost made her flush too.

She dropped her eyes as her chest swelled, and smiled involuntarily.

Goddammit, she thought she was over that stupid crush.

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ii. Eleven Years Before Today, Scott

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“Scott!” Tessa’s voice was sharp, disapproving, and directly in his ear as Poje helped him stand. Eminem pulsed in his ears, epileptic disco lights danced across his eyes. “What the hell are you
doing?” She grabbed his hand, dragging him through the crowd of people that had materialized—the thirty-odd celebrants had been flung across the club minutes earlier, but were somehow on top of him and this jagweed—before wrapping an arm around his shoulder. “Charlie! Jeremy! Deal with … that, would you?” She called behind her, where the asshat was rubbing his jaw. “I’m fine, he’s fine,” she brushed off Joannie, Yuna, Meryl.  “I think he’s had too much. I’m taking him home.” Under her breath, so only he could hear, she muttered, “Jeffrey is going to kill you. Not to mention Marina. And Skate Canada. Oh, and your mom.” Trust Tessa to remind him of all the rules he’d broken and people he’d disappointed, leaving herself off like some fucking martyr.

“He was a jerk, Tessa,” Scott insisted, voice loud but breezy, trying to articulate words and not trip at the same time. It was harder than he expected. “He needed to step off.”

“He was tall, and he was British, and he was a little handsy, yes, but I could have handled it.” She waved down a cab, giving the address of the hotel through the window. “You’re too drunk.” After she made shoved him in, she climbed in too, pulling out a compact to check her hair. He missed the ugly red from last year, that had mostly been a fuck-you to Marina and her mother. He missed the light brownish-auburn-whatever shade she’d had as a kid. Hell, he missed the dopey bangs. Marina had decreed that darker hair, matched to his, would be more striking, more pleasing to the judges. Marina was right; Tess looked amazing. But this new Tessa was entirely too grown-up for his liking.

Which is probably why he’d punched the guy.

“You and your older guys,” he muttered, and she blushed, but resolutely pretended not to hear him, still fiddling with her hair and her reflection. Whatever. He pulled her close, dipped his nose into her collarbone, the place that he’d figured out long ago she smelled most quintessentially Tessa. “We fucking did it, Tess,” he rasped. “We won! Right on track.” He kissed her cheek and leaned back triumphantly, letting out a woo. He thought he might’ve cackled, he wasn’t sure. She smiled, anger dissipating. “Yeah, we really fucking did, didn’t we?” She squeezed his good hand and leaned over. “Let me take a look.” She pulled at the hand still curled in his lap, and flattened his fingers, aligning hers on top of his gently. “We have gala practice at nine AM. I hope you didn’t break anything.”

“Just bruised, I think,” he mumbled, experimentally bending them so they were clasping hers—a real grasp, not a dance hold. “I’m sorry if I made you angry.” She would forgive him.

She sighed. “If you got arrested in South Korea, way more people than just me would get angry. But you’re not my brother; you don’t need to defend my honor.” It was a line she’d been using with more frequency and he never got why; he clearly knew that. (He eventually got why.)

She pulled at his fingers. “I don’t think it’s broken but I’m going to tell Joannie to find somewhere else to crash tonight. We need to put this on ice and you need to sleep this off. This is why they had you room with Jeff and not Andrew, you know. So you wouldn’t get into trouble.”

He tried not to roll his eyes. Seriously, telling him that he was going to Get Into Trouble was probably everyone’s favorite thing to say to him. At this point it was a litany that echoed through his days and conversations and thoughts: Kate about drinking too much; Jim about driving too fast; Marina on how he took his Feet for granted too much; Igor on how his temper was too much (“passion” but that was coded bullshit); Meryl about using foul language too much (who the fuck said whoopsy daisy instead of shit in 2008?); Chucky about brawling in hockey too much; Jeffrey about partying too much; his mother about having too much fun; his father about his responsibility to his skating career (and, always unspoken, the extended-family-wide financial investment in it);
Charlie about not fucking with Tessa; Danny about not fucking Tessa; Tessa about everyone and everything because Tessa just worried and Tessa was always there and therefore witnessed the most things and worried about the most things. He was always somewhere between tired and pissed off when he thought of the ways everyone else thought he could Get Into Trouble (though with Tessa, he mostly just hated that he made her worry so much. Disappointed Tessa was always the hardest Tessa to take). The only thing adults liked doing more was reminding him You’re A Good Kid Scottie, And Such A Talented Skater.

He wouldn’t be surprised if they all gave him a gold medal just for making it to twenty-one that fall without derailing his career, getting a girl pregnant, or crashing his car.

He very much wanted to tell them all exactly where they could shove it. In detail. Except for Tessa. Obviously.

He slung an arm around her and tucked her head against his shoulder as she thumbed a message on her cell to Joannie. “Thanks Tess,” he muttered sleepily, kissing her head and flashing her a smile that even he realized was dumb and drunk. “Don’t know what I would do without you.”

“No get in bar fights,” she mumbled back, but didn’t say anything else. She did relax, though, her limbs settling silkily against him. They zipped through the quiet, wet streets of Seoul, over to their hotel. She threw money and a Jeongmal chinjeolhaseyo at the driver, then guided them through the lobby, taking them the long way to avoid Ashley, the sixteen-year-old American whose mom had stopped her from going out with the rest of the group that evening (he felt sorry for her; Kate had often stopped Tessa from going out when she was chaperoning and Tessa was under eighteen and Tessa had hated it), as well as their parents, who were enjoying a nightcap in the hotel bar. It was rare; for all four of them to come and for Tess’s parents to be friendly with one another, and he knew Tessa didn’t want to disturb that moment with a drunk and bruised and assholish Scott. They stumbled into the elevator, his hands on her hips in a loose hug as he pushed her into the car. She thudded against the wall.

“One sec.” She ducked under his arm to press 15. “There.” She ran her hand along his forehead. “You OK?” Her eyes were wide, and concerned, and a little glassy.

Impulsively, he leaned his whole body forward, forehead tipped on hers and nose nuzzling nose. Her eyes flicked up, meeting his with sureness—and in an instant, she looped an arm around his neck, pressed her chest into his, covered his opened mouth with hers. Trust Tess, he thought hazily, to make the first move. They’d kissed before—as kids, once (twice?); playing Seven Minutes in Heaven at Charlie’s; the first time Tessa got drunk, at a pool party at Meryl’s house; and, of course, after the Turin thing—but this immediately felt more insistent, ready and real. Her fingernails, manicured a perfect baby-pink for the competition, scratched at the nape of his neck, and he pressed his thumbs in her hips hard enough he sort of hoped they bruised. He hadn’t liked the Fedor thing—hadn’t liked the guy at all, actually—but this greedy, assertive Tessa was wholly new, and wondrous. She did not seem like the preteen he’d sworn to protect, at all. He knew he shouldn’t, but he tilted his hips into her, started sucking down her neck as she moaned. Whoa. He tried that again. “We’re here,” she said, her voice tight and strangled. Pupils dark, she stared at him for a minute before she darted her head out—the entire Skate Canada delegation, and half of France’s, was on this floor.

Clear.

She tiptoed down the hallway, fearful of anyone popping out of their room, but he followed closely, an arm wrapped around her midsection. Nobody would be unclear about what was happening if they were to see them, but he fundamentally did not care. So what? Seriously, so what? He started
pressing kisses down her spine as she fumbled with the key card. “Scott,” she hissed, but not annoyed. He pushed her hair out of the way and went for her clavicle again. “Sc-ott,” her voice keened into a whine as his fingers pressed into her stomach; finally, the door tumbled open. He followed her tilting body in and kicked the door shut.

She stumbled a bit but turned and straightened, looping her arms around his neck and taking a moment. “Hey,” she said.

He cupped her chin, ran a thumb over her cheekbone. She shivered. “Hi,” he whispered back, stepping toward her. “You OK?”

She grinned, that damn grin that could probably stop time or light a city. “Never better,” she said, then checked. “Your hand?”

“Oh, still not broken,” he rolled his eyes, then squeezed her hip to prove it. She leaned in, wrapped her thin arm around his neck, and started kissing him again before pushing him toward the bed.

He learned a lot of things about Tessa that night—her gasp when he bit the inside of her thigh; the snap of her sinewy-strong leg muscles around his waist; several new and intriguing noises, whines and keens and groans and moans; that she was as direct in telling him what she wanted as she was in telling Marina what she would and would not do; that she fucking with the same ferocity and determination that she brought to shredding any opponent. That had always been his favorite part about Tessa, how strong she was when everyone looked at her and saw some prissy bookish snobby fragile ice princess, when just underneath the surface she was the strongest person he’d ever met. Tessa Virtue was going to conquer the fucking world.

But mostly he realized that fucking Tessa was a lot like dancing with her: the push-pull to be better for each other; the synchronicity of movements; the anticipation of yes right there now how did you —; the muscle and the eye contact and the slickly tactile grip; the locked-in feeling that there was literally nothing else in the world, no crowds holding in applause or parents drinking cocktails in the lobby or coaches waiting, gimlet-eyed, to tell them everything that was wrong with them; the here, the there, the everywhere. The overwhelming Tessa-ness, usually geofenced and compartmentalized to the rink.

And the talking and the laughter.

Always, the talking and the laughter.

He awoke the next morning with a splitting hangover and an aching hand. It took him a moment to remember where he was, and then he was mostly surprised that Tessa wasn’t still zonked out—she had been drinking too, before he’d slugged the guy, and she usually needed about four coffees and an hour of silence at a five AM practice. In fact, the room was—completely empty?

A keycard whirred in the door, and he grabbed the sheet, hoping it wasn’t Joannie. Tessa rounded the corner, startled to see him up.

“Hey,” she said, and he got a good look—leggings, clean blank face, hair swept back into a perfectly severe ballerina bun, a Canada sweatshirt she’d stolen from him months ago. Plastic bag from the hotel commissary in hand. “I got supplies.” She tossed it on the bed. Aspirin, an ice pack with Korean all over it, two litres of water, four bananas. “Joannie crashed with Kaitlyn but she’ll be back soon. She knows you slept here so it’s fine if you’re still here,” she sighed, “But you do need to put shorts on. Do you have a T-shirt? I think I have one of yours actually. And we need to get our stories straight. And use the ice. We have to be on the bus in an hour and I don’t want you dropping me today.”
“Our stories straight?” he repeated slowly. Also, he never dropped her.

“Yes. In case anyone asks.” She handed him a shirt he’d gotten ages ago at an Eminem concert with Charlie. She’d stolen it years ago. Her face shifted slightly into press-conference mode as she grabbed one of the waters and crooked the puffy cotton out of the aspirin bottle. “Everyone saw you slug the guy. Everyone knows you crashed here. We need to figure out what you’re telling Marina. And, obviously … this,” she waved a hand between them, “is not getting mentioned. You just slept it off here. It’s not the first time we’ve shared a room so I think we’re fine.”

“This?” he repeated. He felt very dumb.

“Yes, Scott, focus.” She waved a hand in front of his face. “Seriously. Are you still drunk?” She handed him two aspirin.

“‘M fine,” he mumbled.

“OK. I need you awake,” she said, sitting on the opposite bed before standing to rustle it up.

“You’re ridiculous.” He leaned over and grabbed her arm, tugging her backwards onto the bed with him. “T. Chill out. Nobody’s going to care who slept in which bed.” He was getting the distinct feeling she was not OK with last night.

“I am chill,” she said, her face deadly calm but her body subconsciously aligning to his anyways.

“Scott, last night was bad, you get that right? If you hitting a guy in a bar comes out on some skating forum, Skate Canada will kill you.”

“We were singing karaoke at a club in South Korea. Nobody will care.”

“We’ll say it was a misunderstanding. You accidentally hit him.”

“Nobody will believe that. That’s ridiculous.” The guy’s nose had been bloody, Andrew had seen it, he didn’t just fall into Scott’s fist.

“It was loud, it was noisy, it was only the three of us, and that guy thinks you’re my brother because you told him I was too young for him. Even if they don’t believe it, nobody will question it, because nobody wants that answer or to suspend you. You need to tell Marina before Meryl does, because she’ll yell less. It was a … kerfuffle. We were celebrating the win and things got out of hand. And I’ll say—” she took a deep breath, figuring out her (their) next move, “—I’ll say that I didn’t like the guy. That he was being too aggressive and I wasn’t feeling safe, and your partner-radar pinged and you came to help. That you swiped him as you were trying to pull me out of the way as he went for my arm. Yeah. That works.” Her voice was careful as she worked out the mental angles.

His head was slowly clearing, so he nodded. He never understood why Tessa cared so much about the skating politics, but he trusted her, and yeah, Marina would definitely care less if he told her this version versus Meryl saying It looked like that guy was hitting on Tessa and Scott got hotheaded, again as she ate a yogurt with three blueberries and five almonds and a prim smirk.

“You got it?” she pressed, running a nail over the shell of his ear, pulling him back to her. “Scott?”

“Yeah. I got it,” he repeated.

“Good. And this—” it wasn’t a question, “—Obviously, I know this doesn’t change anything. We’re a skating team first. Nothing changes. Alright?”

His eyes creased. “Sure. Do you … want to talk about it?” he asked because it was the gentlemanly
thing to do, and also because it was Tessa and he told her everything, always. And he kind of wanted to talk to Tessa about how he had hooked up with this amazing girl last night.

Wait. He should probably work on the wording first so he didn’t piss off either Friend-Tessa or the amazing girl he’d hooked up with last night.

“I … I mean, yeah, Scott, that was … good, but I mean, my body has basically been an extension of yours since I was seven.” She’d mentioned last year that she didn’t remember life without him and the baldness of the statement had made him shiver. “If it wasn’t good I think we should have reconsidered our career, here,” she chirped.

He captured her hand to quell its mindless anxious enticing path. “Virtue and Moir are a good team at everything,” he boasted, pulling her hand to his heart.

She smiled, the close-lipped smile that was mostly eyes and he noticed she broke out sometimes for him, but very rarely. “Yeah. And that—skating—comes first, will always come first. So I’m not going to be … clingy, or whatever.” The words sounded rehearsed, and familiar. He cocked his head. “Scott, we have Vancouver in two years. That’s everything. In the rink, day-in, day-out, that’s the goal. That’s the plan. That’s where my head is at. Not … this. Yours is there too right?”

“Absolutely,” he promised, because it was. He wouldn’t do any of this if winning gold wasn’t the goal. “Though … that was fun, T. That was … that was good. You said so. So I mean if it were to happen again, at like a competition or show … I wouldn’t be opposed.”

“Competitions,” she echoed slowly. “And shows.”

“Nothing that would interfere with prep, or training. Just, you know. Stress relief. Fun.”

“Fun between partners,” she sounded almost amused.

He half-remembered a long-ago crush of hers. That had been … pre-Fedor. Pre-Shawn, the lunkhead Knight back home she’d dated for most of their first senior season. They were kids. Hadn’t meant anything.

They could do this.

“A partner thing. Like twizzles.” Sex twizzles.

“Sex twizzles?” She raised an eyebrow skeptically and he laughed. Mind meld. “If it were to happen,” she said, slowly. “I wouldn’t be opposed. But skating …”

“Always first,” he swore.

“OK, fine,” she said, swerving and sitting up as he leaned in for a kiss. “Joannie will be here any minute, and we now have forty-five minutes for breakfast before the bus. You need to go change, and then I’ll meet you in twenty to talk to Marina. Shower, please, you smell like sex and Korean karaoke. Which honestly, kind of smells like hookers. And whatever the fuck Jeffrey lectures you on —just apologize, Scott. And remember: misunderstanding, I was scared, you accidentally hit him.” She stood at the foot of the bed. “Got it?”

“Aye aye,” he said, grabbing his clothes and slinging his jeans on. He kissed her cheek, the way he always did when they said goodbye.

“Oh and Scott?” he said as he unlocked the door. “I want that shirt back. I sleep in it a lot.” Then she winked.
iii. Seventeen Years Before Today

Tessa had had a crush (ugh, she hated that word) on Scott for forever; that she knew. It was embedded in her subconscious right around knowing that both her brothers were left-handed and that there was no possible way her dad could go on so many business trips.

But she always remembered the first time she realized she was honest-to-god be in love with him.

(First time that she had fallen in love with him, to be completely clear. Not last, by a long shot.)

The new high school in Kitchener was noisy and loud, with everyone going in every direction but ultimately going in no direction. She mentioned to Scott once that she didn’t like the lack of uniforms, thought it signaled that students didn’t take their educations seriously enough, and he drawled back That’s because they don’t, T. She had just turned thirteen before they moved, weighed almost 100 pounds, had skipped grade eight, ate three oranges and a yogurt for lunch in the library because Scott and Andrew were literally the only people she knew and they had fifth-period lunch. Nevertheless, she was Tessa Virtue, and she was determined to conquer this distasteful rowdy ecosystem.

By October she’d decided she liked the most popular senior on the hockey team, a tall and broad-shouldered blond by the name of Eric, who was also class president and, it was rumored, going to study law at York. The boys would skate around her at the rink as she daydreamed through warm-downs, occasionally made kissing sounds. She didn’t know why she liked him, other than the fact that she simply should.

Not that she had ever, like, talked to him, or anything.

At the first dance of the year in October (she was so excited, had picked out a hot-pink dress with Jordan, had curled her hair as carefully as she had at Novice Nationals, had Bronwyn’s mom take photos of her and Scott together to send back to her mom and Alma and Carol), though, she sent Bronwyn over to see if he wanted to dance, and Bronwyn came back shaking her head.

Something twisted inside of her, and twenty minutes later Scott found her sitting outside the caf.

“What’s up kiddo?” he drawled, and she glared at him. He hadn't even wanted to come, but she had begged, and he had said OK. But he and Andrew, after dropping her off at the dance, had met up with some friends outside and gotten slightly buzzed, and she could still see the pilfered vodka shining in his merry expression. Scott was self-conscious on ice sometimes but he loved dancing, shut down the dance floor at every opportunity (and that was saying something, especially at a Moir family wedding), and had been tearing it up with Katie, some girl in his geometry class that he’d sort of been hanging out with. Or maybe it had been Olivia from his French class (He had thanked her for taking him to Moulin Rouge! the previous year because he knew the phrase Voulez vous coucher avec moi ce soir and it was tremendously helpful for flirting with girls in French class, which: classy, teenaged Scott).

“What’s fun?”

“I am. You don’t seem to be though.”
“It’s nothing. It’s stupid.”

“It can’t be both nothing and also stupid, Ms. Future Lawyer.”

She scowled at him, then sighed. “I just … I asked Eric—” She knew Scott didn’t like the guy, so she lowered her voice out of respect, “—to dance. And he said no.”

“So?”

“So!”

“So you’re out here? Tutu, you love to dance. And you’re the best freaking dancer in there. Trust me, I’ve danced with about half the girls there tonight.” Even as he was trying to comfort her he smirked, and she punched him lightly on the shoulder.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s stupid. I told you.” Still, she lolled her head onto his shoulder and heaved a sigh.

“Come on,” he said, grabbing her hand as the music switched to one of Scott’s favorite songs.

“I don’t want to go in yet,” she whined as he slid a hand down her back. *Like in your eyes, I see my future in an instant*, the Australian guy sang. The song was all over; she couldn’t avoid it: Scott sang it, melodramatically, in the rink, in the car, waiting in airports across Canada.

“We’re not. What’s this song? A waltz?” he said, sarcastically mimicking every high-school boy ever as she folded into his embrace. His fingers slid through hers, her pinky slotting naturally past his index finger. Not a dance hold.

“Actually, it’s slightly too slow for any of the standard ballroom dances. Waltzes must be eighty-four to ninety beats per minute,” she teased back.

“Guess we’ll just have to make it up as we go then,” he whispered, and twirled her into a dip.

They danced—not high-school shit, the real dips and shimmies and steps and swivels that came like second nature to them—with him humming the words until the song petered out and they swayed with her hand clasped between their chests. “Ready to go in, tear up that dance floor, and make that douchebag Eric jealous?” he whispered against her temple. *Semi-Charmed Life* boomed from the room over.

“You don’t want to go back to Katie or Olivia or whoever?”

“It’s a dance, Tess. I like dancing. If I’m going to get shit for being an ice dancer from everyone, I might as well get the chance to show off at a fucking school dance with the other best dancer in school.”

She didn’t say anything, because nobody *actually* teased Scott for ice dancing, since everybody liked Scott. Everybody always liked Scott. “Let’s go.”

Next was Ashanti, then vintage N’Sync, then *Yeah!*, and Tessa was so loose and free and into it, finally, that she didn’t notice a little circle had formed around them. Eventually, Eric and a few of his friends noticed, and he came up. “Wanna dance?” he asked.

She turned to Scott, who let out a saucy whoop and grabbed the girl nearest him.

She turned around and blew out a short exhale. “Sure!” Over Eric’s shoulder, Andrew gave her a big
thumps up and mouthed *Have fun and be careful.*

Jesus.

Eric wasn’t nearly as good a dancer as Scott (actually, he was kind of terrible, and he didn’t talk or sing the lyrics as he danced, which was cumulatively kind of a dealbreaker, in the end), but she stayed with him for the rest of the night, shaking flirtatiously around him, making him look great, and as she was making her way back to Poje’s car, he grabbed her by the elbow, kissed her, and said, “I had fun tonight. Let’s hang out sometime.”

She grabbed the cordless phone in the kitchen as soon as she got home, breathlessly recounted the entire evening, from the first ‘no’ to the crowd they’d attracted dancing to the kiss, to Jordan, a high-school senior back home in London. “It was great,” she spilled to her cool, fun, popular older sister, mouth twisted upward into a smile. “So great. But kind of surprising that my first kiss wasn’t with Scott, you know?” Wait, where the hell had that come from?

Jordan laughed. “OK, well, let’s table *that* one for a future conversation with a therapist, but Tessie, don’t you remember the day you marched up to him at the rink and kissed him? You were like, seven. It was when Cara and I convinced you you were dating.”


“Oh, god,” Jordan groaned, her voice heavy and dramatic as if she’d just realized something significant. “Night Tess. Try to get some sleep.”

She undressed, hanging her dress up carefully and grabbing the pink silk pajama shorts she loved and a T-shirt from JOs that had pink maple leaves all over. She was still too wound up, though, replayed the entire evening over in her head: Scott singing *And in your eyes I see the missing pieces I’m searching for*, dancing with Scott, Scott coming to find her and cheering her up, Scott taking stupid posed photos with her because she asked, performing with Scott to the claps of the rest of the school, Scott singing *But some things you just don’t question*, Scott being so excited when she finally got what she wanted … The kiss from Eric.

Scott singing *I think I found my best friend* as he looked directly at her.

She sat up in bed, utterly confused.

And then she wasn’t.

It wasn’t a crush.

She was in love with her best friend.

She was in love with Scott.

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*iv. Three Years Before Today, Scott*

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It took Scott a little bit longer to realize he was in love with Tessa.

(To be fair, he realized the moment came way after he had actually fallen in love with her—though he couldn’t really pinpoint that. When she eventually told him the first time she realized when she
was in love with him, sometime around the argument about Do We Really Need Chargers At The Wedding It’s A Plate Under A Plate And That’s Really Dumb, he didn’t even remember the other guy, just remembered singing Savage Garden to her really badly in some hallway—actually, in his recollection, it was at some post-competition gala though that might’ve been because he definitely remembered drinking with Poje that night—because she had been sad and bad singing always cheered her up. She followed up the admission quickly “I fell out of love with you several times, too,” and he had replied, “Lucky for me I’ll never have to do that.”

Once they committed to the Two-Year Plan, they slid right into divide-and-conquer mode. Tessa took the lead on finding and furnishing apartments, securing a narrow two-story place with a townhouse feel—private balcony with good light, exposed brick around a fireplace—for her, and an open-plan loft for him a few stories up with a lot of glass and great views, both in a funky boutique condo building straddling Saint-Henri and Little Burgandy. It was nice, truly living in a city, which surprised him. He handled the grunt operational work, which meant coordinating the movers and trying to teach her how to pack dishes properly.

(This, predictably, ended with him and Jordan staying at her place in London until three AM and laughing deliriously on her floor as they drank all the beer in her fridge and she got increasingly exasperated with their antics and her own inability to pack dishes tightly, and it was just like old times again, and he felt actual hope that this was really gonna be OK for the first time.)

He’d forgotten how overwhelming moving could be, between getting new license plates and finding a good Leafs bar and visiting six organic stalls at Atwater before Tessa found one where she liked the produce and trying to remember his crappy online-high-school French. They were far from home, and he wanted a hockey league and she was in the hunt for a book club or something, to have an avocation. Plus, of course, he was also trying to salchow into training like he was eighteen, a decision which gave knees, back, and shoulders serious reservations, which they voiced angrily daily. He was lucky if he made it to eight before crashing in front of a game.

And then he came home after a long day of technique drills and an hour on the treads and weights and physio and found her standing on the low-slung cabinet where his television should be, the TV, wires straining from it, pushed all the way to the left. “Hey,” she said, hopping down lightly. She was in leggings and a sports bra under one of those cutout yoga sweater things (why were they sweaters if there was no back and no way you could stay warm? It made no sense), hair loose and messy. “Good. You’re home. I was trying to hang it, but this thingamajig” —she held out the stud finder— “is basically useless.” She’d had a key since—well, she’d had a key to his place and his parents’ place since at least 2005 and probably 2003—but she hadn’t used it in forever. He liked this.

He suddenly had the urge to kiss her forehead, but suppressed it. They were barely back to talking in person daily. “I’m sorry, hang what?”

She grinned. “Your Christmas present from your brothers. And Tessa Two and Nicole, technically. I was trying to hang it secretly and see how long it would take you to notice.”

Nothing was computing. “Christmas was a long time ago.” They’d given him a bunch of socks and scarves and a Canadiens tuque to help survive Montreal. Assholes, but he had been too polite to say it in front of his nieces and nephew.

“Scott,” she said, disappointed, with a punch to his arm. “Come on. The socks? You know they wouldn’t just give you socks from Hudson Bay.”

Ignoring the urge to dig into whether she found the idea of socks offensive, or the idea of socks from Hudson Bay offensive, he rocked onto his feet. “OK. So they … sent something? That hangs?”
“Danny called me in November since he knew I was handling … this.” She waved a hand over his apartment, which she’d decorated entirely in leather and chrome and wood and glass, and accented with shadowboxed medals and framed album covers and his favorite sports memorabilia and the flag they’d draped in Vancouver and red flannel throw pillows. Photos of his family and Tessa artfully covered the walls and bookshelves—initially, she hadn’t included any of the two of them; he then insisted, and she added a couple of them skating in Vancouver and Sochi. Those hadn’t looked right, so he kept the frames since they probably cost him a lot of his money, and swapped in some of his favorite candidsof the two of them—posing with their tongues out in a photo booth at the Carnival in 2015; a dorky one as kids biting their medals; one Danny had snapped of them looking sharp in warmups doing their handshake; sleeping on the plane in Canada gear post-Sochi; laughing at each other on the podium at 2008 Worlds. He wasn’t sure what exactly he was trying to say with all the photos—he was sure the new mental-prep coach would force him to interrogate it one day—but he hadn’t missed her smile the first time she came over and noticed that he had plastered the two of them all over his apartment, and that was what mattered most.

He freely admitted the condo was pretty perfect—not to mention the nicest place he’d ever lived—entirely because he had just handed her his credit card and said *Don’t go crazy.* (Step one to getting back on Tessa Virtue’s good side: let her go shopping), “Anyways, he asked if there was something nice that they could maybe get you for your new place. I had an idea of what I was going to do, so I suggested … Come look.”

She led him to a framed package leaning against the wall in the hallway and tilted her head as if to say *unwrap it.* He pulled off the brown paper to reveal …

“A signed *Wendel Clark* jersey?” He wasn’t sure his voice had been that high since puberty. “This is amazing. You came up with this?”

“No, no, no, I just suggested a Leafs statement piece might be nice, you know, since you’re so far from the ACC. They decided to make it a jersey.”

“You came up with this,” he summarized and kissed her cheek. “Thanks, Tess.”

She laughed. “It was them, I swear! You should call them.”

“I will. I wanna shower first. You wanna stay for dinner?”

“Sure, but I’m starving. Mind if I start it?” They were both on strict meal plans from b2ten and had their groceries as well as recipes delivered every Sunday. Like Hello Fresh, but far bleaker.

“Go for it. You know where everything is?”

She looked over her shoulder with a raised eyebrow. “Scott, I organized your kitchen.”

“Right,” he laughed.

After a quick shower, he wrapped a towel around his waist, and realized his cell was still in his skate bag. He wandered out to find it, before getting distracted by Tessa diligently chopping in the kitchen to Sam Smith. “What is it tonight?” he asked, leaning over her shoulder to see. Tessa was not as wholly incompetent in the kitchen as she often professed to be, but her skillset—precision and rules-following—lent itself more naturally to baking, which they couldn’t do a lot of these days. As a cook her skills were very very limited to following directions exactly—and they had to be exact; she had once called him because a recipe didn’t specify *how much* olive oil to “add generously” to the pan—
and to not chopping off her fingers. Usually. One Christmas, her mother had had to assign her Notify Jordan When The Water Is Boiling after the job Chopping Potatoes ended in a near-disaster.

She didn’t move or stiffen, just held the recipe card up so they could both read. “Four ounces of salmon with grainy mustard for me, six for you, then a Bibb lettuce salad with carrots and hot peppers. Half cup of brown rice for me, cup for you, and sauteed asparagus. Blueberries and almonds for dessert.”

“I’ll share if you won’t tell,” he promised, grabbing one of the carrots off her chopping board. She leaned back involuntarily, and he gave her hips a squeeze and her ass a pat as he moved back.

“Two-Year Plan!” she said with a cheer, waving the knife around. He snorted; Tessa had always had a harder time sticking to meal plans than him.

“Careful there, Lizzie Borden,” he swiped his phone out of the side of his bag and dialed Charlie. “You know, you really had me fooled with that Canadiens tuque, eh!” he said as soon as his brother picked up. “T gave me the jersey today. It’s amazing.” Tessa plopped two bunches of asparagus in front of him and signaled chop as he chatted with Charlie, his niece, and his nephew. As they all spoke—at one point, he handed the phone to T to talk to Quinn—Tessa kept handing him more food to prep, then the little pot and the Ziploc of rice, because they knew from experience there was no way in hell she could make rice. Somehow, by the time he called Danny, they had nonverbally coordinated unloading his dishwasher, sorting mail, and him dusting bookshelves.

“Scott. Food’s ready. Put on clothes,” Tessa called as the timer dinged.

“One sec,” he promised, then to Danny, “Alright, I should probably go. The Virtch’s orders.”

“Wait wait wait—clothes? Were you naked in your living room talking to me as Tessa cooked you dinner?”

“I had a towel on,” he explained, shrugging a Skate Shop shirt on. “I just got out of the shower.”

“So you walked around your place naked as the beautiful woman who basically told us to buy you that gift—” he knew it “—made you dinner and probably cleaned too?”

“I chopped the asparagus,” he protested. “And dusted.”

“Man.” Danny shook his head. “You don’t know how good you’ve got it.”

He was quiet for a minute. “Actually, pretty sure I do. Or I’m trying to.” That was the whole point of this comeback after all.

“Ah,” Danny said. “You guys doing better?”

He cast an eye toward the door to make sure she wasn't not lurking. Sam still crooned from somewhere in the kitchen. “I—yeah. I think so. Or we’re getting there.” Montreal and Marie-France especially made Tessa happier and more inspired than Canton ever had, which certainly helped. She gave him her real, genuine smile again. Willingly broke into his apartment to hang a jersey. Chirped him on the ice. Laughed for real at his jokes. Communicated on the freaky, in-depth frequency they’d used off-and-on for years. They were at their best when they were skating together toward the same goal, and doing so on the daily was a good and real reminder of that, of how great they could be. There had either been a reset or a detente and he wasn’t exactly sure which one had occurred, but he wasn’t going to question it.

“You’re gonna be great.”
“I hope so.”

“I know so.”

It was a quiet night, just dinner as they talked through the new drills and sampled music choices for tour and watched an iPhone video of Ava and Charlotte’s dance recital and she vented about dress shopping for Jordan’s wedding. After they ate she sat on the couch, sparkling water in hand and toes on the edge of the coffee table, and told him how he was hanging the jersey wrong. Once it was finally to her liking, he put the TV back in its place and flopped next to her. “It looks perfect,” he enthused, placing a sloppy kiss to her temple as he brought an arm around her.

“It does,” she agreed, yawning as she flipped on the TV. “I’m so tired—oh! Dirty Dancing. You know the rule.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he groaned, with a yawn of his own. “You going to manage to stay up the entire time?”

“Probably not,” she admitted as she rolled into his side and got comfortable. “But all dance movies must be watched to the end.”

“It is the rule,” he acknowledged, sliding his body down a bit with another yawn.

He wasn’t sure who zonked out first, but when he awoke, Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights was almost over, and the clock was blinking 11:47. “T,” he groaned. “Wake up.”

“Mnhph,” she verbalized, her eyes still closed, trying to stay as un-awake as possible. “What time is it?”

“Don’t ask. You wanna crash here? You can take the bed; I’ll sleep on the couch.” Tessa could barely fall asleep most nights; the fewer interruptions she had, the better.

“Sure, but you’re not sleeping on the couch. You can’t tweak your neck.” Her eyes were still closed. “Am I moving? I feel like I’m moving.”

“C’mon Virtch,” he said, pulling her limbs up like a doll’s and walking her to the bathroom. She barely opened her eyes until he handed her a spare toothbrush, which she stared at suspiciously. “Come on. You know nobody else has used that,” he replied, reading her mind.

“I know. Thank you,” she mumbled.

He wasn’t entirely sure she meant just the toothbrush.

They crawled into bed, and he whispered a “Thanks, T,” into her back. She uncurled almost automatically, her head slanting toward him as she passed out flat on her back, and he wrapped an arm around her waist and inhaled her clavicle before falling asleep.

When the alarm went off five hours later, she rolled straight into his shoulder and chanted, “No, no, no,” into his chest.

“Come on. If you wanna shower here, I’ll make your breakfast before we head in. And the coffee’s probably going.”

“You didn’t set it last night,” she groaned. “It’s so far away.”

“OK, well, I’ll make coffee and your breakfast, you shower, and hopefully we’ll be humans by the
time we get to the rink.”

“I hate everything.” She rolled out of bed to the bathroom.

“Two-Year Plan!” he cheered at her retreating back. She flipped him off at the same time she flipped the lights on.

He started the coffee with a yawn, simmered water for her eggs, spread the prescribed three tablespoons of peanut butter on organic whole-wheat toast for him, slid three pieces of smoked salmon onto her plate, set out the bowl of fruit salad they were both allowed to nibble on, and filled up four water bottles to split between the two of them. He stashed those, plus a protein shake for himself, a green juice for her two containers of Greek yogurt for whomever got hungriest first, and pre-packed lunches (a grape-walnut-chicken salad for her; a tuna-avocado lettuce wrap for him) in the cooler they brought to the rink daily. The water was ready, so he dropped two eggs in for her, and poured two cups of coffee, throwing a dash of almond milk in both before taking a long drag of his. He heard the water shut off, so he checked the eggs. Ready to go. He was spooning them onto the plate when she came out, hair drying in a tight bun.

“I see you raided my dresser,” he spun the plate toward her as he took in her overly large Canada sweats. He handed her her coffee.

She took a long sip as he crunched his toast. “Thank you. And yeah. I need to head downstairs and change before we go in.”

“Same. We don’t need to leave for another twenty.”

“Mmmm. More coffee then.”

Tessa was mostly a human when they pulled up to the rink thirty-five minutes later, and as they walked in she spun toward him and said, “Thanks for last night. And this morning. I … It was nice. Fun,” she smiled.

“Anytime,” he said, almost automatically, and then, he realized very suddenly, it wasn’t simply a response.

It was a request.

Anytime, every time, he wanted that in the morning. And the falling asleep on the couch at night. And the splitting a bleak dinner over iPhone clips of his nieces. And the arguing about whether or not he was hanging a picture or loading a dishwasher properly. And the driving in together.

And the talking and the laughter.

Always the talking and the laughter.

And the her in his bed.

Especially that.

He wanted to figure out how to merge all his new Team Canada decor with her love of cream and peonies.

He wanted to travel, for real, to destinations that didn’t include an ice rink and preferably included Tessa in a bikini.
He wanted her at the Moir Family Thanksgiving hockey tournament.

He wanted to coach their kids’ hockey teams and embarrass her by cheering too loudly at their dance recitals.

Shit, he wanted kids with her.

He wanted to kiss her, for real. For always.

And to be partners in everything, whether that was winning Olympic golds or moving cities or disciplining kids or adopting a dog. Him and her, a team, together.

He wanted a dog, preferably one that was shaggy. He wanted a home. He wanted to see that smile every day.

He wanted to skate and talk and laugh and have sex with her for as long as she’d have him.

And hopefully that was as long as they both should live.

He was in love with Tessa Virtue. Despite the years and the hurts, and the stops and starts, and fights and ... everything (the "everything" was really quite a lot.). And puberty. He was just ... in love with Tessa Virtue.

This was it, forever.

Everyone was right.

In fairness, they were right about everything else, too.

Oh, god, was he ever fucked.

“Scott,” she called, holding the door to the rink open. “Scott Moir. Ready to go? It’s cold out here.”

“Like the rink is going to be better.” He tripped a little as he caught up with her.

“You OK?” she looked at him strangely.

“I’m great,” he smiled, sliding an arm around her waist.

Because he really was.

They had a two-year plan for skating. At that moment, he started to formulate a corollary plan.

And god, did he have a lot of work to do.

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v. Six Years Before Today, Tessa

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The last official practice of the year was also the last day of the damn camera crew, and while normally there was a rink party, with plastic cups of punch and cupcakes that nobody could eat, between everyone’s irritation at the reality show and the stress of the Games, nobody had felt festive enough to organize it this year. As soon as Marina dismissed the two of them Scott had all but tripped over himself to get out of there, taking his skates off so quickly he practically walked off the
ice in sockfeet. He managed to say goodbye to the camera guys, who were packing up, but not to her.

Fuck you, Scott.

She stroked the rink mindlessly, trying to cool down her body, calm down her thoughts. Finally she headed toward the boards, grabbed water, watched Meryl and Charlie wrap up. They cheek-kissed goodbye, confirmed that they were going to pick up Tanith and Fedor and then meet at Meryl’s house so the four of them could join Meryl’s mom’s church choir on their caroling adventure before heading to Charlie’s dad’s holiday party. Charlie reminded Meryl to bring her ugly sweater, and she laughed and said that it had dogs and pom-poms on it. Oh yeah?, he said, Mine comes with a battery pack.

Fuck you too, Charlie and Meryl.

Charlie headed out but Meryl slid up next to her, grabbed water. “Hey. You guys heading back to London tonight?” She shot Tessa a small, foxlike smile.

“We’re sticking around this year. Nationals is in a few weeks and we’ll see everyone then. And my mom came down so ...” Her mom had all but moved into her guest bedroom. Hooray for being the youngest and most obedient child of a divorcing couple. She hadn’t even bothered to put up a tree.

“Gotcha. You guys going to do your annual movie marathon? What was it, one Audrey Hepburn film, one Die Hard? That was such a cute tradition.”

They hadn’t done that since around the last time they’d gone to Charlie’s dad’s company’s Christmas party. 2008, 2009?

A lifetime ago.

She smiled tightly. “Don’t think so, Meryl.”

Meryl moved to grab her guards. “What happened to you two?” she blurted out, then looked almost chagrined. Meryl wasn’t nosy; Meryl was a competitor. In eight years of competing and training together, she had never asked one question, because she didn’t care.

Tessa sighed, knew she didn’t mean just the last several weeks. “Everything.” She thought her voice was going to crack then, but it didn’t, was just heavy with the reality.

Meryl looked a bit startled at the honesty, then said, “That sucks, I’m sorry. I always thought …”

“What?”

“I always just thought that if anyone could handle all of it, even though it’s a notoriously terrible idea, it would be the two of you. Eventually, I mean. You’ve definitely had some … challenges to work out.” She shrugged. “That’s stupid, not to mention rude, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine. I—” she exhaled sharply, trying to get her breathing and life under control. “Once upon a time, I did too.”

Meryl took another sip of water, stared at her. Shrugged, then smiled. “Well. You’re twenty-four. You’re so young.” Meryl was twenty-seven in a week, for fuck’s sake. It wasn’t not like she was so much older and wiser. “The Olympics are over in eight weeks. After that, you’ve got a lot of time. You both have a lot of time.”
“I don’t want that anymore,” she shook her head. “I don’t want to be that anymore.” That girl, bound and delivered as a soulmate to Scott Moir, the way she had been since before she even had a choice in the matter. A package deal.

“What do you want then?” They’d never discussed it, of course, but they both knew the other was retiring.

“Nothing,” and her voice cracked then, and she meant it: she wanted the opposite of everything. She dug her toepick into the ice and reconsidered. “To be free.” She realized her cheeks were wet. To be free of him and of Marina and of skating and of expectations, to be far away, to not be only half, to be Tessa and to have that be enough, to feel clarity, to be at peace, to be happy.

She wondered, grimly, non-judgmentally, almost academically, what happy actually felt like.

Meryl was quiet, for a moment. Tessa and Scott had always mocked Meryl and Charlie a little (fine, a lot, both the good-natured kind and the petty-bitch kind), for being boring and for being lame and for being, off the ice, as squickily platonic as Maia and Alex or Danny and Sheri, for being so consistently nice and friendly and upbeat and patient and even-keeled that they were practically ice-dancing robots. No drama but no passion. A lifetime ago Scott used to make her laugh at the boards by mimicking what their pillow talk would be as they skated. And then, we’ll pay our taxes and eat quinoa, he’d say, his voice breathy and sarcastic, his fingers slipping mindlessly up and down her waist. Yeah yeah right there oh how do you like my sweater vest. It was absurd. She’d giggle into his neck and elbow him in the soft of his hip and he’d use the tussle to steal a kiss on her neck.

She’d always insisted to herself that whatever the ups and downs with Scott were, what they had was more special than that. She liked that, the being more special. It made her feel transcendent. More than. The tradeoffs, the choices, were worth it.

Now it just left her cold and clear-eyed. After all these years, she realized that Charlie and Meryl had it right, had been the ones with the best of both worlds between their skating partnership and a genuinely platonic friendship, neither of which required a literal team of sports psychologists to keep taped together. They were going to end up with a gold medal too, and their memories would be the types that they could genuinely put in a cheesy, $16 joint memoir, about hard work and sacrifice and achieving your dreams. It was slow and it was steady but it was all uphill.

Meryl looked at her, head tilted slightly, with what Tessa first identified as pity but then realized was compassion, in her eyes. “I hope you get everything you want, Tessa,” she finally said, gently and genuinely, and snapped her guards on. “After the Olympics, of course.”

Tessa smiled.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was mostly about laying the groundwork for the ‘epic’ side of the romance, showing off some of the very melodramatic and sort-of-tragic misunderstandings at the heart of this lovely love affair. So I want to talk tone, too.

But it’s also a little bit about being a middle- and high-schooler, and how that was a dramatic age. I had a ton of fun making sure the specificity of being a teen in the mid-aughts comes through. Picking out the music and the fashion of many of the ‘flashback’ scenes has been one of the fun parts of this fic.
So picking ‘I Knew I Loved You’ was pretty critical—I wanted it to be a little cheese and completely over-the-top but also … a little genuine? Because teens, amirite? I didn’t know yet that Savage Garden would continue to kind of weave in and out, but it was the perfect, over-the-top, this-girl-watches-Dawson’s song choice. It’s the awkwardness of high school, of caring too much, of being to sensitive, of being normal and hoping you’re also extraordinary. It’s the most generic love song in the book and yet it hits. This chapter, especially the music I thought of and listened to as I wrote, came so vividly since it’s about those moments that stick, that become bigger in retrospect—like, I cannot read over the vignette where they sleep together the first time without listening to “Lose Yourself.” I picked the Eminem t-shirt as a recurring motif because I couldn’t get the song in, but that’s exactly what I heard as I wrote it. (And anyone catch the reference to Torino as he starts to kiss her in the elevator?) I didn’t get into it too much in this chapter, but I went back and forth on whether this would be a virginity-losing thing; pretty quickly that just seemed too heavy for the narrative to deal with. Plus, I think something that I tried to bring out, quietly, was that they knew there was an attraction; it was unspoken, but this was dangerous, and they were acting recklessly. The virginity angle seemed too naive. They were stupid and bullheaded but not naive.

If the point of the first chapter was to lay out the inflection points and the themes, this was supposed to give clear markers for what happened in between: first time they had sex, first time they realized they were in love with each other (separately), more signs that something clearly went down. Since so much of it was what I eventually came to think of as ‘deep flashbacks’ — stuff that happened before 2008, when they were kids— they were supposed to be the moments that seared. Get you into this spinny swirled place. Tone-wise, I wanted that to contribute to the “bigness” of the feel. I had initially thought the entire piece would have this very sweeping feeling, very vignette-y, something that left you uncertain whether all of this has actually happened, but it sort of evolved very naturally that later chapters tended to focus on very concentrated time frames. The narrative smoothed out because they smoothed out. It made sense, because that’s how growing up works.

But that pre-2008 period is all about headiness, the mythic-ness. Mentally I had started here to divide this into four time frames—pre-2008 (foundation); 2008-2011 (the Vancouver buildup + fallout); 2012-2015 (the Sochi debacle + fallout) and 2016-2019 (relationship)—and thinking of each mentally as being separate and having a separate storylines (Later, the future stuff became its own block too). Themes I had already decided (with the framing) were going to stay constant across the span, but the tone of each of those four periods was supposed to be very, very different. There was sort of a puppy-love, Taylor Swift-y quality to the early stuff that dominates these early chapters —very innocent and girlish and and romanticized as these two kids hold hands and just grasp at adulthood together; in the Vancouver era it’s angsty and achy and tender and terrifying, because they’re teenagers working their shit out, Romeo and Juliet-style; the Sochi era is literally and very intentionally a doomed Russian drama (literally, it’s kind of channeling The Americans). The post-2016 stuff is supposed to be calmer, more mature, settled. It’s the Monica and Chandler or Ben and Leslie or Coach and Tami years. Notice, for instance, that the 2016 is almost completely linear through the first 5-6 chapters. They know where they are. I designed that partly as a tease, but also because it’s basically a breath of fresh air: this sexy, settled, mature, very intimate and also very real vibe between two people who have this deep, genuine, connection. You believe Scott completely when he realizes he’s in love with her, and it’s just centered. But on the earlier stuff it was important, structurally, to get those big set pieces in place so I could keep filling in the plot from there in this chapter, and the sum of it was end up
being a very whirlwind-y mix, drawing you in and leaving you with more questions than answers. Did it work?
i’ll just keep on making the same mistakes, hoping that you understand

Chapter Notes

hi! thanks so much for the kind feedback on the last chapter. it was really motivating and positive! here's another long, meaty chapter, but gets into a lot of missed opportunities, miscommunications, and mistakes made over the last decade. plus has fun scenes with other awesome people. hopefully it's engaging enough to make up for the length :)

Chapter title is the one sad line in “Thinking Out Loud’ by Mr. Ed Sheeran

See the end of the chapter for more notes

i. Twelve Years Before Today, Scott

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“So this is the plan for the weekend,” Scott explained to Charlie, throwing the doors of Arctic Edge open. Freedom, Scott decided, smelled exactly like Friday afternoon in July: hot, grassy, expansive, and a little sweaty. He took his T-shirt off, just because. “Hockey game, now. We kick ass.”


“After that, I go grab Tess and some beer, you grab pizzas—real pizzas, none of the low-carb BS Marina is pushing—we watch the Tigers at Greg’s house and grill out. Tomorrow, practice,” he made a face, “But then more hockey, more beer, I pick up the very lovely Whitney—thank you for that, by the way, you’re an excellent wingman—” Seriously, Charlie was the best at that; friendly and charming and disarming and in possession of absolutely zero game for himself—“And then, party at Ben’s tomorrow night. If all goes well, I don’t see you Sunday. If all doesn’t go well, Meryl makes us breakfast and mimosas on Sunday and we watch the game at her place. Then? Sleep.”

Scott Moir was nineteen years old and one of the best figure skaters in the world, had his brother’s old ID and three girls’ numbers new this week alone, loved his mother and Canada and his truck and hockey and whatever girl was hanging around the hockey rink that week. He was charming and handsome and God’s gift to women and Canada. His only responsibilities were to his skating career and his car-insurance payment. He was invincible.

“All that sounds good,” Charlie nodded. “But is Tessa coming tonight?”

He stopped. “It’s baseball.” Tessa loved baseball, and was exceptionally apathetic about hockey. He regularly gave her shit about her traitorous ESPN habits.

“Yeah, I know, I just thought she was going to see Transformers with Fedor tonight.”

“What?”

Charlie shrugged. “That’s what Tanith said.”

*Harry Potter and the Whatever of Whatever*, maybe, since Tess was a dork but … “Transformers?” Charlie shrugged. “With Fedor?”
“Are you going senile? Because that would be great for me. Do you remember what you ate for breakfast? What about your mom’s name?”

The fucker. “Transformers? With Fedor?”

“I mean, I have no idea why Tanith would lie, she dated him once upon a time, as has basically every girl here, but why do you care?”

He wanted to say I don’t, but that sounded defensive—and wasn’t true—so he settled on, “It’s baseball,” as he sent Tessa a text. U game for the game?

She pinged back a moment later. Can’t tonight, Sorry! Will see you in the AM xx.

He turned back to Charlie. “Alright, guess it’s just us.”

“And Greg,” Charlie said helpfully.

The next morning, he arrived before Tessa for the first time in three years.

He wasn’t exactly sure what bothered him about Tessa dating Fedor. Partly it was the distraction—her skating away from him saucily at the rink, leaving with him at night, him giving her shoulder massages, sharing oranges and laughter with her at lunch—when she’d lectured Scott for years about focusing on the Games. Partly it was the age—the first time he asked Tessa about Fedor outright, she begged him never to mention it to Kate because the seven-year gap would give her a heart attack. Partly it was the fact that he seemed to have dated every girl at the rink but for little Maia Shibutani, who was in middle school.

But mostly it was that he thought the guy was kind of an ass. Plus, Tessa dating him was just ... confusing.

“Scott, just because you’re happy dating whoever Charlie picks up for you at a hockey game—”

“I’m the one with game, Meryl, your partner is way too classy to pick girls up at a hockey game.”

“—Correct, thank god. Anyways, just because you’re content to fricking pick up tail—” Meryl’s nose wrinkled upwards as she hopped off the bench—“and date it for a week, doesn’t mean that’s Tessa’s thing. Tessa’s not a one-night-stand kind of girl, or even a dating type, she’s a throw-herself-into-commitment, long-term-relationship type.” He wanted to argue that point desperately—Tessa had never had a boyfriend, beyond Shawn from the Knights last year, sort of; part of the weirdness, he thought, was surely that she was the one in an honest-to-god, not-long-distance relationship first—but one did not interrupt Meryl Elizabeth Davis from a rant when she was good and wound up.

“And, God, she’s most high-strung person I’ve ever met, and between skating and school, and Marina and her mother, and you and ... well, you, if she wants to sleep with Fedor Andreev to relax, I think you’ve gotta stop being an ass. Because that’s only stressing her out more, and is therefore counterproductive to her goal. And the temperature in this frigid box would go up two degrees if she just relaxed, for once.” Meryl slapped her guards onto the boards. “So do us all a favor, and get over your shit, please.” She skated off, her ponytail flicking decisively behind her.

“Hey, you do swear!” he yelled after her, then scrambled onto the ice. Tessa was halfway down the boards, talking to him, so he skated down and ran a knuckle down her back. “Ready?”

She turned to him and tightened the ponytail. God, he still wasn’t used to this red, or the accompanying pierced belly button—where the fuck had the kid formerly known as Tutu gone?

“Yeah.”
As they worked into a spin, he asked, abruptly, “You OK?”

She eyed him. “Yeah? Of course.”

“You’re not like, stressed, or anything?” He pulled them to a stop.

“Well, I signed up for three classes this semester even though everybody said start with one, and I didn’t sleep a ton last night because I was finishing a paper, and I spend eight hours a day and thousands of my parents’ dollars to get my body into Olympic-figure-skating shape on the off chance that in three years we will put seven minutes of skating together perfectly, but yeah, other than that, not stressed. What’s up, Scott?”

“Just … I don’t stress you out, do I?”

She tilted her head. “No, weirdo. Can we skate, now?”

Meryl was the one who was full of shit, he decided.

A few weeks later, though, when Meryl hosted a Heaven and Hell party and Tessa showed up dressed in a tiny devil’s costume with Fedor in a white bathrobe of hers and a halo, he yelped, “Oh, come on.” Seriously, why the fuck was a twenty-five-year-old at a college party with an eighteen-year-old? What the hell was Tessa doing at a college party, period?

Meryl, who was slipping her sixth Jello shot out of its plastic casing, rolled her eyes and said, “Oh, no, no, no. Scottie, you’re so dumb.” She turned to her sorority sister, sitting in his lap, and wagged a finger at her: “Listen, he’s got a great body and is super athletic, if you want to hook up with him, I approve, but he’s really dumb and not into you, and I feel you need to know that.”

“I am not into Tessa,” he said. “She’s my partner.” To prove his point, he stuck his tongue down the girl’s throat.

(Twenty-year-old Scott? Also not the most mature.)

Some time later, after several Solo cups of Meryl’s Devil Drink and three games of beer pong (as in ice dance, he and Charlie were the kings; they slaughtered Greg and Ben), he wandered into the kitchen in search of … water, maybe? Whatever, he forgot as soon as he spotted Fedor grinding against Tessa, perched on Meryl’s shitty Formica countertops. “Oh my god, eyes,” he slapped his hands over them. “I’m gonna go.” And he promptly ran into a wall, because he was drunk and blind.

“Oh, my god, Scott,” Tessa yelled as she jumped down. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Leaving,” he said, holding up his hands and walking out.

Tessa found him on Meryl’s balcony ten minutes later, handed him a cup of water. “Figured you came into the kitchen for something.” She took a swig of a beer.

“Thanks,” he replied.

“Why are you so weird lately?” she burst out. “Seriously. You would have clapped if you walked in on … Charlie, or Tanith, or Ben. Hell, you would have done play by play for Charlie, probably.”

“That’s just because I’m very pro-Charlie getting laid, Tess. Boy needs it.” The crush on Tanith was really killing his boy.
“And you like Fedor, you’ve played hockey with him for years.” This was true, he had to admit.

“What do you see in him, kiddo?” he asked abruptly. “Seriously. He’s seven years older, has dated everybody else in the rink, and, oh yeah, he’s our coach’s kid. Six months ago you would have freaked out about what Marina would say, or distractions or … whatever.”

She shifted, inspected her thumbnail. "He's tall. Also, older. More mature than a teenaged boy."

"Bullshit. He's Fedor."

"Very generous in bed. Big dick." It was probably the first time Tessa had ever said the word 'dick.'

"Also bullshit. He's Fedor."

She was quiet. “He … he likes me, Scott. That’s it. He likes me, he calls me baby, we go to movies. It’s really not complicated.”

“Of course he likes you. You’re Tessa.” He’d said that to her how many times?

“You’re the only person that thinks that. Marina weighs me, three times a week. Told me to stop eating yogurt because it gives me fat ankles. I’m the fattest girl at Canton. Igor tells me every day that I’m not as good as you during drills.”

“All of that is bullshit.” He’d told Marina about six times that he could handle the weight of Tessa eating a goddamn yogurt when she was hungry. And he’d told Igor to quit fucking with her head just to get her to practice longer. Tessa internalized shit like nobody’s business.

“It’s bullshit but it’s also not false. Canton girls are light and I’m not. And you know you’re a better skater than me. I work harder but you’re just … gifted, Scott. Don’t patronize me and say it isn’t so.”

She took a deep breath. “And Mom and Jordan are so far away and God, Scott, we have an Olympics on home ice in three years and there’s media and message boards and bitchy Russian girls and school and everyone wants me to be something for them and … he likes me, he doesn’t expect anything of me, it’s just having fun. Taking it easy. It’s not complicated.”

He was struck, not for the first time, of how much of Tess just felt unknowable. He knew the exact grade of the curve of her hip, could identify her mood by the height of her ponytail, had met her niece at the hospital because Tessa had been too excited to wait till the weekend so he drove her up and back after practice the day she was born. But the way Tessa thought through things, felt things—she took things that should be straightforward and made them complicated. Even this ‘not complicated’ bullshit felt complicated. And he would never understand why she twisted herself around so much to meet the expectations, often unspoken and merely assumed, of so many others. (It took him a very long time to realize that he was the number-one person she did this for.)

Whereas he—just let him live, man. He loved skating with Tessa so he skated with Tessa. He loved partying and playing hockey with Charlie so he partied and played hockey with Charlie. He loved fucking and kissing and dating so he fucked and kissed and dated. He loved winning so he won. Life was constantly a glass half-full, and he wanted to fill it with fun and adventure and laughter. People and situations weren’t complicated or hard, they were weird and delightful and unexpectedly joyful.

But Tessa liked it when things were hard. Viewed it as a challenge. Only viewed things as worthy when they were hard. He might like to win, but Tessa liked to conquer. If he liked to push, she liked to pull. Always had, probably always would. Usually, at least, those two actions were in sync.

(They had to be, or everything would break.)
So yeah, the Fedor thing made no sense.

“Admit it,” he said suddenly, his voice light and teasing. “This was all a long game so you could defile Meryl’s countertop.”

“Yes, yes it was,” she answered immediately, her voice deadpan. “You caught me, Scott.”

He laughed, then leaned his head on his shoulder. “I’m sorry if I’ve been a jerk to you the past couple of months. With skating and him and everything.”

“You haven’t,” she said automatically. “But it’s OK.”

(He had, and it wasn’t.)

“We good?” he checked.

“Always.”

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ii. Fourteen Years Before Today, Tessa

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Tessa was thrilled when the Marie-France Dubreuil invited her and Scott out to dinner with her and Patrice Lauzon the Saturday before the national championships started. (Scott had teased her; said she had to stop using a the, but She. Did. Not. Care. Plus she’d seen the look in his eyes when Patrice offered to teach him poker.)

(Also, he grew to adore Marie, perhaps even more than she did.)

“You are so young and so promising,” Marie had smiled when made the invitation. Marie always smiled, Tessa was growing to learn. She had the type of expansive, charismatic warmth Tessa had only ever encountered in Scott, that ability to make you feel as if you were the only person in the world. Marie-France had even let her choose the restaurant, since they were in London and all. Tessa picked the place her dad had taken her mom for an anniversary, and felt incredibly mature as she perched in her best dress, Scott at her side. She wasn’t sure who was paying for dinner, so she had taken the liberty of liberating her dad’s credit card from his wallet.

It was going so well and they were telling them all about Salt Lake City and laughing when Patrice leaned in to kiss Marie. “Are you dating?” Tessa blurted out.

“Tessaaaaa,” Scott groaned, shooting her an aghast look that said Mind your fucking manners, I know you have them, Uptown Girl Who Picked This Place With Cloth Napkins and Three Forks.

Marie tilted her head—less mad, more curious—and smiled. “He is the man I trust to throw me around in the air and work with me every day toward my life’s goal,” she explained. “Why would I not trust him with my heart as well?” she asked, very very kindly (too kindly, really. Tessa had been rude and she knew it).

It was a very good point.

She bit her lip, wondering how to proceed, and felt her cheeks grow hot. “Tessa just always has to know everything, you know,” Scott finally said, lightly. “This is like, information for her files. She’s the smartest girl in ice dance. Also the nosiest.” He nudged her shoulder with his gently.
“It has been a wild ride together,” Patch acknowledged. “Very challenging, at times, to do both. And intense.”

“But ultimately, so rewarding,” Marie said. She looked at the two of them, and Tessa tried not to squirm. “When a partnership works, you don’t overthink it,” she winked at Tessa, and raised a glass of sparkling water. “To two extraordinary partnerships.”

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iii. Seventeen Years Before Today, Scott

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“ You’re the new ice skater, right?” The kid at the locker next to him asked. “I’ve seen you after my hockey practice.”

“Yeah. Scott.”

“Cody. You do pairs, right?”

“Close. Dance. No throwing.”

“Oh yeah, my sister ice danced. You dance with that hot girl. The freshman?”

Scott tried not to flinch or punch the guy. “My partner, Tessa, is a freshman, yeah.”

“Damn, I don’t know how I’d dance with her mos days.”

He tried not to grimace. “We’ve been skating together every day for years. I’ve never had a problem with it.”

“No I mean—“

“I know what you mean.”

“Do you know if she’s dating anyone?”

Jerkoff Eric from the dance but he wasn’t telling this guy. “If you’re asking me, I don’t think you’re her type.”

“Are you dating her?”

“Nope.”

“But I can’t.”

“Nope.”

“Why the hell not?”

“She’s not a girl, she’s Tessa.”

He meant it in a she’s too good for you way (there wasn’t any logical other way to mean it), but when Tessa approached not ten seconds later to grab a notebook from his locker, he wondered if she’d heard his final comment and maybe took it the wrong way.

(Oh she most certainly did. On both counts).
After Scott suggested making their drunken lapse a “thing between partners, like sex twizzles,” Tessa wondered why she hadn’t made the suggestion earlier. There was power and excitement in watching his jaw tighten if she happened to run her hand across his stomach at dance practice, the throb of his Adam’s apple when he watched her skate, the darkening of his eyes as she stepped in and wrapped his arms around his neck in the locker room. After years of that stupid middle-school crush, thinking I did that as his body viscerally reacted to hers … well, it was pretty great.

(It also made her stupid and girlish in a way that she hated even then. She listened to Taylor Swift that entire spring. Belted out the lyric I’ll be eighty-seven you’ll be eighty-nine when nobody else was in her car.)

Initially, she’d tried to develop a list of Rules, but Scott had raised his eyebrow and simply said Oh come on kiddo. Eventually, she got him to agree to two: Complete secrecy—Marina would kill them, not to mention their parents, specifically hers, specifically her mother, who had given her several Talks and a birth-control prescription because of Scott’s constant proximity—and a get-out-of-jail-free card for both of them if either thought it began to interfere with skating or the Olympics. She debated whether to make him promise not to sleep with anyone else—God only knew what sort of STDs the rink bunnies had—but she had a deep, sure confidence that that wasn’t actually Scott’s style. Especially with her. And that would have introduced a conversation about what They Were To Each Other, and it had been established that that conversation was off-limits.

So.

They didn’t talk about it.

Anyways.

There were no rules, and they went wild, fueled by reckless flames of desire. After six years of careful buckets for friendship and skating and the fact that she was maybe-probably-definitely in love with him a little bit, he was what she imagined drugs would be like. Scott, his charisma, his smell, his hands, his smile, his body, his jokes, were a high all on their own. It was addicting. He was addicting.

Her initial plan was to stick simply to competitions, to blips in their schedule, to days when Marina was out of town with another team. It would allow her, she rationalized, to be as cool and compartmentalized about this as possible. This lasted as long as the drive back to their apartment complex the week after Four Continents, when he pulled into his parking spot and asked if she wanted to come up to watch a movie and practice choreography.

“On a Friday night? Vertically or horizontally, Scott?”

He grinned. “Whichever plane you want, Tessa.”

Four hours later, as she leaned against his couch’s arm rest and ate ice cream in her underwear and an old Leafs T-shirt, trying for casual like she was Cameron Diaz in a rom-com, she asked, “So … what do you … like?” She’d only been with Shawn a couple times and then Fedor, had messed around a bit with Eric back in Kitchener, plus a few more guys, but she had a pretty good idea of Scott’s number and it was significantly higher.
He turned to her, confused. “Are you losing it? Hockey, beer, Canada, being on the lake …”

“No.” She twisted her big toe high into his thigh. “I mean, like. You know … in bed.”

His head jerked back a little in surprise. “Oh.”

“I just mean, this is kind of an opportunity, right? We know each other so well. And we know each other’s bodies so well. So I figured we could, you know, that that would be an asset.” Her words came in a rushed jumble, and she mentally chastised herself, because that wasn’t cool. “Like, blow jobs,” she blurted out. “Do you like those?”

“Tessa, I’m a guy. Of course I like blow jobs.”

“Do you … want me to give you one?” She realized that she was sucking the spoon semi-suggestively, blushed, and dropped it in the pint of Haagen Dazs.

He studied her for a sec, then scooted over, removed the ice cream carton from her hands. Braced himself on the couch’s armrest, behind her head. Trapping her. “You’ve been with … Shawn, and Fedor? And that’s it?”

Feeling very naked even in the shirt, she nodded.

“So what do you like?”

She felt herself go a bit white. “I … don’t know.”

“Well.” He leaned forward, lightly kissing her neck, then trailing his lips and hands, hot and feathery, down her body. “Let’s find out.”

And thus they began. Unsurprisingly their competitive nature carried over into exploring each other’s bodies, egging each other on to find the best and fastest paths to great sex—try that position, suck right there, tweak here, harder, faster, slower, deeper, yes right there yes. If the first time had been accidental they quickly became intentional. They tried direct, athletic, aggressive, slow, sensual, every new layer uncovering more information. Tessa had always been good in school, and being with Scott gave her the freedom to unselfconsciously become a serious student of what brought both of them pleasure. She catalogued her own reactions and pressure points, quickly learned how to vocalize what she wanted and what bored her, learned that she liked straddling the tightrope of pleasure and pain (years later, Scott would inform her that this was utterly unsurprising given her self-punishing tendencies). Scott was unsurprisingly vocal, responsive, generous, could tell pretty quickly what was working and what wasn’t. She studied each flex and muscle twitch of his, as if she was going to get quizzed on it, to try and become the best for him. “Was that good for you?” she asked, early on, after he came. Was she supposed to swallow? She hadn’t.

“Kiddo, it’s you and me. It’s always going to be great.” He kissed her. “You get that right?”

Besides blow jobs—which yes, he liked a great deal—she discovered he liked the scrape of her fingernails going lower on his abdomen, dancing over the muscle definition he spent hours cultivating. He liked when she licked him, the long flat of her tongue roaming his body. He was Scott so he liked talking, teasing, laughter—sometimes given her a running play-by-play, sometimes rambling about how she was basically the prettiest girl he’d ever seen, sometimes just trying to make her laugh because I just really love your laugh, Tessa. He liked her collarbone, developed a pretty close and friendly relationship with it; liked contrasts, fast whips between fast and slow, light and hard, gentler and rougher. He was so tactile, liked using his hands, loved when she used hers. His abs were surprisingly erogenous. He liked taking the lead, pushing her against walls and pressing her
into beds, making her drip, watching her come, making she came first.

She learned she liked neck kisses, his teeth scraping along her collarbone. She liked love bites—not so much on her neck but definitely on her thighs or lower on her chest, where she could cover it up in front of Marina—and tiny pinches, hair pulls, fingerprints bruised into her pale skin. He apologized at first for gripping her hair when she went down on him, and she quickly blurted out, “No no, I liked it,” almost shyly. Because she did, and that’s what they were doing: cultivating likes. She liked riding him, hard and fast; he found that she liked to be on top hilarious and unsurprising. She liked the thrill of sex somewhere they might get caught—the movie theatre, the janitorial closet at the rink. She needed more than one finger, loved being eaten out, like the weight of his body on hers—his hand holding both her wrists back; his fingers gripping her hips so hard they left bruises, his chest on her back as he pressed into her from behind. Scott thought all these things were a little dangerous but they felt safer, and she wasn’t sure how to say that.

There were times that he balked at whatever she proposed, whatever hypothesis she wanted to test out. He was a little more old-fashioned, more starry-eyed and romantic about sex stuff if not actual romance, which she found a little funny, but she liked being able to talk him into stuff. “I want you just try,” she’d say, very seriously. “You’re not going to break me if we do this.” He was hesitant about some things with her, she knew—she had to bite back her old standby I’m not your little sister at these points—but she knew every other part of his body and his brain and his heart and she wanted desperately to know this too.

“Tess—”

“I know you want to. I’m here, I want to, too.” She leaned up into his ear. “I really want to do this, just with you.”

She usually really liked whatever came next, whether it was rougher or in a shower or doggy style, but she liked that he listened to her, too. It felt like, maybe, she had as much power over him as she knew he had over her.

The Scott high didn’t make her lose her mind completely, but they became increasingly bold very quickly. “Locker room, during the break,” she’d whisper as he swung her into a lift. “Dance studio in ten,” he’d hum into her neck during a spin. Once, she left a pair of underpants in his skate bag—she’d read it in one of Mary Eleanor’s romance novels, years ago. He retaliated by spending the entire morning whispering absolutely filthy things in her ear, and then taking his damn sweet time to eat her out in the abandoned office over lunch.

Jordan figured out immediately, because Tessa showed up back to the house with one Friday evening with sex hair and a shit-eating grin from giving him a hand job on the drive home, before he’d yanked her into the backseat on a deserted road and given her a hickey. “I hope you know what you’re doing,” she said grimly. “And god, Tessa, please tell me you’re not still in love with him. Please have more dignity than that.”

But she was, and she knew it (and he wasn’t, and she knew it too). He made her forget everything—the stress of Worlds coming up, the weird aching feeling that started somewhere deep in her shins and radiated through her legs by the end of the day, Marina’s ban on eating yogurt and now chocolate milk because of her ankle circumference, Meryl’s flirtations with Fedor. She felt calmer and more confident around him, and adrift away from him. It felt right, and she started thinking, unbidden, about After Vancouver. How cute could they be, skating partners from childhood turned Canadian sweethearts?

Outwardly, his behavior didn’t change much, if at all (the rules, and everything), but if he came from behind her to snake his arms around her waist, or brought her food after her ballet class, or said I’m
here as he pulled her out of a lift, she felt special, dammit. She tried to tamp down each stupid flutter of her heart, to carefully sculpt each doopy look into blankness, to deep-breath her way out of blushing cheeks. One day he came up behind to catch her in a spin and she lifted her legs into a cannonball immediately, dips her face into his neck, shrieks with laughter. “I’ve got you, kiddo,” he murmured, his breath close as a kiss.

As he skated away from her, Meryl caught the look on Tessa’s face, shook her head, and said, very dryly, “Well, this is excellent for me.” The feral smile threw Tess.

She wanted to do something fun on the plane to Gothenberg, like mess around under a lap blanket or propose hooking up in the tiny little bathroom, but they had Marina to their right and Meryl and Charlie behind them and Tanith and Ben and Igor in front and it was just not happening. When they arrived she felt more nervous than she had in a while, which was just stupid—she’d been on the senior circuit for two full seasons now—and when they were skating off after compulsory warm ups, she said, out loud, before she could stop herself, “God, I’m tense. Really just wound up.”

He looked at her, understanding immediately what she was asking, and said, “Are you actually insane?”

“We have time!”

“You’ve lost it, Tessa, no way. That breaks one of your Rules.” But his voice was fond and impressed and he squeezed her hand and smirked.

They didn’t have sex then, but they absolutely did before they leave the rink, in an abandoned room behind stacks of chairs and piles of random TV wires.

They got second and it only amplified her high. They were exactly on track for the Vancouver plan. When their scores were announced he gripped her neck intensely, looked at her with naked hungry awe, like she was the most beautiful girl in the world and he was both incredibly proud of her and also wanted to rip her dress off. Her reaction to his reaction was so visceral that she wanted to find some backroom now, so she did, right after the medal ceremony, for sweaty, intense We’re going to win the Olympics! sex.

Being high on Scott meant she viewed skating, for once, with the same passion he did: as a hedonist, eyes forward, all intensity, no anxiety. Just unabashed drive and brash emotion of the sport. At the banquet, she threw back shot after shot, dancing with Joannie and Meagan and Tanith and Anna and Nath. Even Meryl didn’t annoy her. She danced, intensely, with Scott; at one point gripping his face tightly as they swayed, wrapping his arms around her, twirling intensely and laughing as he dipped her. They spent the entire time laughing. She caught Marina’s unimpressed eyebrow in the corner, and didn’t care.

But every high had a comedown, and the comedown was always a hard crash.

Hers started, classily enough, by vomiting into some potted plant.

“Yo! Chiddy. Found her,” Scott’s strong hands came onto her shoulder, pulled her up gently. “Kiddo? You OK?” He wiped some vomit from her cheek. Disgusting, if she thought about it.

“I’m fine,” she sighed. “Tequila.” She waved a hand as if that explained it.

“Yeah, I bet,” he grinned. “OK, give me your shoes. The World silver medalist can’t sprain her ankles tonight.” She tried to flick them off, and basically fell over. “OK, OK. I got you. Hold on.” And somehow, he removed her shoes, like she was fucking Cinderella or something.
No, that wasn’t right. How did that story go?

“Well, Tessa,” Chiddy said, coming up from … somewhere. “Wow. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her this ….”

“That’s because she’s never been this drunk,” Scott replied, a hint of worry in his voice. “Here. I’m gonna take her up. Can you find Joannie and tell her I’ll stay with Tess tonight? Make sure she doesn’t get sick. Jojo should crash somewhere else.”

Somewhere behind her, she heard Joannie sniff and say, “That’s a load of crap, Moir, but trust me, she’s all yours tonight.”

He got her upstairs, wrestled her out of her dress, let her vomit twice. Once he was reasonably sure her stomach was empty he bundled her into the shower, washing her hair but spilling half of her nice body wash all over as he tried to get her cleaned up. She ended up laughing, improbably, on the floor of the shower at that as water ran down his lovely, lovely shoulders. Somehow he got her back in the Eminem shirt she liked to sleep in, made her drink two Gatorades and eat minibar crackers, put a trash can by the bed, rubbed her shoulders as she came to the dim realization that flying home tomorrow would really, really suck. “You’re OK, sweetheart. God, you were such a rockstar this entire competition. Second place, Tess. We’re amazing together. And you had fun tonight, didn’t you?”

They sank into the bed, closed off from the world like always, noses inches apart and bodies curving into synchronicity. Virtue and Moir. Tessa and Scott. Scott and Tessa, ScottandTessa, Scottandtessa. This was how they’re supposed to be. “I love you,” she said.

If she’d had slightly less to drink, she could have played it off as gratitude or pride for what they’d accomplished together. They could have played it off. But her voice was naked and raw and confessional, and even through the copious tequila shots she saw his eyes shift into inscrutability.

“Oh, kiddo. OK, Tessa. Get … God, get some sleep, OK? You’re not going to remember any of this in the morning.”

(Of course she did, though. If she hadn’t, they probably would have figured their shit out six years earlier, lived in London for the rest of their lives, and skipped PyeongChang because she was pregnant.)

(Probably not that last part, or even the last two parts, but still.)

She woke up and realized immediately that all of the overwrought metaphors she’d read about hangovers were true and were wholly inadequate. “Mrghmph,” she groaned.

“Kiddo?” Scott got up off the couch. “Hey. I’ve been waiting for you to come back to the land of the living. How you feeling?”

She cast an eye over the room—the next bed was rumpled, indicating he’d crashed there (which she totally didn’t hold against him given her vomitous state); and he was dressed and holding his PSP, indicating he’d been up watching her for a while. “What time is it?” she asked, lying flat on her back with her eyes closed, partly for dramatic effect and partly to stop the room from spinning.

“It’s almost ten. I told Joannie she could swing by at 10:30 to pick up her stuff.” He looked almost … fearful.

“Thanks,” she replied, swallowing. Her throat felt dry.
And she made a snap decision. “What happened last night?” she asked. Summoning all her Russian acting training, she added, “I don’t remember anything.”

He exhaled. “You celebrated pretty hard last night,” he said, teasing lightly. “We danced a lot. Tons of fun with Joannie. I even saw you and Meryl laughing together at one point. You had the best time, Tutu.”

Ugh. “And then?”

“And then Chiddy and I found you ralphing into a potted plant,” he confirmed. “We came upstairs, you threw up a couple of more times, and then I got you cleaned up and put in bed. Joannie was more than happy to crash with Jess and Mira. And I hope you don’t mind but I slept in the other bed … Wasn’t entirely sure the crackers and Gatorade would do the trick.” He paused, brushing over her awful embarrassing confession. “How are you feeling?”

She contemplated her answer. “Alive,” she finally said.

“Good,” he smiled, helped her sit up. “Never seen you get that drunk. Kinda had me worried.” Stupid Scott with his caring crinkly grin.

It was all because of you, she wanted to say, and she thought she meant it in a you help me let loose kind of way but she realized it was actually much more negative than that. “Well. Thanks for helping me last night.”

“What are partners for?” he smiled and she wanted to die, now. “I’ll get you packed. Do you want to take a shower?”

“Scott, you suck at packing.”

“Well, we’ve got twenty minutes before we need to meet Marina to plot out the next two years of our lives, so I think your options are me packing and your stuff getting wrinkled, or being late to Marina.”

Fuck. Two of her least favorite things, but only one might lead to death and yelling. “Thank you.”

She felt approximately thirty percent more alive after the shower, managed to make it through breakfast by taking very small bites of plain toast. “We have two years to get to the top,” Marina outlined as Tessa tried not to puke at the smell of Scott’s bacon and beans. “Long hours. Total commitments. No distractions. You are on ice, five, six hours a day. Dance. Strength. Cardio. You have very good shot now. Judges are noticing. People are talking. Home ice very good, but you must work hard. Gold next year at Worlds a must. You understand?”

Scott, carrying the load for her hangover, nodded. “We’re there, Marina. Completely. We’ll do eight hours on the ice if we have to. We only want one thing right now.”

Subtle, Scott. But she nodded. “Agreed. We’re going to win, Marina.”

And so they went back, first home but then to Michigan, and practiced more, and practiced harder. When he showed up at her place one Friday night, she simply raised an eyebrow and said, “We’ve gotta focus on the Games, Scott.”

He swallowed. “I’m focused. Are you?”

She contemplated for a second, then said, “Yeah,” and swung her door open.
That was the first time she felt out of love with Scott Moir.

So if she worked out her anger and her disappointment on his body and in practice throughout that spring and summer, that was simply agreeing to their rules. If she skated hard for those five months, for longer hours than she’d ever done before and through pain that kept screaming through her legs like banshees out of hell, that was simply being single-minded in pursuit of their shared goal. And if she didn’t tell Scott that the doctor didn’t think they were shin splints, that it was an overuse injury, that she had spent two hours sobbing so hard that she could barely speak to her mother instead of to him after the doctor said surgery, that was just …

She wasn’t sure what that was, honestly, besides really shitty.

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v. Three Years Before Today, Scott

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Once they made their comeback announcement and made it to Montreal it didn’t take long for Tessa and Joannie to connect. The two of them hadn’t lost touch, exactly—they had been roommates at every competition for five seasons, then on several summers’ worth of tours, and you never really lost track of someone with whom you’d iced three limbs in just your underwear or done vodka shots with you on three continents or been with when you found out your mother died—but they’d been in different cities and on different paths and sometimes texts just sort of went unreturned and then somehow it had been almost a year since they’d seen each other in person.

They finally met up for dinner just before Worlds, at a trendy place Joannie picked in Notre Dame. Joannie had a fiance now, a slightly older cardiologist (a detail that made Kate Virtue dab her eyes every time it was mentioned) that Tessa needed to meet, because she was going to be a bridesmaid; Marie and Patch, who’d known Joannie for decades through Quebec skating circles, were invited along too, making for a perfectly balanced table. When he entered the bar he spotted Joannie immediately, hair curled kickily and a big smile on her face. “Scottie! Mon cher. It has been too long,” she proclaimed, kissing him on both cheeks. “You look fantastic! I hope your French has improved, eh?”

“Working on it, Jojo,” he grinned, giving her a tight, long hug. “You good?”

“Merveilleux,” she smiled. “Starting medical school so so soon! Jean-Pierre, meet Scott. We have to be nice, he has the worst French, even though he dated a girl from Varennes for years.” He was thin and reedy and very Quebecois, and stared at Joannie adoringly. “He has the accent, but might die living here in Montreal.”

“I’m getting better,” he protested.

“Only at the swear words,” Tessa said, coming in behind him and grabbing Joannie for a squealing hug that involved literal bouncing up and down.

“And this is the fabulous Tessa.” Joannie beamed when they finally pulled apart. “Scott’s partner and my roommate for almost a decade. She’s simply the best.”

“It’s just wonderful to meet you; I have lots of tips for living with Joannie. Number one: don’t forget the gummi bears.” The two of them doubled over in laughter; the joke so deep inside their friendship that even Scott wasn’t sure it was. He shrugged cluelessly at Jean-Pierre.

They sat down and split a bottle of wine as they waited for Marie and Patch—so much to celebrate,
after all; b2ten could shove it for the evening—and then the two of them arrived and it was really a swirl of more good wine and bread and French, which he could understand but not really respond to, so he mostly whispered comments into Tessa’s ear.

It was a warm, wonderful night, the type that pooled in your belly for weeks and remembered mostly as low lighting and laughter and the clink of glasses. Marie and Patch, once they finally arrived, regaled Jean-Pierre with stories of baby Joannie and baby Tessa (she would never ever live down the red protest hair); JoJo and Tess recounted some fabulously dramatic catfight between Russian juniors at a gala sometime around 2007, which Scott didn’t remember at all, probably because he was hooking up with some Ukrainian, per Tessa’s recollection. He wrapped his arm around Tess’s chair as she leaned into him with laughter, describing the way the pairs skater had thrown herself at him.

Finally, Jean-Pierre, tipsy, asked the four of them the inevitable question: “So in ice dance, then, you always end up dating your partner?” He winked at Joannie. “I should be happy you did singles, yes?”

“Oh, we’re not dating,” Tessa gestured between the two of them, her smile still full of laughter. “Just … best friends. And skating partners. Teammates! We’ve been skating together for eighteen years, actually. It becomes a really intense relationship after a while.” He nearly said Jean-Pierre isn’t a reporter, babe, but that would have pissed her off on multiple levels.

“Skating partners with a history of benefits, though!” Joannie snorted, her voice liquid and delighted, and Scott wondered, briefly, how much she’d had to drink. At Tessa’s Look, she laughed, “Oh. Please. Tessa. I was rooming with you the Four Continents where Scott punched out that guy!”

“He was being too handsy and it felt unsafe, it got out of control really quickly,” Tessa repeated immediately, and Scott raised an eyebrow, wondering if she actually believed the story she’d conjured up a decade ago. Her smile straddled ever-patient and slightly pissed and a little embarrassed, all at once. Nobody else could tell she was flustered, but come on—he knew that Joannie was about to get Tessa’ed.

“Yes, of course,” Joannie said with an eyeroll. “And that’s why I had to crash with Kaitlyn there, and I think it was actually Jessica—” she waggled her eyes at Scott and he definitely started trying to count backwards to see how many glasses she had had, because danger was lurking— “at Worlds that year? You two were fooling exactly nobody that season.”

Please don’t mention those years on tours, he silently begged Joannie, who mostly looked dumbfounded that her friend was still fighting facts.

Marie was studying them intensely, a small smile on her face. Patch was classily trying to cover up a smirk with a wine glass, but he didn’t have it high enough and his grin was magnified, not hidden, by the crystal. Tessa’s eyes darted between all of them, evaluating her quickest escape from this situation with a pleasant smile on her face. He knew that he should not answer this question. Finally, she said, with a death grip on his knee, “That was a very long time ago! Clearly. Anyways, the answer, Jean-Pierre, is that no, not every ice-dance partner dates. One of Scott’s brothers actually danced with their cousin. And let me tell you about the Shib Sibs! They’re perfectly lovely—” Scott snorted, and she elbowed him— “but Scott thinks they’re really weird.”

Later, on the way home, his own death grip on the steering wheel, he said, “You know, you didn’t feel unsafe, at that karaoke club. And I punched the guy because he was hitting on you and I didn’t like it. And then, yes, we did have sex that night.” He refrained from adding and you kissed me first.

She stared at him, confused. “I know, Scott.”
“Because you just told Joannie that cack-of-shit story you made up so I wouldn’t get suspended by the ISU or killed by Marina.”

“I—sorry. I guess it’s been a while, since I thought about that story. That night.”

Bullshit. “Eventually the lies become the truth?” he raised an eyebrow.

She stiffened at the repeat of the phrase, and took a deep breath. “I’m hearing anger in your voice, and I’d like to discuss that,” she theorized. “However, I am also feeling a little defensive and hurt by that comment.”

He took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. That was a low blow, and counterproductive. I’m just … I don’t like when I feel like I’m being lied too.” She inhaled, sharply. “You’re Tessa. You remember. So, calling the bullshit card there.”

She shook her head, stared out the windshield. “I’m not lying, I swear. I was having fun tonight, and wasn’t prepared for Joannie to bring that up—” That tracked, Tessa had scared literally every figure skater in North America away from ever discussing them in front of her, or the media, or the internet, or their senile grandmothers— “and we’ve never discussed any of that … part of our history with Marie and Patch, not the … dirty details, and I was just … caught off-guard. And, you know … panicked. That was all. I promise. And I’m sorry.”

“Thank you. Tess, they’re not going to, I don’t know, think any less of us, for … you know. Being us.” Fucked-up history and all. “Also, there’s no way Marie doesn’t know.”

“I know, just sometimes I don’t know,” she said levelly. “Can you understand that?”

He reached down and took her hand. She squeezed his fingers. “Course I do, T.”

“Thank you,” she exhaled, finally relaxing.

He walked her to her door when they got back to their building, zero hope or expectation, and asked, “Wanna come up for breakfast and drive to Sam’s together in the morning?” They had SOI choreo to iron out.

She shook her head. “I want to go to the gym first. Meet you at Sam’s at eight?”

Sure she wanted to go to the gym first. “Alright. See you then,” he kissed her forehead, and made a note to pick her up an almond-milk latte.

“Great. And Scott?”

“Yeah?”

“I … really like this new us. This mature, respectful, talking-it-out, being-thoughtful-partners us. I’m glad we’re able to, you know. Come back. Do it the right way.”

He wasn’t sure her avoiding him by working out willingly at six AM qualified as ‘mature’ but he simply nodded (he had to admit it was progress) and said, “Me too, T,” instead of saying what he wanted: that he really didn’t want to lie anymore, to themselves or their friends or the world. Which was also probably less-than-mature of him, either, but pushing either of them too hard too fast would end the comeback as well as their personal relationship, probably for good. And that couldn’t happen. He leaned forward and kissed her cheek. “Good night.”

Scott’s Secret Two-Year Plan: going to be harder than he initially thought.
vi. Ten Years Before Today, Tessa

She was totally prepared, for the CBC question. They’d gotten the question before—her blood still boiled (would always boil) at the phrase younger, more mature sister—and she knew what her response should be (what it would be a variation on for the rest of the Games): No, it’s never been romantic. We’ve really grown up together. We’re best friends and I’m honestly so grateful to go through this with Scott. There’s nobody else I’d rather have by my side.

But maybe it was the phrasing, this time: Any chance of you being a romantic couple like Sale and Pelletier, which was so jarring and ironic and accidentally and hilariously on-point that she wanted to scream or cry or laugh. Maybe it was the reminders from Skate Canada to be seen together and to be happy, the reminders from Marina that Mahler was about young love and they needed to fully inhibit those characters. Maybe it was the fact that their success, their medal, depended on their ability to be convincing on all those fronts. Maybe it was the fact that her legs still burned, always, along their seams, the pressure, pressure, pressure building and screaming for a demonic release. Maybe it was the fact that Scott had been talking on his phone when he arrived at the studio, laughing and promising Jess I’ll make you pasta tonight, baby.

All of this combined made her a little reckless, and determined, and forward when she chirped a “Maybe!” to the CTV interviewer’s question.

Scott looked at her, surprised, because he was expecting her Press Conference answer, but he recovered nicely and did what was expected of him: bantered, let the possibility of a real relationship dangle like temptation.

But his eyes were haggard and questioning and a little betrayed, like he didn’t know her anymore.

They didn’t fight because, years ago, they’d determined that it was counterproductive to their goal of winning medals. They were goal-oriented people. The goal right now was winning.

Later, they’d emphasize that it wasn’t romantic and had never been, that they were best friends, and that made it into the framing of the segment, but obviously so did her soundbite.

Whatever. None of it was lying, she told herself. There had been nothing romantic about those several months in 2008. It had meant so little to both of them that when Marina hauled them to a freaking marriage counselor after she came back and they were barely speaking, neither of them had bothered to mention it (or it could have just meant too much to think about. She wasn’t sure). And it wasn’t lying, to say maybe, either. It was doing their jobs. Part of their job was convincing people they were in love, and this was doing so.

And they had both moved on to other people. They didn’t need to talk about it, really.

Still, she could feel Scott’s eyes burning into the back of her head.

vii. Eight Years Before Today, Scott

“Good! You’re here. Only ten minutes late,” Tessa teased, with a smile on her face.
“Yeah yeah,” he quickly kissed her cheek, then turned to the guy she was standing with. Her eyebrow raised ever so slightly and he knew she saw he was still a little hungover from the night at the bar with the boys. Whatever, Tess. “Hi, I’m Scott. Sorry I’m late, but this one will tell you to please not to take it personally.” He hadn’t seen her in a week; per usual in Tessa time these days, it felt like a year.

“Everyone has to have a flaw and his is a terminal inability to arrive on time,” Tessa smiled, her hand on his back. “Scott, this is David Cranbrook, the owner of the dealership. David, this is my very famous partner, Scott Moir.”

“Thanks so much for your support,” Scott smiled. “We just love the cars.”

“Of course. You guys are our hometown heroes. Couldn’t have you driving any other cars.”

Tessa quickly introduced him to everyone else—he knew this was her first time meeting them too, but she spoke with the affection of someone who had attended their children’s christenings—and let the director of the shoot explain the concept.

“I am really sorry I’m late,” he said again as they put their medals on and stood on their marks.

“Seriously, don’t worry! I had a paper to turn in; I was here barely fifteen minutes before you.” She smiled at everyone else. “The hangover is probably the part you should apologize for,” she said under her breath.

He ignored that. “How’s school?”

“Good. I mean, super busy, but I dropped a class on study design and that’s made everything a lot easier. How’s Jess? On again, right? That’s great. And, oh! Your coaching thing was this week, right?”

“We’re good, yeah, she’s coming to Ilderton next week. And yeah, master class with the ten year olds, who tripped all over their toe picks,” he said. “So, after this commercial, we need to go …”

“To the dinner at the Boys and Girls Club of Greater London. We’ll be signing books. And tomorrow is the luncheon at that IT company that covered our travel last year, then a radio interview previewing Stars on Ice. You got that all, right?”

“That’s it? Yeah, I’m good,” he smiled. “And then you have your Toronto things the day after eh?” Some boutique had asked her to model in for its summer campaign, and Health Canada was doing a photo shoot with her and an interview about her beauty routine.

Sometime between the Olympics and her second surgery, Tessa had gone on a tear for them, snapping up sponsorship opportunities left and right. He was more than impressed—he freely admitted he never would have thought to capitalize on half the opportunities she did—and plenty of them came with perks and parties for him. Like meeting the Queen of England, or the car from this dealership. He’d paid off his parents’ third mortgage, the one that had covered the final three years of training, with the Stars cash—Tess had renegotiated their contracts after the Vancouver win. And it was awesome to see her getting the sort of beauty-and-wellness-and-fashion stuff she loved and he honestly didn’t understand. He had his own things too, some of them even set up by Tess—but she had spent the last four months personally rebounding from a shitty year and a shitty relationship and two shitty surgeries and him being shitty in general and she was fucking thriving.

It was great to see. He’d always said that Tessa was going to take over the world.

Her eyes lit up. “Yes! I’m so excited. Do you want to come to Toronto with me? We can talk to Jeff
and get some rink time to practice for Stars."

He nodded. They’d barely been on the ice since Meryl and Charlie had edged them out at Worlds a few weeks ago, and the extra practice was very much needed. She’d been doing her PT diligently—he popped by as frequently as Marina would let him, was working with her team a bit to improve his stroking, because if he were more efficient they were more efficient—but she wasn’t quite at her peak form. They’d had to withdraw from FCC because of it; it didn’t bother him as much as it bothered her. She wasn’t going to let Meryl and Charlie win again. “When do you want me there?”

“I should wrap around four—we can meet at the studio, grab dinner, go to the rink if Jeffrey says OK,” she thought through their plans out loud.

“Guys? We’re ready,” one of the techs said.

When he arrived in Toronto two days later, he dropped his crap at her hotel—she’d offered him the second bed in the room that Health Canada had arranged for her—then made his way to the studio address she’d texted. “Scott!” she bounced on her toes over to him in a pink-and-orange sports bra and matching leggings. “I’m almost all wrapped. But …”

“But?”

“Julia called this morning and wants me to stop by a reception the CBC is holding. I said I couldn’t since you were in town too but that actually made her more excited. So I figured we could go grab food, go there from about seven to nine, and then Jeffrey said we could have rink time at 9:30. That OK?”

“They cool with my clothes?”

Her eyes flicked over his Canada hoodie and ratty jeans. “We can stop at Banana Republic first.”

He didn’t hate receptions as much as his brothers always thought; food and people were two of his favorite things even if the personalities could be a bit much. Plus, he genuinely did owe his skating career to these people, and he was gracious enough to know that. What surprised him, though, was how much Tessa liked them. He supposed it made a fair bit of sense: This wasn’t Tess, his introverted partner of fourteen years who had skipped all parties but one in the glory days of Canton, this was Tessa Virtue, Olympic ice dancer. It was a character she played and she always performed her best. In her black dress and heels, hair still curled from the shoot earlier and makeup glamorous as a movie star’s, she was a warrior.

“Scott! Come meet Andrea and Jane!” she called, calling him away from some sports broadcasters to meet two very thin women. She wrapped an arm around his waist, patted his chest. “This is Scott, my partner-in-Olympics. He’s incredible. Scott, Andrea and Jane run a PR company specializing in athlete representation here in Toronto. Scott is the absolute biggest Leafs fan of all time, when we were little he used to skate in his jersey—”

He walked away from that conversation with two rinkside tickets to the game next week and an invitation for dinner with Ron Wilson. It made him dizzy.

Later, as they warmed up, the rink quiet but for the slice of their blades, as they relearned muscle patterns and rerouted neural pathways, concentrating on doing exactly what the PT said might lessen her pain long-term. He finally said, “You really like this, don’t you?”


“No I mean, the stuff from earlier. The photo shoots, the commercials, the receptions, the …”
personality aspects. You just, you’ve really taken to it.”

She slid to a stop. “It’s to facilitate our skating career. I’m an athlete first, Scott, not some sort of …
personality.” She looked genuinely wounded.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he sighed. “I just meant … you’re really good at this, the business side, the
people side, the entrepreneurial side, the media side. You’re just … driven and gracious and poised, not that you of all people would ever not be poised, and … I could tell, that’s what I was saying.” He tried again. “You do really well at it. And I can tell you really like it. It was a compliment.”

She softened. “Thanks.”

“Pulling my butt along, that’s for sure.”

She took his hand in a real grip, and squeezed. “Please don’t sell yourself short, Scott. I wouldn’t have done any of this without you.”

“Now that I don’t believe,” he teased. “You were always going to end up here, T.”

She simply blushed. “False, and flattery will get you nowhere, sir. Let’s practice the no-touch again.”

Their new world—which really felt like her new world, and he was along for the ride—was heady and
exciting and full of opportunities and parties and new people; but most days, like this one, he simply wasn’t sure what was authentic and what was phony. What was public, what was private. Skate Canada had drilled them with media training in the runup to the Games; he had found it tiresome and stupid, but Tessa had listened closely and taken enough notes for the both of them, and it showed. She had always been savvy about the politics, he knew: sometime around their first Worlds in 2007 she suggested taking their hug—a ritual started because he got amped up and she got anxious before a competition and they really just needed to feel centered and in sync—and doing in the mixed zone, in front of the judges and cameras. He didn’t care where they did it, just that it happened, but it had become its own thing, a sign of something greater, and the ISU and Skate Canada and Marina had all approved of her plan. It felt like that casual, careful opportunism was seeping into all aspects of their career, and like she was simultaneously developing a sort of armor. He got it, he did—she was so damn private, and such a people-pleaser—but he hoped for both their friendship and their career that he was still allowed behind those defenses.

He was beginning to wonder, though. He knew, intellectually, that there had to be a ways to go before they repaired what had happened between Seoul and her second surgery—there was no way she had just … moved on from the last three years; even he was smart enough to know that—but she was so genuine and gracious and complementary that he had a hard time telling if they might be really OK or if she was just perfecting Tessa Virtue, public figure.

But her hand in his, stroking the rink—that he knew was genuine. It was simple. It was true.

They lazed in a booth in an abandoned diner afterwards, splitting fries and a cheesecake and drinking watery Molson’s. After going over choreography and deciding together whether or not they liked Jeff’s new boyfriend Justin (answer, yes, which made their eventual wedding less awkward), she asked, “Are you and Charlie going to play hockey when we get back to Canton?”

He scowled. “Doubt it.” It turned out that their friendship, which had glided through Estonia and Armenia and Moscow and Mexico couldn’t survive one thing: The Olympics, then Charlie and Meryl beating them.
“That sucks, but I think it’s the right thing,” she said, empathetic but diplomatic. “It’s … It’s going to be a rough couple years, Scott. Through Sochi. Especially now that Meryl is dating Fedor, we need to make sure we’re still getting Marina’s attention.”

“I want to beat them too, but that one’s a little unfair. Especially from you,” he said levelly.

She had the decency to blush, but insisted, “I’m just saying. Game faces. Eyes on the prize. Sports metaphors galore.” The woman who looked at him was cool and determined and unafraid. Ready.

“You seem to be handling it better,” he said.

“You’re friends with everybody, and everyone’s friends with you. Meryl is basically my Regina George and even Charlie barely tolerates me. This is almost easier, now that we don’t have to be playing pretend. Well, except with the judges, and the media. But not at practice.”

“And we’re not … playing pretend?”

“What? Us?”

“I mean, I know on ice and everything, that’s a story but … us, we’re OK?”

“I … don’t even know what you’re asking,” she crunched a fry. Her voice was genuine.

“I just … The sponsorship stuff is great. Really. I meant it and I think you’re … extraordinary, and God knows if I’d been left to my own devices I’d still be driving Danny’s old truck and my parents would still have half a million dollars in debt.” Actually, left to his own devices, he wouldn’t have made the damn Olympics, but … not the time. “But it’s playing a part, too, right? The offers, the opportunities, the narrative about us,” he used her favorite word. “The rest of our lives, the ISU and Marina and Skate Canada and the … other people who are involved, it’s sometimes hard to remember what’s real and what’s pretend. Especially as we …” he wanted to say Start thinking about life after ice dance, but the first rule of an Olympics quad was Don’t Talk About What Happens After and he wasn’t even close to thinking about that, so he tried again, “It’s not just us, fifteen and seventeen, arriving in Canton, us against the world. And sometimes it feels like it’s hard to … find that, again.” He wasn’t sure what he was saying, exactly, but knew it needed to be said.

Her eyes softened. “I know what you mean.” She reached a hand out and squeezed again. “But this is still real. You and me, against all odds. Through everything, we’re still standing here, skating together. That’s enough to cut through all of that, I think.”

He squeezed back. “Holding you to that, Virtch.”

“Virtch?” she crinkled her nose and laughed. “That’s a new one.”

They paid the bill and walked out, and as he went to hail a cab, she said, impulsively, “You want to just walk back?”

They were a good four miles from the hotel and it was nearly midnight, but he just smiled and said, “Sure.”

They held hands and waltzed through the city—sometimes literally, dancing off curbs and practicing lifts against large plant holders—and talked and laughed about everything and nothing, the way that only the two of them could. When they finally made it back to the hotel around two, he brushed his teeth and dropped into bed as she took a shower, but was only mildly surprised to feel her arms wrap around him in the same bed. “Night, Scott,” she whispered, placing a feathery kiss between his shoulder blades.
He kissed her fingertips before falling asleep. This was real.

The next morning, he woke to a note: Hi! Had to rush off for the interview for the mag. I checked out so you’re good to go in the room till 11. Tip the maid? I’ll owe you three coffees! Driving back to London tonight; rink time in Ilderton later this week maybe. Text me! xxT.


Last night was real, but this new them—and the new him and the new her—were all real too.

Chapter End Notes

I got a *ton* of questions about how I kept everything straight. The long story short is: bullet points!

The structure of the story, from the outset, was a bit of a high-wire act, but I don’t think it was really crazy-ambitious, and definitely not scoped out from Day 1. I’m very much a no-outline writer—I tend to just write, and take the attitude of “well, I wrote it, so it must be what I wanted to write.” I’m not precious, it’s not fraught, it’s just to explain, and entertain. It’s why I write so damn much, and rarely sequentially. But even with the RPF backbone I knew I would run into trouble.

It started w/ one outline, basically my spin on What Really Happened. I very quickly fixed in as flashbacks from their wedding (I didn’t decide on any flash-forwards for several chapters). I wrote, and locked into, Scott’s last vignette (in ch. 15) very early; it was one of the first ten written, and meant to parallel 1.iv pretty explicitly. The idea that their first real kiss was in the last chapter came early too, as a parallel and because I wanted the story to swing wide again in closing. This wasn’t exactly narrative, a lot of the time it felt like fitting puzzle pieces together. It was sort of like building a house of cards and really carefully thinking through where the next piece would have to go. I focused on the how. In retrospect it’s a matrix: one axis for time/plot; one for character development and interplay; one by chapter. But after sort of scratching out maybe twenty-five pages (I’m a fast writer, and plot is a weak spot—which RPF fixed), I sat down a made a bullet list of about 65-70 “scenes” that I was interested in writing.

I then wrote out a fact-outline, which listed out known events (competitions/locations in a given year, show numbers) as well as a pretty filled-out picture of a lot of the relationships and personal developments, based on blogs and contemporaneous sources. This was maybe a page and just for reference.

Then I started futzing and arranging the vignettes into chapters designed in a story arc, and this became the main outline. I focused on where I wanted them to be in each chapter which helped to make decisions for me because it arced the vignettes two ways: by the overarching themes, and then internally, in each installment.

It ended up about twenty-five pages, and was always a living document. It was pretty locked into an overall arc by chap 4 or 5, when I knew it would be at least 12 chapters; but not finalized until July. There were some very practical considerations to ordering vignettes, based on how I wanted the story to unfold—for instance, it was important for the scene with Tessa watching Scott make out with Cassandra to be before you fully knew where they were together.
At times, I would map out which scenes would go in a chapter, and realize I had an imbalance—like, five Scott, three Tessa—and need to come up with a new section. Those new vignettes were very thematically driven (the one with them playing a prank started this way). I liked this method because it informed and reflected the storytelling—there are different ways of telling many of these scenes, but it did depend on what information you were supposed to learn, what info they needed to learn, etc.

The original list of scenes became a chronological outline. This was also a parking lot for un-assigned vignettes. Here I might see that we needed a bit more to go from Realization X to Realization Y, so would add a vignette, or would notice that we had like, two Tessa POVs in 2011 but six Scott. So would try and balance there.

Finally, the fourth-ish was a sort of tone-sketch for each year, which very explicitly had me write down where the major tensions (public/private, real/fake, choice/destiny, opposites attract) were in that year (sample, from 2013: Plus he’s stupid in love with her, and stupid in general, as he faces the gradual realization of how all-encompassing this is: this is his past, present, and future which only primes him for a fight/fuckup. He finds being with Tessa to be a bit overwhelming and he doesn’t actually know that.).

The chronological outline was probably complete, in terms of what vignettes I wanted to write, around chapters seven or eight. For the process-interested, I would sometimes write a section early on—Chiddy finding out was probably written in May, for instance, but didn’t post till October—but I would only sit down to write full chapters. No draft chapter was ever ‘organized’ chronologically; i.e., I didn’t write everything from 2009-2013 in order and then assign it out across six chapters. And if I wrote something in 2010 in chapter three and then another thing in chapter six, the chapter six one would need to fit with the earlier one, if that makes sense.

Hopefully all of this makes sense and makes me sound less, not more, crazy!
all of your flaws and all of my flaws they lie there hand in hand

Chapter Notes

So I know I said I wanted to go shorter, and here I am, 12k words and less than a week later (what can I say? Work is stressful right now and I don't like it). One of the sections I definitely thought about cutting but that would throw off the pacing, so I left it in. I ended up liking it though, but will absolutely give snaps if you guess which one it is. There are probably going to be fewer vignettes going forward per chapter, since my original chapter cap is only achievable with, like, a bajillion plot points. And that's just tiring ;)

I will double-issue warn that the next couple of chapters fact that this is RPF realllly began to weird me out, given the plot points I've incorporated (many of which seem pretty well established in the skating community) and how I would connect all those plot points. Still, weird for me! And might be for you too. But, you know, the more written, the less can possibly be true? Anyways, hopefully approaching with both a healthy dose of pathos/empathy + emotional honesty + thoughtfulness for some truly extra-ordinary circumstances. Feel free to tell me how you're feeling it. Angst isn't really my thing (or my strong suit) but we're definitely hitting some drama.

Finally, happy to announce this is the last section with substantive time spent in the teenage-angst years. Congrats, everyone, we've made it through 2010; sorry we will soon be hitting 2013.

Let me know comments! Especially if that comment is "please take scissors to your chapters, stat."

Title is from Bastille's "Flaws" which I had on repeat throughout this chapter, and sums up the tone of the entire piece.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Today, Tessa

--

Once the engagement photos hit Instagram, more than one person, from journalists and baristas to Moir second cousins and Scott’s junior teams, asked her if planned to use their skating music at the wedding. She had scoffed. That was absurd, she informed them; was she just supposed to crawl lecherously down the aisle to Carmen before jumping onto Scott’s face?

There is already an element of camp in their story, and she refuses to capitulate to the cheese aspects of the narrative. Skating is obviously a huge part of their story, a vital part of them, but she doesn’t want her vows to include In sickness and in health, in gold and in silver; doesn’t want a Stars on Ice -esque group dance featuring past and present members of Team Canada; hadn’t wanted competition photos or newswire shots in any slideshow she knew their families would inevitably make (Of course, Cara had convinced her to allow exceptions for the Olympics, though, and Jordan slipped in several heinous teenaged photo shoots, because she still finds the mid-aughts to be a delightful time in Tessa’s fashion journey); and she certainly doesn’t want the party to end with everyone drunkenly
skating at Gadbois at midnight (especially because, as Scott correctly notes, the chances of someone ending up in the ED due to a skate slice—and the chances of that someone being on his side of the invite list—would be pretty high if that happened.)

They are so much more than their skating career—their *marriage* will be so much more than that—and that’s what this wedding will be about. She, they, are clear on that point.

There will *be* no spectacle.

But the music does become the touchstone used to honor their skating career without necessarily drawing attention to it. It makes sense: they had always selected songs together, and chosen music that reflected where they were at that point in time—hence *Carmen* instead of her beloved *Pride and Prejudice* back in 2012-2013—so it was a prism for their personal and professional lives; stitched together made a pretty good aural history of their journey together. As guests filter in, the string quartet plays the instrumental versions of many of their old songs—*Jack & Diane, I Want to Hold Your Hand, S’Wonderful, Umbrellas, Latch, Hip Hip Chin Chin*, all of the tangos, including (yes, fine, internet) *Carmen* and *Roxanne*. Her mother had pushed for the *Seasons* to be included, even though Scott truly hates it, has always hated it, but Kate argued that it was an important part of their story even if it hadn’t been perfect, maybe *because* it hadn’t been perfect, and Tessa knows per usual Mom is right, so she put *Stay* and *Sorry* on the list, too.

Her bridesmaids walk to Mahler and she fakes him out by teeing up *You Make My Dreams Come True* before she walks down the aisle, but after a few bars and a booming laugh from him, she actually processes to *Come What May*. Over the top and perhaps a bit trendy for the elegant affair, but worth it for the tears in Scott’s eyes.

And in hers too.

“You’re laughing and crying at the same time, T,” he observes, lowly, after she kisses her parents goodbye (nobody fucking gives away Tessa Virtue) and stands next to him for the most important step sequence of their partnership and the music swells behind her. She realizes he’s right.

(He thumbs away her tears before kissing her softly. The officiant reminds them *not yet.*)

Later on they do do their first dance is to *Long Time Running*.

As they close out the night with *Footloose*, followed by *I Want to Dance with Somebody*, sung by Miku, who has jumped on the stage next to Max, her husband (husband!) swinging her around as they absolutely shut down the dance floor, she thinks *fine, new second cousins and Internet. You totally win this one.*

She honestly doesn’t mind.

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**ii. Eleven Years Before Today, Scott**

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Scott recognized Kate’s Lexus—a pretty old model, she’d had it since the Kitchener mornings a lifetime ago, but figure skating carried financial costs, at least in their families—from the moment it turned up the Moirs’ long driveway. His first, vague thought was that it was weird that his mother hadn’t mentioned Kate would be popping by for tea. But she did that, not infrequently.

But then he saw Tessa looking small and mad behind the steering wheel, and he knew immediately
that something was very wrong.

She slammed the door, leaned against the car as they stared at each other. She approached him, arms crossed in front of her. “We need to talk,” she said, shakily.

*Fuck*, Scott thought. After months of hooking up and not talking about it, after the confession he *knew* she remembered at Worlds, after the best season of their career and worst summer of their partnership, Tessa had decided that now, a month before the most important Grand Prix season of their lives, was the time to have it out.

She had always been a lot braver than him.

She must have seen the look of dread in his eyes, though, and she said, sharply, “*No*. No. Scott … it’s my legs. We need to talk about them.” And then she burst into tears.

“Hey, hey, kiddo,” he said, his body hurling back in motion, because he could do *that*, he could be a rock for her. He felt a primal need, always, to comfort her against every hurt but the ones he inflicted. He wrapped his arms around her, moved her to the steps to the porch. “OK. So. You went to the doctor? The one they recommended at HPC?”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, and just like that, her face was fixed. Calm. Impassive. “Yes. My mom and I. This morning.”

“So, new boots? More PT? A couple of weeks off?” He didn’t know what exactly the treatment was for shin-splints—he’d been meaning to Google it since she’d mentioned it—but he was glad they were tackling it before the season started.

“Not exactly,” her eyes were clear and her voice contained but a tremor. “It’s not shin splints. It’s a condition called compartment syndrome. It’s an overuse injury. My legs …” She took a deep breath, air hissing in spurts out of her nostrils. “There’s too much pressure in my muscles from going too hard and wearing them out. They feel … God, Scott, it’s like needles, all the time. Skating, walking, going up stairs, lying absolutely still, *breathing*, it feels like I’m being stabbed. It’s ten times worse than the worst muscle cramp. They just don’t stop, ever. Ice doesn’t help, the drugs don’t help,” her eyes were wild as she rambled, voice pitching, and she took a moment to compose herself, holding herself together tightly before speaking again. “They need to relieve the pressure to stop the pain.”

He knew he wasn’t Tessa-smart, but literally nothing was computing. After an eternity, she added, “And the only way to do that is surgically.”

“You have to have surgery?” his voice cracked. “*Surgery*?”

“Yeah,” she said miserably, staring at her hands. “They’re thinking in a couple of weeks. Early October.”

He stopped himself from saying, *But that’s when the Grand Prix is starting*. Tessa fucking knew when the Grand Prix started. Instead he said, flatly, “When did you find out?”

“They told me about the surgery today. That’s why I’m here.”

“She’s thinking in a couple of weeks. Early October.”

He stopped himself from saying, *But that’s when the Grand Prix is starting*. Tessa fucking knew when the Grand Prix started. Instead he said, flatly, “When did you find out?”

“They told me about the surgery today. That’s why I’m here.”

“T, they don’t just *diagnose* surgery on the first appointment. Hell,” he said, bitterness creeping into his voice, “you fucking haven’t *said* anything to me about knives or needles before. And you know, I notice, I *ask*, and you say it’s nothing! I ask all the time—at the rink, when you’re heading to physio, *in bed*—her entire being seized up then, because he was definitely violating one of the unspoken Rules, “—And you say it’s nothing. But you did know, didn’t you?” She averted her eyes. “How long have you known, Tessa?”
She closed her eyes, wilted in front of his. “I went to the doctor for the first time eight weeks ago.”

“Two months?”

“I didn’t know … and with everything … I wasn’t sure, and I didn’t want it to be true.”

“Two months?”

“I thought I could handle it. With the Olympics and Marina and god, we have to win Worlds this year…”

“Well, fuck, Tessa, yes, *not talking* to your partner about a season-ending injury is strongly positively correlated with it *just not being true!*” He wanted to say many things—namely, that she was his partner and this was their career, not a his-and-hers thing, not something that either of them should have to go through alone, that therefore this was something that they would go through together; that he was her friend, her … something, her person, she was his person, other shit be damned, that as her person he would want to be there too, that he was scared for her. Instead, though, he yelled, “How could you? Seriously! This isn’t just your career, it’s mine, too! My Olympics! *Our* Olympics, you and me, for eleven years! How could you just not say anything! Since February, we’ve been … How could you be this damned selfish, Tessa? Is this some sort of punishment or something? What the fuck did I do?” He was dimly aware that he was losing it on her.

“You never asked!” Tessa yelled right back, which was surprising in and of itself. They hadn’t yelled at each other in maybe six years. She was crying, too, and he noticed her bent over, gripping her calves. And normally she would step right into his space for an argument, but she was rooted to the step. “Huh, Scott? *Since February* is right! And then this has been going on for two months and the pain started way before that, and it’s your career too but it’s my life and you just never asked. If you had asked, maybe I would have told you.”

“I asked every day! If you needed to stop, if you needed water, if you were OK, if you’d gone to the doctor! You said shin fucking splints. I can’t help if you don’t *talk* to me.”

“You didn’t want to know! You didn’t want to listen!”

Suddenly he wasn’t sure which fight they were having. “You still should have told me!”

“What the fuck is going on out here!” Danny burst out of the house, yelling. He took a look—Tessa crying on the steps; Scott raving and raging around the lawn like a madman—and lunged at his brother, bodychecking him against the railing. “What the fuck did he do, Tutu? You OK?”


“I’m fine,” she said, all the fight sucked out of her. “Well, no, I’m not but—it’s not Scott’s fault.”

“This time,” Danny said skeptically, letting go of him but not moving far.

The screen door banged again, and his mom and Tessa Two came out. “Hi Tessie,” Alma said easily. “I just got off the phone with your mother—I’m so sorry, sweetie.”

“Thanks, Alma,” Tessa sniffled.

“I see this conversation isn’t going very well,” her voice was steady. “So, Scott, why don’t you go on a drive and cool off until you’re ready to talk. I know this is a lot to process but I don’t think you’re being the most supportive, right now. Daniel, can you help Tess into the house? I imagine you’re in quite a lot pain, sweetheart. You can wait here and have tea until Scott comes back. Then
you two can talk.”

“I should go,” Tessa muttered, wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand.

“Kate and I overrule.” Alma’s reply was sweet but firm. “She said you’re free to stay here as long as you two need, because—this is both of us, here—this is your career, together. Which you both know already. Which you have both known for ten years. She says you shouldn’t worry about the car.” Tessa, trapped, nodded. “Scottie, why don’t you go cool off. Tessie, Leanne is bringing the baby around in a bit, he’s practically doubled in size since you saw him last. Danny, help Tess.”

It took three hours, two beers, and a game of pool at Joe’s but he eventually thought he could speak to Tessa like a rational adult without yelling, like someone who needed to make important decisions about his career and whose career was also his crying broken nineteen-year-old best friend who was also the girl he’d been hooking up with for six months, half that time sensing something was very off between them (no wonder he felt ill-equipped for this conversation.). When he entered the living room, she was wrapped in his grandma’s afghan on the ratty old couch, laughing and watching his mom and Carol and Leanne and Tessa Two play with the baby.

“You’re back,” Alma said, straightening. “You guys can take the basement.”

Tess shifted as if to stand, but if she was in as much pain as she said—and he could see it now, etched on her face, skin tight and white as if she was constantly holding in a breath, wondered how he hadn’t seen it for weeks—that wouldn’t do. He scooped her up easily as she groaned, “I can do this,” and he replied, gruffly, “Stop fighting and just let me help, kiddo.”

Once them made it downstairs he sat them both on the rattier older couch, her legs tented over his lap, photos of the two of them and Danny and Sheri everywhere. He finally said, “OK—does massaging them help? Are you in pain?”

“Yeah, and yeah,” she sighed, rolling her head against the back of the couch. “OK, so first off: I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

“Me too,” he swallowed, kneading the soft of her calf muscles. Fix-it mode. Fix-Tess mode. “I’m sorry, I mean. For both the yelling, and the, you know, not asking earlier.”

“Thanks,” she whispered.

“I mean, the good news is, the Olympics aren’t for seventeen months. You’re gonna make it through, Tutu. This is a bump. You’re so strong. We’re still on track.”

“You’re still on track,” she corrected, with a hoarse laugh. “God, Scott. I’m so far off track … You get it, right? I … Scott, I might not come back.”

“You’ll be good,” he said, with a confidence he didn’t feel. Based on her dubious look, she didn’t either. “Come on. You’re too good, you’ve come too far, and you’re too much of a competitor. It’s a challenge. But you’re Tessa.”

“I tried that. Mind over matter. The power of positive thinking. I would lie on the floor and put my legs in the air for hours because that’s what WebMD said. I tried, so hard.” She mumbled something that sounded like I want you to know that.

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her forehead, because only Tessa would try and mantra her way out of surgery and nearly succeed. “I know you did, Tess. I’m so proud of you.” Of course you did. ”And that’s why you’re going to get through this, eh? We’ll get through it.”
She was quiet. “Do you want out? I’m damaged goods now and all, this … This is your chance.” He hated when she got on this tangent, about him being naturally gifted, like a gift had gotten him this far.

“What? Fuck. No. T, come on. We’re partners, a package deal. A team. The A-team. And there’s no such thing as a B-list Tessa Virtue.”

(His dating history would say otherwise.)

“No. Nobody else is as good as you, as good as us. So. Not an option.” That, more than his anger or the need to reassure Tessa, was the crux of this entire dance: he was going with Tessa, they were going together, or the Olympics weren’t happening. There wasn’t a backup plan.

(It had never been about finding skating, it had always been about finding Tessa.)

“The surgery is at least a six-week recovery. Maybe longer.”

“So we’ll miss the Grand Prix and be back for Nats and Worlds,” he said. “You’ll be stronger than ever.”

"Also my mom is going to let me get that nose job, finally," she announced abruptly. "While I’m under. For my emotional pain."

Only Tessa could wheedle a nose job out of her parents as a present for having her career suddenly derailed. "See, something good out of all of this."

She laughed, then sobered. “You should go to Canton,” she said, the realization coming on her suddenly. “And train. One of us needs to stay in shape.”

“You sure?” he checked.

“Yeah,” her voice was surer. Her eyes firm. “I need to focus on recovering. And frankly, Scott—” she hesitated, the expanse of the last six months sitting between them, becoming more vast by the millisecond. “I think the space could be good for us.”

He could have chosen to do a lot of things at that point—including but not limited to kissing her; reminding her that he loved her no matter what; asking her what she needed and how he could be more supportive; pushing the point with her and coming up with a schedule to see her; starting a conversation about what had been going on since Seoul; telling her that he’d fucked up and wouldn’t let her down again—but he just nodded and said, “If you’re sure.”

“I am,” her voice was steady.

“OK,” he said. “Well—I think I’ve still got Funny Face down here.”

Aat She smiled. “That sounds great.”

As she started laughing along with the movie, her fingers twisting around his nervously, he willed himself to believe they would be fine.

The power of positive thinking.

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“So how’s it working with Marie-France and Patch?” Jeffrey asked, a quiet slurp emerging from his green shake as he played with the remote control of the massage chair. “Patch completely whip your ass into shape and teach you ten new French swear words yet?”

“Ha. Scott yes on both, me no.” Tessa smiled, turned a page from the magazine on her lap. “Ouch—please, don’t touch the callouses.” She smiled at the nail tech, but she really couldn’t afford to lose those. She’d just gained them back after four months of training.

Tessa wasn’t sure when it had happened, but pre-camp-and-competition-and-tour mani-pedis with Jeff had become a mainstay over the last decade; they might not technically be competing at Worlds but her role commentating and Jeff’s coaching was close enough. In the very early days Joannie had always come as well; more recently, Scott, Chiddy, and Andrew were likely tagalongs on tour. Kaitlyn had also been a dedicated attendee, but she had been pretty salty lately about Scott and Tessa’s return, even though they’d done her and Andrew the favor and called them in Moscow and everything. While Tessa had some serious issues with Kait’s attitude—a true competitor worked their hardest and didn’t blame another couple simply for being better—she did want to maintain friendships in skating and was inclined to rise above, give it time. She was no longer eighteen and ready to burn down the Arctic Edge cafeteria.

But today, she wanted time with her dearest friend in skating, and so they’d slipped into the North End alone.

“New Charlie and New Meryl doing their whole whisper-twin thing in the corner through practice still?”

“Ugh. I mean, Gabi and Gui are fine, and they’re no Charlie and Meryl, on any level, so it’s not like—” she handwaved that decade away “—and the atmosphere is just so positive. Patch and Marie and Romain respect our lead on decisions. And you and Justin need to come visit—Joannie’s taken us to a couple of good restaurants and there’s a nice park I think will be good for runs when it gets warmer.” She handed the deep-red polish she’d selected for her toes to the tech, and smiled at the second woman taming her cuticles. “Thank you.”

“Count us in—maybe post Stars, before the season really kicks into gear?” Jeff swiped the magazine from her lap.

“Perfect, but you’re crashing with me, not Scott.” Scott and Jeff were quite close, but he was her friend first. Scott got Chiddy.

“Naturally. And how is Scott? He seems happier than at the holidays, when he was still going through his mope. Though honestly, he kinda seemed fine then, too. Love him but there’s something kind of sad about a guy who’s so good at lying to himself that he just Munchausen’s himself into a post-breakup wallow.”

“Jeff!” Tessa swatted with him with her free hand. “He really tried to make it work with Kait, he did. He just said he couldn’t commit to the comeback and to her, which I think is really mature of him.” She had wanted it to work out with Kait. “But she was delightful.”

“Yes, which was why it would never work.” Jeff threw her a simper. “Not that you’re not delightful.”
“I am delightful, thank you. Also, you call me and Scott catty.”

“I’m not catty, I’m just observant.” He inspected the cuticle treatment and smiled at the tech. “Anyways. He’s good? Surviving outside of Ilderton?”

“Oh god, he’s so great. I mean after Sochi …” she trailed off. “Anyways. He found a hockey league with some of the b2ten guys. He’s really into mastering French right now and he’s got such an ear for language and music he’ll probably be more fluent than me by Korea. Skating gives him such focus, which just brings out the best in him. Oh, and he and Billie have gotten so close. She follows him around whenever she comes to the rink. It’s so cute. He actually took her to a movie, just the two of them, a few weekends ago so Marie could run errands when Patch was away.” She shifted, moving her left hand under the heat lamp to seal in.

“Uncle Scott is like, a top three version of Scott. And you two?”

She smiled, and shrugged. “It’s good to be back.” On multiple fronts.

Jeff looked at her patiently. “And you two?”

She raised a shoulder, nodded as she tried to search for an appropriate response. “Also great. I wish I had something juicier to report. It’s just … we’re in a groove.” Tessa was deeply grateful, that even as she and Scott destroyed everything else, they had at least preserved them. “He’s a little less temperamental, I think I’m probably more flexible, we’re finding the joy again, you know? And the time off has been calming, gave us perspective. We’re so lucky that we were able to maintain a skating partnership, but I do have to say it’s nice to be best friends again.”

She wasn’t lying on that point: it was easy, fun, comfortable. She liked communicating with eyebrows and sighs and inside jokes that folded in on themselves. She liked spending all day with him again. She liked living in the same building, liked when he followed her home and make them both dinner after a long day, liked collapsing on the couch with Jeopardy! (her choice) or The Bachelor (his choice; he always had Opinions on whatever Lauren was currently creating drama that season), had loved decorating his condo into the perfect Scott Moir Bachelor Pad. It was simple, and settled. Edited down to the basics.

“You’re a whole new skating team,” Jeff agreed, placid and smug behind his Cosmo.

For pete’s sake, he was so not good at keeping his feelings to himself. “Do you have something to say, Jeffrey?” Tessa finally asked, a little teasingly.

“No, no. Just … He’s mature. You’re relaxed and happy. It’s a ‘good groove.’ I know the timing has never been right between you two, but JoJo mentioned—”

“Oh, no. No.” After an absurd drunken ambush of wishful absurd rom-com logic, Joannie had sent her a bunch of rambling text messages that included the actual goddamn phrase ‘soulmate’ ten times. And if she had talked to Jeff as well … Tessa knew she needed to Shut. It. Down. “It wasn’t the timing, Jeff; it’s us. You were there, both times. It was awful and dysfunctional and messy and nearly cost us our career. This time around, it’s off the table, and it’s just so much smarter and healthier and it’s fun again, you know?”

Jeff winced sympathetically, and Tessa tried not to respond defensively to his kindness. “Hey, I remember those days too—I have eyes, and I saw a disaster. I don’t want to downplay how rough that was for you. I’m just saying, Tess, you seem a lot happier than you have in the last … years, really.” His tone was gentle. “It’s nice to see you like that.”
“I … It’s really nice, yeah.” Two years Saying Yes and exploring ‘happy’ and she still wasn’t sure what that meant, besides ‘skating with Scott,’ but it was nice, to have a purpose. “To be skating competitively again, to get the chance to write the ending that we wanted.”

“And think that just has to do with skating and not, you know, the Scott of it all?”

“It has a lot to do with Scott, but it doesn’t mean it has anything to do with him romantically. And let’s be realistic — we’re not joking when we say we’re completely different people. We’re the only two people that know what it’s like to be in this partnership and people just need to … trust us to know ourselves.”

Jeff snorted, and shook his head as he flipped a page in her magazine. “You doth protest a bit much, my dear,” he informed her, looking at her a bit inquisitively.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m serious. We can’t be everything to each other because it just breaks everything. And let’s be realistic. All we have in common is … laughter and ice dancing.” And both of those were ephemeral, fleeting. Neither lasted, had ever lasted.

“And good sex.”

“Well, obviously.” She said. They spent six hours a day feeling each other up and pretending to be in love. “Great sex, if we’re being technical.” She did miss that, she had to admit. She shot a look at the four techs working on them. They were studiously not listening.

Jeff snorted. “Happy marriages have been built on far less than laughter, great sex, and dancing. The only reason I married Justin because he makes a damn good grilled cheese. We’re doing OK.”

Tess laughed. “His butt’s pretty cute, too.”

“Definitely,” Jeff agreed. “So, we’ve established: You and Scott. Shitty timing, lots of laughter and dancing and great sex. Oh, and a twenty-year history of supporting each other, working together for a common goal, learning how to communicate with each other, and sharing your defining passion.”

“Jeff, what the hell is this, an interrogation?” Tessa exclaimed with a laugh. “Seriously, just go onto those damn message boards. Or share it on that damn iMessage group chat that I know Chiddy started three years ago for you all to gossip.”

(Of course she knew about the group chat—she and Scott liked to stage disagreements in front of suspected members to fuck with them—but even she would have to admit surprise that it encompassed forty figure skaters on three continents. Also, all those bets that people had joked about —those actually were honest-to-god true, too. More than six thousand dollars exchanged hands during the wedding, mostly via a pot managed by Charlie Moir, with Charlie White of all people, having bought in on the very early side, taking the bulk. Their friends and family were genuine assholes.)

“I’m not interrogating! Though now I am very interested in why, despite being happy, despite being excited about the return, about being back with Scott, you are super defensive and giving your oldest and dearest friend fucking press conference answers. I went on multiple double dates with Semple, sweetie. I let you bring him to my wedding. That’s unconditional love, right there. I get the real story.”

Suddenly at a loss for words, Tessa merely stuck her tongue out.

A little while later, as the tech buffed his nail beds, Jeff tried again, tone a little softer. “I’m not judging, I’m just … being a friend, T, when I say nobody would see it as, like, a failure, if you were
“Scott’s wonderful. Why would ending up with him be a failure?” Seriously, whoever ended up with Scott Moir would spend her entire life getting treated like a queen. When Scott committed, he committed. She was the physical manifestation of his commitment. She was always confused and defensive by the implications, on message boards and in the media, that he was a flake, or unserious, or not bright, or a jerk. Anyone who had met Scott would know none of those things to be true.

(He will freely admit that the ridiculous ‘two condoms’ thing was not his best moment.)

“I don’t know, the fact that you have tried this before, and you think people might see you as an idiot for going back to it? Or the fact that it feels like it’s out of your control, and you don’t do anything you didn’t set out to achieve, intentionally? Or fuck, the story it tells? The inevitability—looks pretty easy on the outside to just meet a guy when you’re six, become best friends, win a bunch of Olympic medals, get labeled Canada’s sweethearts, get married. Fuck those people.”

She sighed. “It … Jeff, no. I don’t care what people think anymore, but all of those are exactly the reasons why we’ll never be together.”

“Why?”

“I mean … Look, I love Scott. I do. I couldn’t do any of this without him, I am only great at what I love because of him. And we’re not together because I love him. I know how bad we are, and I don’t want to put us … put him, through that again. I don’t want to keep saying toxic, but what else can it be? It poisoned skating, our friendship. And those are both too important to screw up by screwing each other.

“If that’s the whole story, great. I am fully, one hundred percent supportive of you. But there’s a difference between saying no because it’s right and saying no because you’re scared..”

“It’s absolutely the first. He makes me the happiest, yes, but he also makes me the most miserable, and that goes both ways.” She studied her new manicure, a lovely, wistful wisteria. It would look nice with the blazer she had picked out, she thought. “You know it’s a story, what we tell on ice. And you do know the real story, our story. It’s too hard.”

Jeff raised an eyebrow. “You always liked the epics, Tessa.”

She looked down at the manicure again before smiling at her friend. “It’s really hard to live out an epic romance. This is me being mature—I’m not twenty; I know my boundaries and how to maintain a respectful, supportive relationship with my best friend. You should be proud.”

“Not a day has gone by since I met you that I haven’t been proud of you, Tess.” He smiled, then squeezed her forearm with an eyebrow waggle. “Even the day JoJo died your hair red in some motel in Regina.”

She laughed, finally, at the memory. “She was supposed to do her hair too. I’m still mad at her for backing out.”

“You’re done,” the tech said. “Don’t forget to wear flip-flops for the next twenty minutes.”

“Thank you,” Tessa smiled.

Jeff laughed, slipping on his own sandals. “Alright, nails are on me this time. Payment for putting you through the emotional wringer. You’re right, I’m sorry. I’m just so happy you two are skating together and happy again. Though if you get back with Semple just to keep yourself from dating
Scott: we’ll need to talk.” Tessa laughed, but as Jeff busied himself with payment, she sat back in her chair contemplatively.

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iv. Seven Years Before Today, Scott

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“Carmen?” he wrinkled his nose. “The opera? With the—” He mimed the little clink-clink percussion things.

“Lobsters?” Tessa giggled, mimicking his movements and pretending to bite his nose.

“No, the like, Mexican maracas.” He stole her (new) nose and she started full-on laughing.

“Castanets. They are Spanish,” Marina said flatly. He gave Tessa her nose back, and she affixed it wordlessly, laughter gone. Marina had been even more stressed and less humorless since the Igor shit had gone down a few weeks earlier, so he supposed they should be more respectful.

“Who would we play?” Tessa, finally composed, turned back to their coach, arms crossed, head cocked, eyes squinting. Open, but skeptical.

“Carmen and Don Jose, who else?” Marina asked, impatiently. “Is good. Will be evolution as artists. You say edgy, this is edgy. Very deep, very romantic, but you will be more passionate, athletic. Build on the Hip Hip, take advantage of the chemistry, addresses the weakness.”

“That Charlie and Meryl look more athletic and are more technically proficient,” he rubbed a hand across his face and rolled his eyes. They’d been getting that a lot lately, though for the record, they had won at Worlds this time around, and Charlie and Meryl had looked like they were dressed up at some Broadway nerd convention.

“Yes. I have good lifts in mind,” Marina smiled, her teeth as tiny as her bangs.

“Doesn’t Carmen, like, seduce him, and then he loses his mind and kills her?” Tessa asked, lifting one leg to scratch her calf with her toe pick. “She’s like a crazy temptress? I … I’ve never done that.”

“In real life or on the ice?” he joked, before he could help it, because one was definitely untrue; while she rolled her eyes she smiled at him. Marina did not.

“We make him lose mind this time for modern twist. Plus, ISU rules. And you are too old to play young love any more.”

“I’m twenty-three!” Tessa laughed. “I just turned twenty-three. I go to parties and fail at flirting. It’s only young love for me.”

“You’ve been doing young love since you were fifteen and stopped looking like Lolita and Scott finally went through puberty. Is boring now.” Marina’s tone was dismissive, of Tessa and her argument.

“Hey now, it wasn’t that bad,” he insisted half-heartedly, as expected.

“This is evolution. You say edgy and new—” they had said those things “—nobody will expect it. You get people talking.”

Tessa considered. He could tell she was skeptical—not at all sold on this story and wary of Marina,
she had been wary for weeks now, and was tick-tick-ticking through what the ISU thought and
Skate Canada thought and what she thought and—it was exhausting, sometimes, to know so deeply
what someone else was thinking, because he knew before she opened her mouth that she was going
to say, “I’d really like to—”

“Nooooo,” Scott groaned.

“—revisit the idea of an Elizabeth-Darcy—”

“Veto,” he said. Like he had said ten times already and would probably say another ten times
because T was really into the idea and the music just wasn’t gonna work and he was not going to
wear another velvet ruffled anything. “C’mon kiddo. This could be fun.”

“You’re not the one that everyone is going to look at like some slutty psycho ex-girlfriend.”

“Yeah but did you hear her, I lose my mind after acting like a lovesick idiot? Let’s at least listen to
the music.”

“What do you think?” she asked later, as they stroked the rink alone. She raised an eyebrow: Really.
He shrugged. None of the cuts had been perfect but … “I mean I like the idea. It's a warhorse but it is
what we asked for. It’s edgy, it’s hot, it’s messy, it’s dangerous.”

“Yeah, ‘hot mess’ really describes us exactly,” she said dryly. It wasn’t wrong, he thought— maybe
complicated was more charitable?—but saying that now wouldn’t convince her to do the routine, and
‘hot mess’ wasn’t the image they needed to project to the judges. “Did you hear what Marina was
describing? The all-black, the crazy … the lifts? Scott, we will be simulating sex out there. I have to
look our mothers in the eye after these competitions.”

“T, if you’re questioning whether you want to do it that’s one thing and we should talk … But if it’s
whether or not you can, that’s easy. Of course you can do that character.” It was kind of exciting,
actually, to think of Tess all wild and crazy. She’d been leaning into the ice-princess thing for way
too long.

“Because I’m just such a good actress,” she replied dryly.

“Well, yes, but also, there’s totally a part of you that’s that, you know, badass and passionate and
tempting and tempestuous and take charge. Just like there’s a part that’s all Audrey Hepburn—” he’d
agreed to that program purely because it was her first season back full-time and god, he was glad that
was over ”—and a part that’s that you know, all lyrical in white hanging out in towers picking
flowers or whatever ingenues do. And personally, I think the badass version is pretty hot. I mean,
they’re all hot but—” It certainly was his favorite Tess—sparky eyes, determined mouth, mussed
hair, ready to conquer the world. “Might be fun to show that off to the world for a change.”

“Hot?” she smiled, eyes crinkling. “Scott Moir, you make me blush.”

“Or sexy, whatever you wanna call it,” he said mindlessly, not even noticing when she stopped.
“What—seriously? How do you look like that,” he nodded at her, “and not put two and two
together?” He slid into her space. Gripped her waist.

“It’s not that,” she said sensibly, toe picks knocking toe picks. Forehead touching forehead. “I know
I’m objectively hot. Minus my breasts. It’s just sometimes, I look at you and see that” —she flicked
her eyes up and down once, and he swore she touched her tongue to her lip— “and sometimes I look
at you and you’re the partner who brought me the bucket of rice and it was the kindest thing, or the
little kid who once spent an entire car ride to Kitchener showing me how to burp the ABC’s.”
Pushing away, she pulled her cowl neck over her smile and blush. “I’m sorry, that was incredibly mean, and you were so supportive. I didn’t mean to be dismissive.” She snapped the sweater down and snapped to business. “You think we can do it?”

“I think you can do it.” Also, your breasts are perfect.

She finally asked the question under all her hesitation, the one he had been avoiding. “You trust Marina?”

“Oh course,” he started circling her lazily with spread eagles, inside then outside then inside again. Pushed into her space, away again, circled closer. “Why this again?”

“It’s just … we need to reclaim the momentum, somehow. And with Igor gone now her attention is going to be a lot more divided.”

“Tess, we just won Worlds, and we’ll have a kickass program that’ll get everyone talking. We’ll win Worlds at home next year, and we’ll hit the Olympics as the reigning world champs and Olympic champs. That’s momentum.”

“That’s dominance, not momentum. They’ve had higher Grand Prix scores the last couple seasons.”

“Yeah, that was the same going into Vancouver, too.” He took her hands and began pulling her around the ice. Skating helped Tessa think less.

“I’m just saying, Igor’s gone. Did you hear Charlie say they’re getting deposed? There’s going to be lawsuits galore here, my dad says. Marina’s going to be distracted and her attention will be split anyways, but USFSA is working with her on the money side, and I know you say it doesn’t matter but she and Meryl are a lot closer since she and Fedor started dating. Actually, officially, dating.” He rolled his eyes because while he knew she was cannier at the politics, her obsessive worry had officially reached Shonda Rhimes levels of crazy. “And all that aside, Charlie and Meryl are the ascendant underdogs. They’ve waited their turn. The ISU doesn’t want this. If we don’t have Marina, or if she designs us a program that the judges don’t love, with these lifts and the writhing—that’ll be a problem. I think it could be fun, to kind of unleash that and play around with something new. And I certainly don’t have a problem with sex—”

“Oh, I know.”

“Scott. Be serious,” she stopped skating so he did too. “I don’t have a problem if we win. But it’s a hell of a lot riskier than whatever baroque bullshit Charlie and Meryl will put up.”

“Yeah, cuz we’re better. Better artists, better skaters, better chemistry, better friends, far more attractive, funnier, and more charming. Better in every sense. None of that shit matters when we step onto the ice, because we’re better. So let’s push the envelope.”

“I think we should consider going with Igor. I don’t think we can trust Marina’s got our best interests completely at heart.”

“Tess. You think that won’t blow up with the ISU? Come on.” Madison and Evan had gone, but they were B-team. If they left Marina, shit would go down.

“You trust Marina?” she asked. They were still holding hands, he noticed.

He nodded, raised his eyebrows: Yeah. You trust me?

“Always.”
She smiled at him, and he wondered, suddenly, if she’d ever called the skier who had given her his number at some benefit a few weeks ago.

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v. Nine Years Before Today, Tessa

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This, Tessa thought ruefully as she stared at the greyish popcorn ceiling, was not exactly how one was supposed to feel after all your hopes and dreams came true.

Winning the gold had been indescribable, of course. Trying to put it into words was futile and stupid. The applause had been overwhelming, so loud it pounded in her skull hours later, a satisfying thrum. At each point in the evening she tried to commit all the sensations to memory—the snick of the ice when she stepped out, the breeze in her hair during the lifts, the satisfaction in Marina and Igor’s eyes, the earnestness in Charlie White’s hug, the squeeze of her brother’s twirl, the noise of Charlie and Danny Moir whooping and whistling, the cadence of Jordan’s YEAHs carrying across the ice. Her mother’s tears, mingled with Alma’s, on her neck.

And of course, Scott, everywhere. With her. The squeeze of his hand, the scrape of his fingernails on her palm, the heat of his breath on her neck. His hug, her tears, their laughter. They’d done it. Together.

Together.

More than the events, though, she tried to commit the feelings. The sheer vastness of emotion, the satisfaction of accomplishment. The knowing that this was going to be one of the five greatest days of her life, but that was damned ok because this one felt amazing.

The brutal, twinned sensations of the deepest pain and the greatest pleasure.

Because the rest of it—fuck that noise. Scott was off with Jess and Patrick and everyone else, celebrating and cheering on every team possible and basically living out nine-year-old Scott Moir’s dream journal: drinking free beer, getting toasted by everyone, hugging pretty girls, wearing Canada gear and watching Canada sports. David … well, he obviously had plenty of other commitments. She, in contrast, was spending 90 percent of her waking hours in PT, dealing with loneliness, fatigue, boredom, tears, the monotony broken up only by the crush of media and interviews and trying to comfort Joannie, which was not exactly fun though she needed to do it. At least she’d gotten to go to the hockey final.

She stayed up late at night, scenes from each day echoing in her ears, layered over things the sports psychologist had told her to repeat in order to cope with the anxiety of the performance and the depression of the comedown. It didn’t work. That moment, you just had? Her mind taunted, a dark mirror reflecting the positive daytime feelings. No matter what you do in life, you will never be that happy again. She felt like she was being swallowed by the looming emptiness.

Because she’d achieved the greatest thing she ever would in life, and it felt amazing, but she had eighty years left to live.

Her mother hovered, knowing these things without Tessa needing to articulate them. She was grateful, but watching her mom watch her get PT so she could win Worlds next month just made Tessa even more depressed, and so she sent Kate out to find pins. If Tessa couldn’t be out celebrating with Team Canada, she wanted the pins to prove she was there.
“Hey kiddo,” Scott’s voice rang out, his presence announced noisily with clodding feet and the bang of the door, his loud Scott way.

“Scott?” she said dumbly, though there was no mistaking the figure padded down by five layers of the loud Canada gear and his gold medal. She stopped doing the stupid weighted leg circles.

“Hey,” he replied with a smile. “You haven’t been able to get out much so figured I could swing by. We haven’t hung out much and it’s our Olympics, you know? We should be together. So, I brought gifts: Chocolate milk—” he handed her three cartons of the stuff— “and pins. I got some really good ones by letting some Japanese kids hold the gold medal.”

Her heart literally warmed. “Thank you,” she smiled, sifting the tiny gold pieces through her fingers. “These are … thank you.” He was right; they were gorgeous.

He stayed indefinitely, lying back on the massage table and regaling her with stories through her stretches. As she moved into the last set of exercises, he turned onto his side, and, eyes sparkling, said, “Hey T? Did I tell you about my dream last night?”

“The hockey team agreed to let you take the last penalty shot against Team USA?”

“No, but that’s almost a better dream! Why you gotta tempt me, kiddo? No, listen to this: back-to-back gold medals.”

“What?”

“Let’s do this again, T.”

She stared at him. “You see me, now, right?” she gestured to her legs. “Let’s just get through Worlds.” They’d agreed to Worlds because they needed to win Worlds but she wasn’t sure she could hold out past then. Besides, her entire life since 2002 had been arranged around the pinprick of the 2010 Games, and now she was just supposed to … keep going, at the same exhaustive pace indefinitely?

“You’re healing!” he said. “And that’s part of it. Tess, this, the Olympics? This is the best fucking feeling ever. Why would we ever stop chasing this? And you earned going crazy cheering for Team Canada and getting hot guys to hand you drinks in Canada House, you’ve worked so hard and been so spectacular. And right now you’re stuck in this gray box just so you can walk. But in Sochi … We can get it right. You can go to all the curling matches you want.”

“Curling’s boring and confusing.”

“Skiing then. More adventurous, right? Anyways, I know you’re going to say this is an Olympic high talking and whatever, but seriously, Tessa, tell me how school can possibly beat being an Olympic gold medalist. You love skating. You’ve worked so hard. You’ve earned this. Let’s do this again, kiddo.” His eyes were entreaty. He raised a tiny fist and started chanting, like he was an American or something, “Four more years! Four more years!” She laughed in spite of herself.

She thought of the life she’d only begun to imagine, the What Ifs. She could finish school before she was thirty, have time to date normally, to date normal boys that she could call her boyfriend because they spent enough time together to have a real relationship, boys who held her hand in the daylight and maybe brought flowers the first time they met her mom. She really did want to go to law school; there was comfort in its logic and repetitiveness, just like skating. She could go to brunch with friends and not worry about eating oranges or yogurt or chocolate. She could color her hair whatever color she damn well pleased and not just the shade that matched Scott’s. She could go out with
friends and Jordan and dance, really dance, without worrying about spraining an ankle and missing training. She’d gain her life. The concept felt like a relief.

But she’d been losing her world. Scott was very right—she did want a chance to do the Olympics properly, to get those drinks and go to the parties and sign autographs and twirl on top of the world—but she loved skating, loved it with a rugged raw pure passion that sometimes bubbled over into tears because she wasn’t sure, at twenty, if she could ever love something or someone as much as she loved the sport. Besides her family, everything good in her life, all she had ever known, or felt confident in, or had truly loved, was a closed system inside the smooth oval of a rink on a competition day. The costume; the makeup and hair and the being beautiful; the music; the applause; the feeling of freedom dance gave her; the comfort and the anonymity of performing and being someone else, instead of herself; the payoff from hard work; the way skating made sense in a way nothing else ever did; the steadily increasing rise to perfection; the glittering deep-breath sweat of success.

And Scott. Always Scott.

If they stopped … they’d stay in touch, of course, at first, especially with tours and show skating. But she would be in school and he would be in Ilderton, and he would get swept up in eighty-six projects the way only Scott could and she would maybe go to France to study, and pretty soon he’d get married to some girl who was probably pregnant at the wedding, and she would bring some lawyer guy who was taller and older, two things Scott really didn’t like, to it. They’d see each other at holidays and most information would be exchanged via their mothers.

Everything might be awful right now, but that was positively unbearable.

And this was a chance, she realized, to fix what was wrong.

She told herself it wasn’t really a choice, but it was, and she didn’t hesitate to make it. “OK. I’m in. One year at a time. But. Let’s get this right.”

With a whoop, he picked her up with a twirl, kissed her forehead. She felt powerful and hopeful, realizing he wanted to commit to four more years with her. “There’s literally nothing that the two of us can’t accomplish,” he boasted, his eyes lighter and less worried than she’d seen in ages. “We’re golden, T.”

And in his arms, she sure as hell felt so.

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vi. Fifteen Years Before Today, Scott

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He didn’t even remember the first—only—actual fight with Marina. They hadn’t been been at Arctic Edge very long, and his mom and Suzanne had made it clear that this was going to be a step up, that it would be hard, that he needed to take it seriously and watch his temper. “Russians don’t fuck around,” Charlie had drawled from the couch as they packed his shit for his new apartment. “They don’t even use heat in the winter. Just vodka.”

The transition hadn’t been easy for Tessa, because transitions were never easy for Tessa. She hated the new apartment, hated the squat impersonal apartment complex that served as a surrogate dorm for horny skaters, hated her new roommate more than the host family, hated not being able to get anywhere because she couldn’t drive. He was totally down for taking her to the grocery store, but he
was not down for driving her, listening to her cry there and back, and then driving her again thirty
minutes later when she decided yes, actually, only ice cream could solve her problems. He wasn’t
sure how many times he could watch some old Ginger Rogers at her place on a Friday night instead
of going out on a real date with the girls from the hockey rink, or how many more times he could
“just come over and cook salmon, please” instead of going out for burgers and fries with Charlie.

Despite her unhappiness, practices, he knew, were successful or not based on his mood, and the
practice that day was just sideways. Maybe it had started with a crick in his neck from falling asleep
on Charlie’s couch post-watching the game? He honestly wasn’t sure. But he got tense and Tessa got
quiet and then desperate and the lift got harder and just didn’t go right and then Marina started yelling
Show me love show me passion TELL ME A STORY. He said something and Marina said something
and he snapped, and Marina snapped right back, because she was a crazy old Russian bat. He had
learned quickly that you could sort of get away with yelling at Igor, as long as you just yelled and
then let off steam and came back focused, but Marina would not tolerate that shit. Suddenly, he was
arguing with a psychotic raving Russian lady in the middle of the ice, Tessa, probably terrified that
Marina would fire him, grabbing his arm and trying to get him to calm down.

“Tess,” he groaned, pulling his arm out of hers, “you can cling to me in a lift and you can cling to me
instead of making friends and settling in here, but for fuck’s sake do not cling to me now.”

“Off!” Marina roared, then started yelling at him more in Russian. Fuck this noise. He stormed out.

“I’ll fix it, I’ll fix it, we have it totally under control, Marina!” Tessa yelled, following him. Before
she got off the ice, though, he heard her say to Marina, “Escalating is really just not the way to
motivate him. Or me, for the record. I don’t appreciate it,” and he thought Go Tess since she was
steelier than people fucking thought, even at barely fifteen.

She found him, and he didn’t remember their conversation, or if he apologized (he didn’t), but
twenty minutes later they were back on the ice, calmer and more focused and ready to take the
challenge on together. “Bend knees,” Marina intoned. “Glide, glide, good, smooth edges and lift …”

He thought that was that.

So you could have knocked him over with a feather when Marina showed up at his apartment that
night, rapped on the door like a normal person and everything.

“We will talk,” she announced.

“Sure,” he said, staring around at the card table and folding chairs he and Ben had decided
constituted decor. Ben stared at the two of them, then immediately decamped to his bedroom, where
he could totally hear everything anyways. “Um, the balcony?” He wondered if Tessa might actually
be right and he might be getting fired.

Marina cut right to the point. “Tessa is … quite young,” she started. “Suzanne, Paul, they did not
mention this.”

“You’ve seen her passport. You know she’s fifteen.”

“No, they did not mention this,” she gestured, and he stared, utterly clueless. “Sergei and Katia, they
were a little older. You are nearly her age, seventeen, when they first became involved. It is risky. I
advise against. What I saw today … that is no good.”

“Tessa and I aren’t … what? It’s so not like that.” He was annoyed at having to explain this yet
again.
“You two have power over each other, power that I do not think even you fully understand.” He stared at her, wondering if he had tripped and fallen into Anastasia or something. If Marina was the second coming of the evil rat, so many more things would make sense. “It might make you great. You have musicality, synchronicity, sensitivity, emotion, alignment, chemistry, balance. On ice, beauty I have not seen since then. But off-ice, you do not communicate well, you do not listen to each other, you care too much, you need too much, you expect too much, you depend too much, you take each other for granted, and you yearn for too much … what happened today will destroy you both, eventually. Toxic, yes, is the word? Sergei and Katia were once-in-a-lifetime love, and they still had struggles, it was still hard to do that and to skate. You and Tessa—you are very talented. You especially. She is beautiful, best body movement in sport, graceful, a worker, but you are once-in-a-generation feet, once-in-a-generation sense of ice. You need to protect that. Protect both of your careers.”

He stared at her. “I’m not a skater without Tessa. Period. We’re a team, let’s get that clear.” His mouth hardened. “Why are you here?”

“Tessa is very young,” she repeated, “And you are very talented. And the two of you can be great. But days like today will destroy that, and probably destroy you two. Her, especially. It is your choice. I am merely making sure you are aware of it.”

(He wasn’t, and it took him a long time to believe Marina, but he never mentioned this conversation to Tessa.)

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vii. Six Years Before Today, Tessa

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Tessa tossed and turned, the damn short dance playing in her head over and over again, her mind’s eye zeroing in on the score with white-hot fury. It hadn’t been perfect—she knew that; knew very little of their skating had been perfect this season—but the levels were a fucking joke. Scott was always surprised when this shit went down, offended by the unfairness, because Scott somehow still believed that being better meant something to the ISU. She never was, had always simply accepted it as the price you paid for a shot at greatness in figure skating—but this was home turf, and they had lost.

She wanted to die.

After the damn medal ceremony, after listening to the fucking Stars and Stripes in her arena, after having to take a thousand photos with Meryl and Charlie without ever looking them in their smug stupid simpering eyes, Scott had suggested going out, first to celebrate Chiddy and then to drown their sorrows somewhere a lot seedier than the restaurant for the official Skate Canada party. She’d made it through Chiddy’s party but on the way to the dingier bar where he had summoned his entourage of Ilderton bros, had yelled at him and they argued about the Marina thing again, pulling over to the side of the road to really hash it out over whether or not to stay in Canton next year. It wasn’t really his fault, she knew intellectually, but she was just so … mad. No. Heartbroken.

They’d been blocks from the bar but she’d made him turn back to London, drop her off at Kate’s. She hadn’t said goodbye as she slammed the door. He had lingered in the driveway for what felt like hours. She pouted on the couch in the living room.

“You know,” her mother had said mildly, staring out the curtains at his headlights, “No matter what happens from day-to-day, what you two have, what you’ve accomplished, is really quite
extraordinary. I just hope you can find the perspective, the grace, to see that. And even on days as awful and unfair as today … Tessa, it’s not the result you two wanted but it’s still something pretty special. Be sad today, hate it all today … but you’re going to need to pick yourself up tomorrow, and know that you and Scott can accomplish whatever you set your mind to together.”

Kate had a soft spot wide as Lake Huron for Scott, and Tessa knew that, but she was also right, and she knew that too. No matter what, she and Scott were something special. And he was special to her.

The most special, really.

They were more.

Tessa sat up, knowing she’d be unable to sleep until she saw him, pulled off the teal satin sleep mask. Yanked jeans and a sheer black lace tank top on, slid her boots onto her feet.

“I’m going to Joe’s Taproom,” she told her mom as she grabbed her coat.

“OK,” Kate said from the couch, flipping through a magazine. “You back this evening?”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “Have a good night.”

“Love you, sweetheart. Tell Scott that for me, too.”

“See you in the morning,” she muttered.

It was a quick twenty-minute drive, and as she pulled into the gravel parking lot, the yellowing fluorescent sign promising her Beer / Pool / Wings / A Good Time, she felt relief for the first time in six hours. The door jingled as she walked in, and she recognized Paul and Baker and Jake at the bar.

“Hey guys,” she smiled, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Is Scott around?”

“Uh, yeah,” Jake said, “He’s … around. Can I, um, get you a beer, Tess?” She’d known these guys for years but had barely interacted with them until recently, and Paul was definitely the friendliest. Jake was nearly useless. Baker was in between.

Scott loved them all.

“Sure,” she said, cocking her head. Something seemed off. Paul was staring at his shoes. Baker seemed to be staring in the distance, a panicked look on his face, and she followed his line of sight to see Scott and … “Is that Cassandra?” she asked. “Last-summer Cassandra?” She’d been someone Scott had probably met here at this godforsaken bar, had gone on a couple of dates with. Tessa had watched a rec hockey game of Scott’s with her and Chiddy at some point. She’d barely registered—typical Ilderton girl, could barely even skate or make conversation, and Scott had hardly mentioned her.

The two of them were making out, pretty heavily, against the defunct payphone by the restrooms.

“Uh ... yeah, it is,” Paul said, and she appreciated that he didn’t lie. “Tess, he’s really drunk, and pretty fucked up about today. He just bumped into her, I don’t think he’s seen her since August.”

“You know what, it’s cool,” she said, rummaging around in her purse and throwing a five down next to the beer that had just arrived. Beer was really cheap here. “I’m actually really tired, I’m going to go. This was a mistake. See you guys around, I guess.” Something twisted inside of her, and she realized that it was the one truth she had carried forward from the time she was seven onwards—that Scott, no matter what, was loyal to her first and always.
She cried in her car for twenty minutes, thinking irrationally that he might come out.

He never did.

She had always hated the Final, but she really fucking hated Worlds.

viii. Ten Years Before Today

He met Jess—scratch that, actually, because he met Jess sometime in novice or juveniles even, had met her so long ago that she was wall art for a decade of his childhood, always a smirk in the far right of group photos and a musical laugh rising above the shouts of noisy practices in his memories and a hand passing him shots at celebrations in sweaty hotel rooms on three continents.

He became physically acquainted with Jess sometime in 2009, when Tessa was barely speaking to him (and vice versa) and maybe back with Fedor and mostly still recovering from the first surgery and everything that had come directly before and after. Everything felt tense, with them—they went through each and every practice practically tiptoeing on their toe picks, one bad look or heavy sigh or imperfect step sequence away from her spending a break crying in a dressing room or him bursting outside after yelling Fuck it I’m taking ten at Igor in Russian. They were so focused on the goal of winning the Olympics the next year that it was destroying themselves individually and as a … whatever-ship together. Friendship? Relationship? Partnership? Their carefully codependent balance—his push and her pull, her artistry and his technical precision, her brains and his passion—everything that had fueled their meteoric rise, that made them special together, was spinning too fast, too precariously close to a tipping point. Marina and Igor had thrown them into marriage counseling. They needed to make it to the Olympics, they needed to win, and everything else needed to take a backseat.

He got it. He believed it. But he missed her. That was what was fucking with him the most, that he just … missed her.

(And the hardest part was that it wasn’t all terrible, all the time. They still laughed at least fifty times a day, and spent of their time talking in Looks and half-sentences in practice. She brought him water and he picked her up twice a week. He’d look at her and waggle his brows in an impression of Igor, or catch her tiny eye roll after Marina said something, or one of them would remember something from six years ago at the exact same time as the other, and he would remember that she was, at the end of the day, his best friend and the only person who would go through all of this with him, who had these memories and these dreams, who had moved to Kitchener and Canton, and it made him think maybe.)

(The talking and the laughter. Always, the talking and the laughter.)

So when Jess found him at the bar after what had been easily the most stressful High Performance Camp of their career, after Skate Canada made it abundantly clear that the country’s best hopes for a gold at home rested on Tessa’s fragile legs and his volatile ego, after he nearly tripped her as she exited The Goose, after Marina made them stare into each other’s eyes and stroke each other’s arms and moan and pretend that they’d never felt a love so pure and passionate for literally an hour as she yelled MORE EMOTION MORE REAL MORE PASSION LIKE MAN LOVE WOMAN, after at least six interviews where they talked about how they were so thankful to be childhood best friends and she was like a younger, more mature sister and the most important person in his life, after Tessa accepted an invite to go out to dinner with David instead of hanging with him and Chiddy and
Joannie and everyone else—it was pretty easy. That was what he was trying to say. Starting up with Jess was one of the easiest decisions he ever made.

When they woke up the next morning he asked her out to dinner the next night, a real dinner at a restaurant with normal lighting and a decided lack of beer rings on the table (it was a Boston Pizza—he didn’t deserve too much credit for romance). She was fun and smiley and cute, if not hilarious or brilliant or hit-you-upside-the-head gorgeous in the same way as Tess; she understood the rigors of being a competitive skater and in a skating pair; and she had similarly nearly fucked up her partnership by fucking her partner.

It was actually a lot in common, when Scott thought about it. As good enough grounds as any to start a relationship, he thought as he watched Tess get out of Dave’s car at the rink the next morning. He watched David tuck a flyaway strand of hair behind her ear, and she laughed, and she looked happy for the first time in months.

He was glad to see that. God knew she deserved it.

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ix. Eleven Years Before Today, Tessa

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“Tessa! Scott’s here,” her mother called from downstairs.

“When?” she said, stupidly. She’d been napping, instead of packing.

“Me, kiddo,” he said, clomping into her room. “Hey.”

“Hey,” she said, shifting up. It had been … ten weeks? She’d seen Charlie and Danny—they came by Thursdays for dinner—and Alma because she drove Tessa to PT a few days a week, and Joe sometimes because he subbed for Alma in a pinch, but Scott never.

Which made sense, because she told him to give her space.

She just didn’t think he’d take that to mean literal months.

Give her until she sent him a text on Tuesday saying hey they say i can come back next week. And he had sent back a YES THANK GOD a full day later.

And that was it, and now it was Saturday.

“I come bearing chocolate,” he held up a box, “flowers, which your mom has in a vase, a teddy bear wearing a Leafs jersey cause I thought it was funny.” This he just chucked lightly at her, and she caught it with an eyebrow up, before tucking it on her bed because it was cute. “And The Band Wagon. I know you like Ginger Rogers better but come on. Cyd. Charisse. I also brought Clueless, if you’re in the mood for hilarious modern adaptations of Jane Austen, and Hiroshima, My Love, if you’re feeling French New Wave. Oh, and popcorn. And that’s it. Chocolate, flowers, a funny bear, multiple movies, and popcorn.”

She stared at him, unsure how to react. Ten fucking weeks, Scott Moir. “Really covering all your bases, there,” she said, wrapping the blanket tighter around herself.

He deflated into himself. “Yeah. I … Yeah. Can I … Can I sit?”
After a beat, she nodded toward her desk chair twelve feet from her. Raising his eyebrows in an *Oh that's how it is now huh?* he nodded. “How’s Canton?”

She’d heard things, of course. Things about the practice partners that didn’t really feel like just practice, despite the fact that he swore he wasn’t going that route. According to Meryl—Meryl, who had visited, who had followed through on her pledge not to watch any new *Gossip Girl* episodes until they could watch together, who had brought her dog for Tessa to play with, who talked about how Charlie had gone stir-crazy with a broken ankle in juniors—several dads had offered Scott basically anything he wanted, if he’d leave his broken partner for them: a new car and Leafs tickets, his training and competition fees, probably fucking dates with J.Lo. Meryl’d phrased it so *affirmatively*, like it was a demonstration of his commitment: “It was like a parade of every unpaired junior from Pennsylvania to Illinois and all cities north,” she’d giggled, rolling her eyes. “If you think you’ve seen Scott frustrated over twizzles—wait till you see him try them with someone else. He made that sixteen-year-old from Toronto cry.”

But Tess still felt anxious, all out-of-control and vaguely nauseous, like she was waiting for him to leave her and for her skating career to be guillotined away by his skate blade. She hated waiting.

He hadn’t called, or texted, or visited, or sent a fucking *smoke signal*, in ten weeks.

“Oh, my god, it’s the worst without you, Tess.” He groaned sheepishly, warming up like he was about to tell her a really good story. His smile was wry and crinkly, his eyes wary and full of false cheer. “Marina gave up on trying to recruit practice partners a couple of weeks ago so I just sling sandbags and hockey sticks around and try not to throw them into Meryl or Madi. Really not as attractive as you. Jokes aren’t as funny either.”

She stared at him. “Two months, Scott, and the first thing you do is tell me that I’m funnier than a piece of *wood* tied to a bag of *sand*?” She surprised herself with the strength of her annoyance.

He sighs, scratched his neck. “Yeah … Danny’s pretty pissed at me.”

“He told me. At dinner on Thursday, cause he and Charlie come every week to ‘hang out’ with Kevin and Casey. Our brothers *barely* know each other.” They were just all being supportive of her. And if Danny had not-great updates on Scott—getting kicked out of rec-hockey games, driving himself home from seedy bars at night, showing up hungover to coach on weekends—she didn’t *care*.

“My mom’s pissed too,” he offered.

“She said ‘disappointed’ last week.”

“Guessing your mom isn’t too happy, either.”

“I mean, she’s more *sad* but she’s told me about fifty times that you’re still a good kid and I need to give you time.”

“I know I fucked up, T. It hasn’t exactly been a picnic for me, either.”

“Oh, yeah, so *hard* for you, with the Leafs tickets and the cars being thrown at you, Scott,” she scoffed. “That’s real suffering for our art, there.”

“Alright. You … you’re allowed to leave the house, right?”

“Yes, Scott, I’m not like, a bank robber on parole. I don’t have an ankle bracelet.”
“OK. You wanna eat? And talk? Let’s go get food. Anything you want.”

Leaving the house sounded good, actually. “I want Greek,” she said. Party she wanted hummus but it was also Scott’s least-favorite cuisine—he thought it was the second-rate version of more excellent cuisines, and that feta was too salty—which was nice too.

He gave her a look that made it clear he knew exactly why she chose it, and said, “OK. Joey’s Gyros it is.” They put fries in their sandwiches so he tolerated them.

He helped her downstairs, opened the front door and his car door for her. She rolled down the window, even if it was November, to get a breeze in her hair, just because she hadn’t been outside in forever. It was tense, but companionable, and when he took her hand she squeezed it back.

She hated that no matter how much she hated him in any given moment, he was also her favorite person.

“Alright. So. I fucked up.” His voice was blunt and sparse.

“Yeah.” She was quiet.

“You said you wanted space. After everything that happened, after that argument, after last spring and summer, I … overshot.”

“I know about the practice partners. And their dads.” What was it about overbearing dad in female sports? There was something uncomfortable about them bidding for their beautiful daughters’ hands.

“What are you talking about?”

“The practice partners that were really dry runs. For my replacements. And how the dads offered you money and Leafs tickets and stuff. Meryl told me.”

“Meryl can fuck off.”

“She thought it was cute. Romantic. Not like in the sex-and-dating sense,” she added quickly. “In the sweeping-epic-commitment-to-me sense.”

“I don’t even… She was fucking with you, probably, you know. Marina wanted me to practice with humans. But they just … weren’t you. Finally she gave up. And I never asked … Tess, you know this is a you-and-me thing. It has been since I was nine. I’m not just going to skate with someone else. You know that.”

“Do I? Because it’s been ten weeks, Scott.” Why was he even so loyal to her? Why had it not broken, when logic said it should have? “I broke, Scott,” and her voice broke too, finally saying the words out loud. Her legs, and then her head, and then her sense of self, had all broken. She broke; she failed.

“You got injured. Your legs got injured. You said you wanted space!”

“Not fucking radio silence, Scott.”

“Well that wasn’t clear.” His jaw was as angry as her mouth. “With where stuff ended I … didn’t want to overstep.”

“Well, you didn’t step at all.”

“Neither did you. You know it takes two to tango.”
He was right, but she wasn’t about to apologize, and neither was he, and she knew that. “I’m back Monday, so. We’ll be tangoing inevitably.”

“It’s a Viennese Waltz this year.”

She smiled thinly. “Right. Waltzing.” Much more romantic, much less intimate. “Last year, when we were ... tangoing, outside of the rink—” she couldn’t bring herself to say sleeping together or fucking or something trite like making love, was frankly mortified that she, that they, could have been so incredibly stupid to try and sex-twizzle in the first place —that won’t happen again. We had two rules, and one of them was if it affected skating, we’d quit. It did. It does. So. Skating partners. Business partners. That’s it. Agreed?”

“And best friends,” he added abruptly.

“Best friends?” She quirked an eyebrow. Emphasized the first word.

“Yes. That’s what we are, right? Tess, I don’t know how many times, how many ways, I can say that I’m only skating with you, that none of this happens unless it’s the two of us. You, me, a team. Together. You’ve been the only other person who gets any of this, has for the last decade. I love you, I will always love you,” the words tripped strangely out of his mouth; even though he used to tell her that all the time, because he was Scott and Scott said what he felt, but that was Before and they both knew that. “You should know that, and you don’t, and I’m running out of ways I know how to tell you. And I just … want to get back to that. You and me, best friends, doing this together. If we’re not, I don’t know how we win the Games, I don’t. So yes, let’s just … go back. Please.” His eyes were so earnest and sad and she hated that she had made him this way. “Forget the last year.”


He picked her up the next evening to drive her back to Canton, just like it was any old weekend in London.

They made it three practices before Marina threw their asses into couples’ counseling.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, the timeline and themes and the tone are established, we’re now all conditioned to how this is gonna go, and time to dig into the actual plot, here. Only took us 36K words!

In all honesty, I’m not really kidding. This is where we really get into the thrust of plot happening, with four major threads unspooling. Ideally—and I think it worked OK here—we can because we’re comfortable with what’s happening. Which was why this was the perfect place to start expanding the universe because until now, we’ve only been learning the steps to the Scott and Tessa dance.

Getting that specificity of character from the Greek chorus of friends and coaches was difficult but important, since we weren’t going to see them too much (I wanted one major moment from each, like in a black-box play; Chiddy, the sneak, stole a second, as did Marina and Marie). But new people ground the narrative and make the world more real, but they also are integral to building to the realization that this. Is. a. Super.
Unhealthy. Relationship. Tessa’s observation that “She hated that no matter how much she hated him in any given moment, he was also her favorite person always” is completely on the nose, and if we spend too much time in their perspectives, we might start to believe the bullshit ourselves.

Jeff Buttle’s addition to the story in this section was one of my favorites, and frankly I like the reworked section much, much better than Kaitlyn Weaver. He’s got a deeper history, and we’re able to see more of Tessa’s authentic feelings, as well as the space between what she’s willing to admit out loud vs. what she’s thinking, in this iteration. Chiddy of course got to be the longest-suffering voice of reason. Striking a balance between a guy who’s observant enough to come up with homie-cide and Sexagon with that guy was really fun, and went a long way toward filling that out.

Building in little asides, like “Moir men” here helped, as did coming up with rules for the characters and how they interacted. One of those was that none of the Moirs would refer to Tessa as Tessa, and I’m pretty sure it held: Alma almost always refers to Tessa as Tessie; Danny and Charlie stick almost exclusively to Tutu or Big Hands; Scott only uses her full name when he’s angry—like in this chapter, he calls her Tessa when they’re arguing about her surgery—and he stops using Tutu after he starts to develop feelings for her (Well, I combed this nine times to double-check, so I hope it holds). A similar small ‘rule’ is she only calls him Scottie during the Kaitlyn era, or when she’s mad at him.

Kate was a hard one to nail for me. There’s a few comments about parenting (editorial and in-character) sprinkled throughout the piece, especially when we’re talking some of the decisions made when Tessa is younger. I also wanted to give some space between Scott’s read on the situation and Tessa’s (he’s very much not impressed by the nose job here; in ch. 13, when they’re fighting, he initially thinks she’s calling Kate, not JF), but not really dwell (and at the same time, give Kate one fantastic insightful moment of parenting, the speech on grace). I think Scott would be too chill to truly care (and they would all be very very very close anyways) but it was a choice that felt right since it defined all three characters involved.

I was a lot more interested in Meryl and Charlie than Gabi and Gui, which probably came across (“whisper twins!”). The competitive clusterfuck, the friendship and the longevity and the mirror-ness, was really important and insightful. I’ll talk about some of their major moments w/ Charlie later on, but tracking the evolution of that quad was where the outlines became helpful. For instance, in this section and the first, Meryl and Tessa watch Gossip Girl together and Meryl visits her when she’s out. But that wary friendship tie is the first to break, by 2011; Tessa rationalizes it away pretty bloodlessly. But there’s a deep understanding nobody else is gonna get.

And finally Marina, who gets one major scene with each character, was freaking hard. I wasn’t interested in making her a villain (There were eight good years), but I also liked the conniving, opaque motives. I thought they were good contrasts to both Tessa and Marie, and highlighted the complexities of such a high-stakes world. (Basically, there was no way for everyone to come out of the Sochi quad happy—again, oh so very Russian.) Again, she provides that outside check so we don’t get Stockholm Syndrome’d into thinking their behaviors are normal, or cute, romantic, or excusable. Initially this scene was supposed to be a Tessa scene, but I realized that might cue up her suspicions too early. Instead, we have clueless Scott completely out of his depth, as a coach both warns him away from hitting on Tessa but also very clearly realizes that she’s sitting on a freaking gold mine of chemistry to frack.
if you dare, come a little closer

Chapter Notes

So, I tried for shorter — really! This is what we ended up with. I would say I SWEAR the next chap will be shorter but I swapped out a section for a shorter one (but one that includes Adam Rippon!) so .... we’ll see.

Continuing to dig into the tenser/less "cute" aspects of the relationship, so just a general warning. The first major Scott section was a *lot* for me to work through, and doesn’t fully address my personal feelings on the matter, but happy to elaborate. Timeline-wise, on a couple major points, this is very much "inspired by true events" because a lottttt has been condensed. Still trying to tell a story about what happens when the great love story of your life (friendship, romantic, work-related) is at the cradle of reality and performance; choice and destiny; a public and private life; and the lines between your career and your personal relationships, and address it all w/ emotional honesty, thoughtfulness, empathy, and some humor. Good intentions, I swear!

Title is, of course, from Rihanna, because what else encapsulates them not being on the same page?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Six Years Before Today, Scott

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After the shit hit the fan but before they truly broke—so, sometime that summer of 2013—she came to the rink with Stay; a few listens in, he realized it was actually going to be goddamned over after Sochi. Tessa Virtue, writer of her own story, builder of her own brand, creator of their careers, world’s best best friend, skating partner extraordinaire, the person he thought of first, always and forever, in any decision—she was choreographing the end of their story to a goddamn Rihanna song, and planning on broadcasting it over the course of a season. Probably without ever explicitly talking to him about it. It was incredibly logical when he thought about it through her eyes, a move deeply embedded in the dramatic reptilian recesses of her cautious, people-pleasing, narrative-driven, overly-OCD brain. It was possibly the most classically Tessa move she had ever made.

Fuck if he hadn’t made the biggest mistake of his life.

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ii. Five Years Before Today, Tessa

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Retired life meant a lot more time to do things like have drinks with friends and date and go to fancy TIFF parties, and Tessa was All About all of those things, as she gazed around the sky lounge at said TIFF party. All the furniture was white, the lights were pulsating purple, and the crowd was the first one she’d been in since the Village where she was actually envious of anyone’s abs. Her eyes followed Ryan’s sculpted shoulder blades as he cut through the cocktail attire and haze of booze for
drinks.

It was good to have other interests beyond ice dance and Scott Moir; actually, it felt damn good a lot of the time. She was Trying New Things. Taking a Year of Yes. This—fancy parties with interesting and beautiful people, a jewelry line to promote, money to earn, A Night Out columns to appear in—was exactly how one was supposed to spend their twenties if presented with the opportunity. She had worked hard, she had earned this, this was fun.

“Sorry, what did you say?” she turned back to Midori with a smile. Shook herself back to the present. “It’s so loud in here.”

“I said—you seen Scott lately?”

“Every couple of weeks or so for lunch or golf, and then for skating, but not really,” she smiled. “We text a lot, but it’s the curling season so he’s drinking beers wherever Kaitlyn’s competing.”

“What happened to you guys that last season anyways? It got so weird.” She felt sorry she’d dragged Midori into the damn mess of the TV show and all of her Plans.

“Well,” she said, taking a sip and being careful not to slosh the very strong martini, “Those last two seasons? I think we just lost our damned minds.” She swallowed, and shrugged. “That’s the only explanation I have for them.”

(It’s not.)

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iii. Nine Years Before Today, Scott

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“You know,” Chiddy said as they stroked around the Sasktel Centre, warming up for that evening’s CSOI performance, “I didn’t think it was possible for you and Tessa to have relationships with other people that could possibly even come close to being the level of weird that you two have with each other after, well, everything, so frankly, I’m impressed that you both managed to find more fucked-up situations to dive right into. You two truly do take the gold in whatever you set out to do.” His tone was light and conversational—fuck, it was borderline cheerful. Scott knew that not only was his friend right, but he was saying these things in Scott’s best interest, which was the only reason Scott didn’t punch him. Chiddy nodded toward Bryce and Jessica, then David and Tessa.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” he finally managed to grit out.

“Please. To summarize: Your on-again, off-again girlfriend of more than a year is now off after cheating on you with her ex-ex-boyfriend, who also happens to be her skating partner, and one of your pretty good friends.” Ex-friend, Scott mentally corrected, because Bryce could eat tacks, “and while they may or may not have privately separated years ago, Tessa is freaking dating half of Canada’s last golden ice couple as that marriage publicly melts down like an ice pond in March—though they’re still skating together on this very tour, which I like, can’t even step back and wrap my head around how fucked up that is. Anyways, he is also one of your personal heroes and mentors. And while aaaaaaaaaall of this is going down, you two both tell every local news station in Canada how special you are to each other—fuck, you wrote a book on it—but you’re still crazy-weird with each other after Vancouver and, really, we should just label it, That One Season We Don’t Speak Of. There are literally not enough buses to accommodate the combinations of people who won’t sit next to each other because of all of this. I’m just … have you and Tess addressed this at all with your
“Nope, and no plans to,” Scott replied. “Also, she’s a mental-prep coach. For competitions. Not a marriage counselor. Cause we’re not married. Or in a relationship.”

“I’m just saying, remember in, like, 2006, when I had a crush on Tessa, and I was worried that our friendship might end over it?”

“She was never gonna give you time, Chiddy.” The words are probably more cutting than Chiddy deserved—Scott knew he was only trying to help, and was probably the only person on tour who had half a shot at being successful—but Scott didn’t want to hear their post-Vancouver lives laid out as cleanly as a closing argument on Tessa’s beloved Law & Order.

“Well, if I’d known that this is the depth of fuckery that you two could descend to and still be a successful skating team—and the level of nonsense you would take in friendships—I would’ve asked her out to a Hall & Oates concert or something.”

“You’re point, Chiddy?” He slid to a hockey stop, purposefully spraying ice all over Chiddy’s pants. Tried not to sound aggravated. It was frustrating enough to be in therapy, to be reminded of how to cue each other with kindness, to turn toward each other with generosity, to be open instead of defensive, all the shit Suzanne had covered years ago.

Mostly, it reminded him of what they’d lost.

“Just that being awesome at being awful to each other isn’t the same thing as winning gold medals. Seriously. Do you honestly ever stop trying to push each other to greater and greater heights?” At Scott’s face, he continued, “That’s clearly a no. I don’t even know if you can help yourselves,” he shook his head. “Listen, I can’t pretend to understand what goes into a skating partnership, but I’m looking at three incredibly fucked-up, borderline incestuous couples in a fucking Sexagon.”

“Oh fuck you, Chiddy.”

“No, it’s totally true. You have collectively ruined tour. It’s lot less like summer camp and a lot more like a weird French dinner party this year. So I’m calling bullshit on the whole ‘partnership’ thing. I far prefer being a singles skater. And as the closest thing to an impartial seventh party to this—and your roommate, which means I’m Team Scott-and-Tessa always—I’m suggesting you maybe talk to Tessa.”

“She’s my best friend. Still, always, forever. We talk all the time.”

“For, like, real, I mean. You being an asshole isn’t helping anything. Also, if you bring back another figure-skating groupie from a bar for a one-night-stand this tour, I might kill you.” It had happened twice. And with an eyebrow raised, Chiddy skated away to join up with Jeff, who had been carefully avoiding all six of them, except Tessa, the entire tour.

(Actually, most people on tour avoided them, carefully or not-so-carefully, that year. He couldn’t blame them. In retrospect, he was just impressed that nobody had punched anybody.)

(Well, he had punched Bryce, once, right after the second show, in Ottawa. But he was surprised that nobody besides the six of them punched one of them. They certainly deserved it.)

“Never really been our strong suit,” he admitted to nobody.

Patch and Marie, laughing and holding hands, skated right by.
He tried not to interpret them as a sign of the universe mocking him and T, but it was pretty damn hard.

He watched David skate off to practice a lift with Jamie—dear god he hoped that he and Tess never reached that level of silent, furious acrimony—and so he took the opportunity to skate over to where she was perched on the boards retying her lace.

“Need help?”

She looked up, flitty and a little surprised, but extended her foot. “Hey,” she said, softly, and he perched the boot on his thigh. “We should practice Everybody Dance Now again.”

“Sure,” he agreed easily, though they’d been doing the routine since middle school and he could probably do it in his sleep. He tightened the laces carefully. Tessa liked them just shy of cutting off her circulation. “So. How’s it going?”

“Fine, Scott,” she rolled her eyes. He wasn’t trying to pile on her, honestly—it wouldn’t be particularly helpful; yelling at Tessa was never helpful since she took it and just exponentially magnified it internally. In this case though he couldn’t blame her for being defensive—everyone had been giving her shit for weeks now. Neither Jim nor Kate had been exactly enthusiastic about David, but their disapproval had taken dramatically divergent forms: Her dad had been apoplectic, which had inevitably kicked up Tessa’s defiant streak; her mom had been overly worried and overprotective—Kate was always lenient with her over-sensitive youngest; this was not a new Virtue Family Argument—which had actually led to more fights between the two of them, about business trips and nose jobs and choreo from when Tessa was thirteen and money, which only stressed Tessa out.

He wouldn’t exactly call Kate thrilled, though: He and Tess had invited Jess and David to the traditional Virtue/Moir Family Victory Dinner after the Games, in an effort to be mature adults showing their families that they were mature adults doing mature-adult things like have mature-adult relationships with other mature adults; the entire thing had been the most awkward dinner Scott had ever attended. He’d never seen Jordan or Kate that drunk before, and they both liked their Chardonnay. Jim downed two scotches in stony silence; he hadn’t been that pissed even when Scott drove them back from Canton in under two hours. Even Alma was tipsy by the end.

And based on a few phone calls he’d accidentally overheard, Skate Canada was giving her plenty of shit about it too, which was all kinds of fucked up—where did they think David had first met Tessa, exactly; who the fuck was still married; and who the fuck was fifteen years older? But Tessa was the rising star with a gold in the last Games and a book coming out in a few weeks; the SC team, with Tessa’s assistance and Scott’s agreement, had successfully crafted the speculative bullshit Canada’s Sweethearts narrative around the two for them, and her ingenue schtick needed to be maintained, or something, so suddenly Skate Canada was up in her grill, pressuring her about her reputation and earnings potential and reminding her this was ruining Jamie’s life.

(Much much later, when he starting contemplating children and the thought of daughter who looked and acted like Tessa terrified him, he realized an anxious, twenty-one-year-old people-pleaser was far easier to manipulate than a thirty-five-year-old divorcing dad in the twilight of his career, no matter how intelligent and independent she was. The same went for Dave. After this epiphany he spent two hours with the b2ten punching bag, then hugged Tessa for so long she asked if he was dying.)

It was confusing because he’d always liked Dave, generally. He’d been really cool to them, giving them advice and arranging a couple sponsorship opportunities, until Jim intervened and hired Tom; buying Scott beers at hockey games since he was fifteen; penning an enthusiastic foreword to their book that was, in retrospect, suspiciously effusive about Tessa’s poise and beauty. He kinda thought Dave should be stepping up a lot more in Tessa’s defense, if he was really serious about her, but also
felt he had little room to judge.

He did think if Tessa wanted to date Dave that was her choice. She was a grown-ass woman and in thirteen years he’d never seen her do anything against her will. She was stronger, and more fiercely stubborn, than she ever got credit for. Besides the blip of whatever-the-fuck they had been doing a couple of seasons ago, she’d always had starry-eyed-but-kind-of-shitty taste in exclusively older guys, though he wished she would just date someone awesome who got how awesome she was. And he didn’t really understand any of the political chess; the PR bullshit mostly struck him as, well, bullshit. He knew from eight years of dealing with the ISU how important playing the game was, but really, the line should stop when it came to living your actual life.

But if this was going to be a thing with Skate Canada or with Jamie or the rest of the vultures on tour or, god forbid, the media—Tessa, no matter wary she might be about him, no matter how much he’d disengaged in the last several months, was his partner, and he was on her side.

Always.

And he hadn’t made that clear.

(In fairness, he had had plenty of his own personal shit to deal with, and she’d definitely bounced out of that.)

“Legs feeling ok?” He checked, giving the laces a final tug.

She shrugged, dropping her skate but lifting the other one. “They ache,” she admitted with a sigh, settling the boot against his thigh. “No. They hurt. So fucking much, Scott. I think I had them on ice for like four hours last night. They basically went numb and they still hurt.”

“What did the PT say?”

“Talk to the doctor. It hasn’t been that long. I’m going to give it some time and go when we’re back in London.”

“T, it’s an overuse injury. Using it more isn’t gonna do much to help it.” He patted the boot to signal all set and she swung her leg down but remained perched on the boards.

“I’ll get it checked out before the season starts and hey, if my career is over, maybe Jess is interested in switching to dance. Could help you get her back.” Her face dropped, as if shocked by her own bitchiness. “Oh my god, I’m so, so sorry, that’s not Productive Conversation. At all.” Her eyes looked so tired.

He looked around—everyone had wrapped up, or migrated to the other side of the rink. Not super subtle, guys. “It’s OK,” he shrugged. “It was fun, but you know. Shit happens. And I’m not going back to that mess.”

(He did. Multiple times, for more than a year. But the best of intentions, and all.)

“Are you OK? How are you feeling?” Oh. It was sort of funny, to hear Tessa asking about him after a breakup. She had been good, for years, at calming him down, checking in on him, supporting him when competition got to him, but the girlfriend territory was, well, new.

“It’s OK. I’m OK.”

“I thought Bryce deserved the punch, for what it’s worth. Hell, I half-considered punching Jessica for you.”
"You, throw a punch?"

"I totally could. Might have been a slap. More my style, I think," she laughed.

"I believe it," he smirked, because Tessa had a petty-bitch streak a mile wide, as the ongoing drama at Canton proved. "Though I’m a little concerned though that you still think, Tessa Virtue, that I’d ever get another skating partner.” He’d left a discarded pile of juniors somewhere in 2008 to prove it, and he wasn’t sure how many more times he could re-make that point. She needed to trust him, again. "I know I’ve been shitty to you lately, but I’d appreciate it if you just told me to get my head out of my ass directly.”

“I … That’s fair. Though. Sometimes it’s hard to catch you in the right mood to have a rational conversation about whether you’re being a jerk. That’s sort of where the ‘being a hothead’ part really comes in.” He knew that was true, knew it was harder for Tessa to say so than most.

"OK. I’ll work on that if you work on not coming up with low blows about my dating life.”

"I know. I’m sorry.”

“Wanna share why you said it?” This was one of several phrases the therapist had told them to use when they got frustrated and snappish with each other.

“I guess … I’m worried about what the doctor might say. Pain doesn’t help much.” She leaned forward and picked some lint off his sweater. “And, you know … things are a little much right now.”

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat. “I’ve kind of picked up on all of that, with David.”

“Scott, I get based on your attitude these last couple of weeks you probably don’t like this, but you have very little room to talk—” she started to snap.

He pressed closer in to cut her off, palms coming to just outside her thighs. Leaned into her space. “Hey. Not what I was trying to say. We’re not supposed to jump to conclusions,” and she shut up, immediately. Expectantly. She searched his face, then nodded, continue. “Anyways, I’ve been dealing with … my own shitty mess right now. But, we said we’d be best friends, and I’ve had kind of a fucked way of showing it lately, so. I know Skate Canada’s been giving you a lot of grief, and Jamie’s basically Mean Girls-ed you into having a miserable time on tour. Just, I guess my first point is to say fuck them all, but also … if you ever want to vent, or complain, or cry, or get away from it … I mean, obviously there’s David but if he’s ever … dealing with his own shit, or Jamie’s sliced off his balls with her skate and he’s in the ED, or hell, if you want to bitch about him and don’t want to talk to Joannie. If you want to talk, or bitch, I’m here. I’m on your side, I guess is what I’m saying.”

“That’s tremendously eloquent,” she said, but she smiled.

“I mean we said a lot about the strength of our partnership in that book; I’d like at least a tenth of it to be true.”

She nodded. “Me too. I’m sorry Jess cheated on you with Bryce.” Something —guilt, regret, embarrassment, acrimony—flitted across her face. He refused to speculate, but could hazard a guess that it had to do with the David Thing, simply because most things in Tessa’s life had to do with the David Thing these days. “That must really suck.”

“Yeah, well, according to her I never told her where we stood or how I was feeling about her unless I was yelling at her so maybe I’m slightly responsible for this situation.”

“Pro-tip for dating women, they’re actually pretty simple and straightforward. Sometimes they just
like to know that you like them.”

He snorted. ”Yes, kiddo, you’re the definition of simple and straightforward.” He squeezed her hand, briefly, to let her know it was a joke. A bit of a joke, anyways.

Her eyes crumpled a bit. “I think I am, really. At the end of the day I don’t think I’m any more complicated than anyone else.”

“I think you’re Tessa, and I think you’re … complex, and I think that’s awesome. And anyone who makes you think you should apologize for it can shove it.”

Something brimmed in her eyes for a flash before receding, another look at that he didn’t want to analyze too closely. “We’re quite the team, aren’t we?” she finally groaned. She dropped her head briefly on his shoulder before straightening, her eyes calm and bright with a wry laugh in her voice. “I’m the Hester Prynne of tour, you’re punching guys at bars. Only one of us is supposed to be pissing Skate Canada off at a time and I think it’s my turn. God knows I’ve been waiting on it for a while.”

“You are definitely overdue for a turn at shit-stirring,” he agreed. “I’ve been carrying the burden of being the fuckup for far too long here.” Her eyes darkened again. “Not, god, that this is a fuckup, T. Live your life. Just that, you know—”

“Other people view it as one,” she finished, and swallowed. “I know. And you’re not a fuckup. You’ve never been. But when did you get so wise and honorable and mature?”

Something in her voice sounded so wistful and tiny, and it made his heart crack. He skated even closer into his space, tipping her chin up with his fingers before gripping her waist. “I don’t think anyone else would use those words to describe me,” he replied, his voice unexpectedly rough. “But I’m always going to put you first.” It was simple, profound, a law of the universe he was certain of even at twenty-two, like gravity—something vital that he took for granted.

She reached up, tugged her fingers through his hair, and he thought, for the first time in a long time, of 2008, of her hands and her body dancing over him, heated and mesmerizing. He didn’t understand how he could spend half his life with her body touching his and not really feel anything, but in one motion, immediately feel something entirely different, entirely wondrous, toward her. “I know,” she said. “Sometimes I forget, but I always know here,” she put her other hand on her heart. He leaned forward so that hand bumped his chest. Close enough for a kiss.

She didn’t move.

What the fuck were they doing?

“I’m sorry I haven’t been here as much as I should have been,” he finally said.

“I’m … having kind of a year. Like I do every year,” she acknowledged with a small laugh. “I’m sorry I didn’t slap Jess for you. Next time, OK? I promise.”

“You gonna be OK?”

“I hope so. I think so,” she corrected.

“I know so,” he exhaled, then pulled back. Moment over. Way too dangerous. “Wanna skate?”

“Always,” she said, hopping down and sliding her hand into his. Together.
iv. Six Years Before Today, Tessa

Tessa sat coolly and confidently in her grandmother’s pearls and a power pencil dress, her ankles crossed delicately and pearl-pink manicured hands folded in her lap. Next to her was Julia who was next to Tom; on the other side of Tom, Scott looked a little rough and assholish but calm and expectant in a Leafs hat, backwards, and a T-shirt from a Keith Urban concert he, Paul, Jake, and Baker had gone to last fall.

(She had gone to the concert too, riding shotgun in his truck all the way there with the wind in her hair, like she was the love interest in one of those damn songs; it had been outdoors in August and very sticky but he stood behind her anyways, chest covering her back and hands tucked into the front pockets of her jorts and his chin on her shoulder and his body making hers dance as he sang into her ear. It had been a lot more fun that she expected.)

Across from them at the square table sat the four producers from the network; to their right, a miserably skeptical Marina, her damned dog, and a clueless Johnny; on their left, Mike and a couple of other suits from Skate Canada, all looking smug and pleased and not like they were entirely useless, frequently broke, and somewhat of a joke. But Tessa smiled; this had been her idea and she’d done it, she’d really done it, gotten everyone on board and negotiated their deals and signed papers in triplicate and everything.

If the ISU or Marina wasn’t going to look out for them, if Skate Canada couldn’t back them up, they were going to steer into the headwinds of Sochi alone, generate their own buzz. And if that counterbalanced the narrative—well, that, plus awesome skating—they might be able to pull this off. When they were good, they were untouchable.

“Alright, so we’ll film for 65 days between August and December, no more than two days per week so as to not interrupt practice or preparation of Scott, Tessa, or any other athlete,” the exec producer outlined. “All promotional shots will be taken this summer, and we’ve agreed no media during the premiere because of the Olympics. Your family members and the friends you have selected, Ms. Davis, Mr. White, and other skaters at Arctic Edge have all received paperwork outlining rights and compensation.”

“Great,” Scott nodded. “We’ll make sure they sign them.”

His voice sounded tired. Was he sleeping? They’d barely spoken since Worlds three weeks ago. Not your problem anymore, Tessa, she reminded herself.

“Now, most of this is behind-the-scenes,” the producer continued. “We’ll be tracking your season, getting the inside scoop on prep, the ‘extra stuff’ that goes along with being an athlete, how you’re feeling about Sochi. On the personal side we’ll follow your relationship with one another—this sixteen-year-partnership is just incredible—and with your family and with fans. So nothing fake like the Kardashians,” he laughed. “However, the contrast between you two is really interesting. We’ll want to dive into that.”

“Contrast?” Scott asked, a little confused. “We’re different, yeah, but we’re a team.”

The producer smiled. “You’re an extrovert, she’s an introvert; she’s very bright-lights-big-city, you’re more laid back. And, you know, we’ll follow Tessa around as she’s sort of a single-girl-with-her-gal pals, Sex and the City-style—” Marina visibly gagged and Scott couldn’t hold back a snicker
“—and you know, you with your ‘boys’ but also with your girlfriend.”

“My girlfriend?”

“Cassandra,” she cut in tightly, leaning forward to shoot a *Stop asking questions in front of people, please,* smile at him, put on her best Press Conference Face. “I mentioned her on a pre-call last week —” one he skipped “—and they thought it might be a good contrast to my life to include her, like he said.”

“Sorry, I thought you two had discussed with each other.” The producer stared between them.

“It’s fine,” Tessa smiled. “Scott’s very private; we both are. Scott’ll talk to her this week, but I’m sure it’s fine. We can proceed.”

“If she’s not comfortable,” a more junior producer suggested, “we can look into casting someone to play the archetype. Especially with that bridal photo shoot that just came out, the ice wife vs. real life dichotomy will really take viewers in.” *Ice wife? Really?* She was a fucking Olympic gold medalist.

Scott raised an eyebrow. “I know the value of telling a good story, but these are my friends’ and families’ lives, and they’re not used to this. I’m fine putting my life under a microscope for my career but they didn’t sign up for *that.* So casting someone to play someone in my life’s not an option.” His tone was gentle but firm. “I’ll … talk to her I guess.”

An hour later in a cab to York—some speech to a sports psychology class about Mental Preparation and probably also Teamwork and maybe even Communication, a talk she was probably going to have to stop herself from laughing hysterically through the entire time, because they were *such* fucking hypocrites—he finally said, “So, were you going to mention the Cassandra thing?”

She shrugged, still staring out the window. “It’s a storyline idea, like he said. They had a bunch of suggestions and this one seemed the … I don’t know, the most feasible. I offered her name.”

“Most feasible? Tess, these aren’t storylines on a soap opera. These are people’s *lives.* Including yours, that you’re just going to … manipulate for TV.”

“I know they’re real lives,” she insisted, her voice edgy. “Christ, Scott, of course I know that. And I’m not *manipulating* anyone, God, that’s just kind of offensive.” She expected something like that from Meryl, but not him. “I’m trying to create a narrative with what we’ve got. We agreed, to combat everything … I said that I would handle narrative and the public stuff.”

“This is the narrative you created?”

“Please. You know how private I am. None of this is easy. I wouldn’t be doing this if I wasn’t completely convinced the payoff is worth it. We lay track about Charlie and Meryl and Marina; we get people on our side so we’re not cast out as has-beens or losers when this is all over, and *maybe* we get a real shot at winning again; raise our own profiles for … after.” It was a high-wire, exhausting, moonshot plan. She was suddenly very conscious of the cabbie up front.

“It’s just … a lot to ask from people,” he mumbled. “Including me.”

Ignoring him, she leaned forward, “Excuse me, how far are we?” When he said *a mile,* she replied, “That’s great; actually, I think we’ll walk the rest of the way. Do you take card?” At Scott’s dubious glance toward her heels, she said, “I brought flipflops.”

She left him to pay and stalked off very fast, wrapping her trench around her. “Wait *up,* kiddo,” he yelled. She turned, shoving her sunglasses on her face. She realized that she probably looked faintly
ludicrous, like she was wearing an Audrey Hepburn Halloween costume, which felt especially ludicrous given that she was about to get into an argument with a douchey frat boy in a bro-country concert tee in public. It was a ridiculous, perfect tableau for this partnership.

“I …” he stumbled a bit, trying to find the right, therapist-approved wording. “I was really surprised, after everything, that you would suddenly just **volunteer** her name to, what, be my … girlfriend? On this show. For the record, I haven’t seen her since Worlds, I have no **plans** to, and god, Tess, I know I fucked up, hurt you on every level. I am so incredibly sorry. I know I will spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to you, I know I can’t, and I know that doesn’t fix anything—” and she knew that was driving him nuts; Scott Moir was pathologically programmed to be a fixer, but this one he kind of had to just **lie** in “—but I am truly, truly sorry. So yeah, it’s surprising, and it feels a little bit … vindictive, I guess? For you to suggest that.”

She closed her eyes tightly behind her sunglasses, and realized tears were streaming down her cheeks. She felt Scott itching to wipe them—or, probably more accurately—kiss them away, as she started to speak, tightly. “When I started talking to the producers in February, the ‘storyline’ they were going to do was going to be the romance. How we balanced being together off-ice with on, how we really **were** Canada’s Sweethearts, the rush of our first official competitive season as a … whatever.” They’d never really gotten around to defining it, and that, like always, was their downfall. “Announce us to the world. And when I saw you … kissing her, I … Scott, you want to talk about playing pretend? About narrative, public versus private? About the **lines** between real and not? **We**, that, was **real**, at the end of the day. So I can put on a happy face and go to parties and lament with some girlfriends or whoever that I’m just so **bad** at flirting and have no time or whatever, but I couldn’t do that ‘storyline’ now. Talk to Cassandra, don’t talk to Cassandra; date Cassandra, don’t date Cassandra; fuck Cassandra, don’t fuck Cassandra,” her voice, finally, painfully, cracked, “I don’t care anymore. Whatever storyline you want to do that’s fine with me, just let the producers know. I do think this is the one that sets us up best for success, if it’s not the … other one.” The verboten one. “Hell it might be better for our image if it looks like I’m … pining.” It was a dull, grimy, grimly unpretty realization, but also, she felt, probably true.

He stood in front of her, the boy she had crushed on, the skater she’d won gold medals with, the business partner with whom she’d built a career, the best friend she’d supported for sixteen years, the man she’d kissed and fucked and loved, in the real, deep, lasting, adult sense. In every sense, really. He, their connection, their career, was and had been her whole life. It wasn’t a Nicholas Sparks novel—hell, most of the time it now felt fucking **Russian**, which she chose to blame on Marina—but it was the kind of love that came straight from the raw marrow of your soul. It was hers and theirs and vast and real and definitional.

And how it had ended—before it really began, before their careers were over—was utterly devastating.

His eyes were wounded; his body a coiled wire. She tensed, wondering which way this argument was going to go. Finally he heaved a great sigh, and stepped closer, wiped the tears from her face. “If that’s what you want,” he sighed, staring straight at her. “If that’s really what you want.”

She took a deep breath, and stepped back. Out of his hands; away from his gaze. “It’s not what I want. I want to be mad at you. I want to be furious, actually, and throw things, and drink a bottle of wine, and go to a beach in Australia with Jordan for a month and bitch about you. I can’t do any of those things, because—and this is the really fucked-up part—I know you too well. I get where you were and I know where I was and what I did and I get how it happened, and I kind of hate us for being … this. It’s not forgiveness, not yet anyways, but it’s … empathy.” She **should** be able to, for once and for all, let Scott Moir face the consequences of his temperamentalty, his temper, his shoddy impulse control, and yet she was the one up every night, replaying the night post-Worlds in her head,
replaying the entire damn season, picking it over until she could find new ways to blame herself (and knowing that she deserved some), different moments across their lifetime where she had fallen short for him.

It made her angry, it made her sick, it made her helpless, but yet, she could not be completely mad at him.

“But more importantly,” she continued, “I want to win the gold. We have the season of our careers in front of us, everyone else is against us, and we just need to lock down and focus. Get our heads out of our asses, and get our twizzles back. We have a plan, and we need to execute. And to do that, we need to get our shit together, Moir.”

She yanked the sunglasses off of her head, and her voice softened. “It’s not vindictive.” And it wasn’t. It was calculating, for sure—you didn’t win Olympic golds without being strategic, she had always known that and would never apologize; Scott would never ask her to. But while there was a feeling of satisfaction or comfort or something, in getting control back of the narrative of whatever had just ended, Scott was still her partner, whom she loved deeply and also needed at his best. And she wasn’t lying at all when she said, “I really have zero feelings about her, I swear. It was just a suggestion for what might serve our goal best. If you want to do something else, just let the producers know. Make a choice, Scott.” She was heartbroken but calm, full of conviction.

Because she had made hers. Because she was in this. Because when he said four more years after Vancouver, when her legs still ached to the point she couldn’t breathe, she said yes to their partnership, their careers, their medals, above everything. Because sticking the landing of their careers, of Marina’s abandonment, of the Olympics, was simply so much bigger than either of them. Because the two of them, together, always had been. When they were working together, she knew they could do anything. “I need you with me, if we’re going to win this,” she added, because it was true and it was the perfect combination of words to mobilize Scott into action.

Because if they pulled it off, if they got gold, the sacrifices of the last sixteen years, the consequences of the last five—they would be worth it.

He stared at her, a thousand of the emotions flying through his eyes. But eventually they landed on hard, and knowing, and a little sad, and she felt naked in front of him, despite the coat and the LBD and the glasses. “I’ll give Cassandra a call when we’re back in London,” he said levelly. “And ask her out for dinner. If it goes ok … we’ll see. I’m not going to, like, fake-date her, but I’ll … see. If there’s something still there. Is that good with you?”

( Everyone always forgot that under his big kind heart and his bright loud laugh, he was a competitor, that he wanted to win, probably more than she ever did.)

“But of course,” she said, shaking out a breath. “In the interest of complete honesty, I called up Ryan for dinner tonight. He’s in Toronto right now.” He’d been kind of surprised to hear from her after five months of radio silence, but had offered to make her pasta. She’d accepted.

“So that’s how it’s going to be now, eh?”

She squinted into the sun. “I think that’s how it is already.” Paused. “So we’re in this together?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Always.”

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v. Seven Years Before Today, Scott
He got asked twice, during sex, if he was fucking Tessa—first right after Vancouver, during a break with Jess. He’d been mouthing his way down her body, when she’d blurted the question out. He’d simply grinned wolfishly and said, “Nope, fucking you,” before giving her a hard lick and working as hard as possible to make her forget it.

The second time was with Cassandra, the summer Igor left and he and Tessa were workshopping Carmen and things were getting … well, hot. And weird. He’d gone out to Joe’s with his buddies partly to shake her out of his head, met Cassandra playing pool and ended up at her place.

Cass’s doe eyes were sweet and open, her flirty tone trying to hide the fear in the question. He’d pushed the hair out of her face, kissed her softly. “That’s a story, we tell, on ice,” he explained. It was the explanation he’d given a hundred times in a hundred interviews. “We’re good at selling the romance thing, so we play it up for the judge and the media and stuff since it helps our chances at winning. We kind of find the question flattering, but nope, I’m not. I swear.”

She raised her eyebrow. “That’s a weird thing to be flattered about,” she pointed out. “Tricking the world that you’re in love with someone if you aren’t.” And the unasked question: how do you know you’re not tricking yourself?

(And the second unasked question: Are you tricking yourself that you’re in love, or not in love, with each other?)

He stopped. He couldn’t say it wasn’t true, now, because that would raise flags—and wasn’t false, because it was flattering, a sign they were doing their jobs correctly. But it was also, on some level, horrifying that he was flattered by the question. So he went back to the tactic he’d used the first time, and it didn’t get brought up again until Paris.

This conversation got added to the (very small) list of Things He Never Told Tessa, next to that old Marina conversation and the fact that he had hidden her skate guards that one time in ’05, not Charlie. He purposefully didn’t delve too deeply into whether this was because it was about sex with another person, or because he couldn’t tell if she would be horrified or flattered at their successful salesmanship.

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vi. Nine Years Before Today, Tessa

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Charlie had showed her how to climb the Moirs’ trellis, once, ages ago when she was a bored, rambunctious tomboy. It had something to do with finding footholds, she remembered, and using your body weight to lever yourself up. Like a lift. She’d made it to the top, but she had been much lighter then, and Joe had found her, pulled her in through Scott’s window, and told her she was going to break her neck. More than a decade later, she was surprised that she hadn’t.

Whatever. She was an Olympic gold medalist, albeit in an entirely unhelpful discipline. She could do this.

She made it about seven feet before crashing to the ground.

“Tessa?” Scott’s sleep-dry voice groaned from above her, apparently woken up by the commotion. “What the fuck are you doing?”
She brushed some wet grass out of her hair. “Hey. Just visiting?”

“It’s one AM.”

“It’s a lovely evening. Very … balmy.”

“Hold on. I’m coming down.”

A minute later, he unlocked the front door, and she walked through like a normal person. “My parents could have thought you were a robber.”

“I’m too cute to need to rob people,” she dismissed the concerns. “Also, way too much of a klutz on land to do it successfully.”

“Yeah, I’m aware. Quiet feet, OK? They’re sleeping,” he said, and she rolled her eyes. “You want water?”

“I’m good, thanks,” she smiled.

“Upstairs, Bonnie O’Clyde,” he steered her shoulders.

“She name was Bonnie Parker, and she was a bank robber.” She let herself be steered though.

He flicked on a light. “So is this you coming to say you want to pursue a crime partnership if ice dancing doesn’t work out?”

“Not really,” she said, and looked straight at him. Straight to the point. “We went to the doctor again today.”

His face got deadly serious. “Surgery again?”

“Yeah,” she sighed. She’d been expecting it, honestly. It all added up: The pain and the aches. The PT’s worried looks. The doctor’s hedging tone. She’d told him when her doctor’s appointment was, this time, kept him in the loop. He’d been expecting it too.

They might still be rough around the edges, uncertain how to navigate being Tessa-and-Scott while they were both trying to develop relationships—or the weak facsimiles of relationships, since neither of them had a really great track record as of yet—and lives that didn’t include hyphens, but after last time, she owed this to him. Tour had been so hard, and he had either been super-distant and caught up in the Jess stuff, or crazy-supportive and exactly the kind of partner-slash-best friend she needed with the David stuff. It was sometimes exhausting, to try and guess which Scott she would be dealing with on a given day, but the good days always outweighed the bad.

God, she needed a cigarette. Alma would kill them if she caught them smoking on the roof again, though, so.

“I’m sorry kiddo.”

“Me too. They say I’m going to need to retrain my legs, to skate more efficiently. So it doesn’t happen again.”

“Skating more efficiently is never a bad thing. Maybe I’ll tag along.”

She smiled, despite her best efforts. “I’d like that, yeah.”

“Done. You’ll rest this time? Like, really make sure you wait. We can skip Nats.”
“Yeah, we don’t have the Olympics breathing down our necks at least so—”

“What did David say?”

“I called him to tell him and I … ended things with him instead, so I have no idea.”

“What?”

“Yeah. He’s got too much going on, and I don’t … I don’t want to be extra stress, you know?”

“Tess, you’re not extra stress. You’re exactly the amount of stress you deserve to be to a person.”

She smiled, wanly. “You of all people know that, huh?”

“You were too good for him,” he replied.

She shrugged; she’d known that Scott had always thought as much privately, because he had a 
stupidly high opinion of her, but had been concerned in overstepping some boundary. And really, it 
was better if they didn’t delve too deeply into each others’ romantic entanglements. “No, it was more 
of a … if he can’t be there fully for this—which he can’t; his divorce is all over Entertainment 
Tonight—then I can’t deal with halfways right now. It’s too much.” She ducked her chin and studied 
him. “That goes for you too, you know.”

“Roger,” he said, going to his planner, which he used never, and opening it. “When’s the surgery?”

“October 8th. Seven AM,” she sighed.

He wrote it down carefully, like he might forget it otherwise. “What do you want for your final meal 
the night before?”

“Chocolate. All the chocolate,” she smiled. “You’ll come?”

“Of c—yeah. I’ll be there. I promise. Why’d you come over now and not, like, when normal people 
are up?”

She inhaled. “I couldn’t sleep. Nerves, I guess.”

“What are you nervous about?”

She picked at the stitching on his comforter—hunter and navy plaid. It made her smile, still, how 
much of a boy Scott was. “It not working again, for one. Being in this much pain still. Giving up my 
career. Failing. Shall I go on?”

“It always comes down to failure for you,” he observed.

“We’re athletes,” she pointed out. She didn’t want to articulate the point that the person she worried 
about failing most was standing in front of her in his boxers as she rambled in the middle of the night.

“I don’t know, for me the biggest fear wouldn’t be the career, it would be not being able to skate 
with you again,” his words were almost offhand, but they hit her in the solar plexus. This was the 
best and worst thing about Scott, she thought: his ability to just casually, unthinkingly, be the 
sweetest person in the world. It wasn’t entirely unexpected—minus the temper and the harmless 
braggadocio, he was incredibly kind and thoughtful; the type of guy who always said hello to the 
grandmas keeping score at rec hockey games and looked out for the new juniors at the rink and 
brought girls he’d gone on two dates with flowers—but it always hit her just when she was trying to 
push him a little bit away, mentally. Give herself space to breathe, to think.
Like now.

“Yeah, well, you’re not too bad yourself.”

“It’s genetic. So. Obviously I screwed up last time. I’d like to avoid a repeat. What can I do?” They were Therapist Phrases, but she loved him for trying anyways.

She hugged her knees to her chest. “I don’t know. Probably a lot, eventually. There was a lot of pain last time, after the surgery, and then the PT … wasn’t super fun.”

“I remember Vancouver,” his voice was quiet. “Well, we’ll start with the surgery. I can take some time off too, hang out here instead of Canton … help. Would you like a movie marathon?”

“Yeah,” she said, her voice distant. “What are you worried about?” she checked in.

“You being in pain, letting you down again, us getting into another fight,” he listed.

“Not anything about me not coming back?”

“Nope. Because you’re the hardest worker I know, and I know you’ll do what you need to get back to where you need to be. I know you want it. And so if we have to make a decision about retirement, we can make that together.” He ran a hand over his face. “You wanna crash here tonight?”

She considered. They were raw, but there had been moments on tour, where she swore he looked at her differently. “I’m in jeans,” she deflected. Jess would probably be mad, but she wasn’t ever in the habit of mentioning Scott's girlfriends to Scott.

“Hang on,” he rummaged through a drawer then pulled something white out. “Ta-da! It’s probably yours, technically, under common law.”

She caught his toss. It was his Eminem T-shirt, from ages ago. She laughed. “Well if you’re offering, I’m going to keep this again.”

He yawned. “It was always yours. Want some water?”

“Yeah,” she mirrored his yawn. “That’d be great.”

By the time he got back she’d changed, typed out ended up at Scott’s to talk, crashing to her mother, and crawled into the tiny double bed.

“You know,” he said, handing her the water as she turned to him. “I think we have the same biggest fear. Just different perspectives. Yours of failing, mine of never skating with you again.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Please don’t put this all on me and my legs.” She couldn’t handle that, again.

“My fear isn’t of you not skating again. It’s of me not getting to skate with you. I’m saying we’re scared of the same thing happening. I think … it’s losing this, right? Our careers, everything, but more? Not waking up before the ass crack of dawn, seeing each other, competing. But you’re scared of it going away because you’ve let people down, because that’s something you think should be in your control, and mine is for reasons outside of mine, but they’re both about the fear of losing this. See? Very different ways of having the same perspective.” She smiled softly. It was something the therapists hammered home. “Anyways, the shrink would say that I should tell you: you can’t let me down, alright?”
It wasn’t that easy or that simple, but in the inky blackness of two AM, it was easy to pretend it might be. “You’re not gonna lose me either,” she promised, because it was dark and she was sleepy and he was safe.

“I will one day,” he said, his voice miles from her. “And that’s ok. You’re—god, Tess, I know we’re so focused on skating right now, but you’re so much bigger than that, you know that, right? In twenty years, this is gonna be a blip on your greatness.”

She was quiet. “We might not skate forever—and god I hope that ‘forever’ doesn’t start till after Sochi—but best friends,” she paused. “You won’t lose me.”

It was a stupid thoughtless proclamation, the type only made when one was young and the night was long, but they pinky-swore, and they both slept better than they had in ages.

Like he said, he was there when she woke up from surgery. She didn’t remember it the first time, because she was stoned for the second (and last) time ever, but she did the second and third and fourth times, his face gradually sharpening into clarity. She drifted in and out of sleep, him babbling about Ginger Rogers movies and how he would drive her to PT and bring her soup and massage her legs, and that he probably could try washing her compression garments but she probably didn’t want him too—she forgot his words, but remembered the weight of his hand, and knew this time would be different.

On the second day in the hospital, as her mother and Jordan wheeled her to PT, they passed the gift shop, and she said— “Stop. Wait.” A little bear, honey-toned instead of dark maple, wearing a tutu, stared at her. Probably meant for a little girl, perfect for a twenty-three-year-old guy.

“Can I get that?” she asked. “I mean, do you have my wallet? Or I can pay you back.”

“You want a stuffed animal?” her mother asked, amused.

“For Scott. To match the Leafs one from last time.”

“You’re buying him a gift as you recover from surgery?” Jordan was less amused. She thought both Tess and their mom always cut Scott too much slack because he was so charming. Jordan was like their dad, direct and pragmatic and cool and no-bullshit. She loved Scott, but was less easily charmed. And Jordan's savvy sometimes made Tessa just feel very sheltered, and young, and dumb.

“I … yeah,” Tessa shrugged, defensive. “What about it?”

“That’s very generous, Tessa. Let me pick it up. You two keep moving.”

“You forgive his shit way, way too easily,” Jordan said as they wheeled away.

“We address it and we get over it,” she corrected. “Look, two years ago, he could have just gotten a new partner. And … he didn’t. And now I have an Olympic gold medal.” That counted for so, so much. “And yeah, he fucking up last time but … you know, I’ve made mistakes too. I don’t like just, forgive his shit—and that goes both ways—but it’s like, we have to move on, since we’ve got a bigger goal, right now.”

“So I see marriage counseling is working.” Jordan cracked, and Tessa swatted her hand in the direction of Jordan’s arm. “Is there anything you wouldn’t forgive Scott for?”

“I mean, maybe if he murdered someone … but honestly I’d probably get the call to help hide the body. And he’d probably have a pretty good reason. So,” she shrugged. “Probably not, I guess.” Her mom caught up with the bear again. She left it on his chair, and when he arrived with sandwiches
and weak tea hours later, he practically fell over giving a dramatic awards-show acceptance speech, complete with faux tears.

The hole in her heart closed, and they were truly best friends again.

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vii. Five Years Before Today, Scott

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He hit SCI by himself the fall after Sochi—he missed skating, wanted to see what everyone was up to, and Kaitlyn was at a competition and Tessa was on another vacation. Jeff took pity on him and let him tag along with his crew, which was how he found himself wedged between the two most gossipy, bitchy-in-a-way-Tessa-and-Jeff-found-delightful-and-he-found-eyerolly American skaters while eating a $36 hamburger the night competition wrapped.

“So, Scott, where’s Tess?” Adam asked, tilting his head in a pout. “I miss her.”

“She’s on vacation with her boyfriend. She’s been texting me nonstop, though. I had to figure out FaceTime so she could watch you two,” he nodded at Kaitlyn and Andrew across the table.

“She texted me! She’s so proud of you,” Kaitlyn smiled. “And me, too. Me, mostly.”

“Boyfriend?” Ashley asked. It wasn’t uncommon knowledge, but Tessa was so damn private, and Ryan hadn’t been around competitions in a few years.

“Yeah, Ryan, he’s a skier, he’s been around for … a while. They didn’t have a ton of time to see each other last season but since we’re retired they’re back on.”

“You like him?”

He shrugged. “He’s a lot taller, definitely older, and kind of an emotionally unavailable asshole, so Tessa likes him, which is what matters.” It was meant to be a joke— he was teasing, and it was a funny line if you knew Tessa and her dating history; he, of all people, was allowed to have a sense of humor about their respective relationship histories—but Kaitlyn cut him a disappointed Oh come on you didn’t look.

Jeff snickered, a bit like he couldn’t help it. “You’re not one to talk,” he reminded Scott. “But yeah, that basically describes Semple. He’s the worst.”

Adam found all this hilarious, and snorted the dregs of his $17 boozy milkshake. “Oh this makes so much sense,” he clapped like he was doing a Stefon impression. “Like, I thought your years of petite brunettes whose hair weirdly changed to match Tessa’s right after you became official was funny enough, but that is fantastic and even more perfect. Oh my god. You two.” His tone was the tone typically reserved for small children who were adorable but slow to get jokes. “So cute.”

“What?” he laughed, irritated. God, he thought that retirement meant he was done with these conversations. And clearly, he wasn’t Tessa’s type.

The rest of the table groaned, and Adam just sighed, "Ohhhhh, sweetie. You are as cute as one of Canada’s beavers, you know that?"

Kaitlyn, whom he knew didn’t like his Kaitlyn because of an absurd possessive hangup about her highly common name, just patted his arm. “You’re dating a blonde finally, which is probably healthy
for everyone right now, so don’t mind him.”

“We’re proud of you,” Poje added, his voice syrupy and sarcastic.

“He’s being a jerk,” Ashley chimed in, on her phone. “Also, this guy is hot. Go get yours, Virtue.”

“You two remain my favorite ice dancers, always and forever,” Adam sighed, with another slurp of his shake. “Don’t tell the Shib. Or Meryl.” He shivered dramatically, and Scott was reminded why he liked Adam again. “Another one of these, please! Get one for this guy, too,” he yelled at the waiter.

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viii. Seven Years Before Today, Tessa

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Her eyes, welling up with tears that she refused to spill, flicked back and forth between her parents. “I don’t get it,” she said, helplessly, even though she did. Felt a little dumb that this was her reaction.

Nothing surprised Tessa, so this didn’t either—a potential split had been one of the more persistent What Ifs keeping her up for years—but her mother’s words took what had been subtextual for the last five years and an undercurrent of the last ten, and made it real. Raw. Unavoidable. Somewhere in the back of her mind, those What Ifs banded together, hissing you were right all along.

“Your mother and I have decided to separate,” her dad said, slowly and kindly and clearly. “We actually made the decision earlier this fall, but didn’t want to interrupt Grand Prix preparations for you.”

“So, you decided to wait until right before Nationals?” It was the year before the Olympics. That shit mattered.

(It was going to be the hardest year of her life, but she didn’t know that yet.)

“Tessa,” her mother said, her voice about as disapproving as it could get. “We didn’t think it would be honest, or quite fair to us, to go through Christmas without telling you.”

“So, what, this conversation is now associated with Christmas instead of my Armistice Day? I’ll have to carry these memories forever.”

“Tessa, please,” Jim’s voice was sharp. “This isn’t about you.” Kate elbowed him. Obviously, given the delay, it was a little bit about her. “We love you, and we’re so proud of you. We know how important this season is to you, and your career. We tried to be very considerate of that.”

“Do Jordan and Kevin and Casey know?”

“We told them this fall, yes.” Great, so they’d been lying to her for weeks, too.

“Who else knows?”

“It’s not a decision we came to lightly, Tessa—”

“So, everyone? I’m the last person to know? Mrs. Meyerson said hello to me in the supermarket today, does she know that I’m about to be a child of divorce?”

“We’ve informed close friends and family. It’s nobody else’s business. I don’t know if anyone has
told Mrs. Meyerson, but I haven’t seen her since that Halloween in grade three when you and Alyssa both came as Angelica from *Rugrats,* her mother came and put her arm around her, but she couldn’t bring herself to drop her head to her shoulder and cry, so she just sat there, frozen.

“Was it the skating? The money? The travel?” Her real question, that she couldn’t voice, was: *Was it me?* She had a pretty good sense of the answer, though. She was their far most stressful child: a handful since birth, not-infrequently playing them against each other, prone to dramatic proclamations, always been in her own world of skating and Scott and skating-and-Scott. The problems she brought to them were not ordinary Parenting Problems, and not what they had signed up for. She’d taken her mother away from the rest of them frequently; taken their vacation days and holidays; taken their mental energy and filled it with useless knowledge on step sequences and twizzle GOE scores and fucking dance holds. She had needed more, demanded more, expected more. The price tag on skating was literally incalculable. How much had the coaching, the gas, the costumes, the doctors, the PT, the mental prep, the airline tickets, the skate sharpening, cost? She had taken, taken, taken, and for what, really?

But it had never felt like an issue.

(Her question was on the right track—and her answer not off-base—but David, Scott, the bellybutton ring, and the nose job were all closer to the truth.)

“Tessa. Sweetie. You’re an adult. You know how complicated adult relationships are. It wasn’t any one thing. It was a million things, and nothing. It was a thirty-five year marriage with four beautiful, successful, happy children and a lot of love and memories. We don’t feel this is a failure or someone’s fault. It wasn’t you. It wasn’t anyone, and nothing that you did or didn’t do would change that. This is just the right decision for both of us now. Try and understand that.” Her mother ran her hand along Tessa’s shoulder blades.

She absolutely understood adult relationships—she had been in an adult relationship since she was seven—but the news still left a metallic, tangy taste in her mouth. Adult relationships were about the commitment, at the end of the day: the waking up and just *being* there, showing up for practice and putting country music on your iPhone for long car rides and carrying their bag through the airport as they handled the tickets. Forgiving them for entire conversations conducted in *Monty Python* quotes and letting it slide when they were super indecisive at the grocery store. It was through thick and through thin, richer and poorer, compartment syndrome and gold medals. You didn’t just stop being partners. She ticked through everything she had ever held true and foundational about her childhood, shifting and rearranging even the parts that *were* still true—about how happy they’d all been, about how deeply loved she’d always felt, the youngest and tiniest, always warm and safe in the center of the pile-on family hugs—as her brain processed this information.

She pulled her lip out, and realized she *had* bitten it so hard she had drawn blood. Huh.

Tessa stood from the pristine white dining room table—her tastes came from somewhere—and paced for a while. “I’m going out,” she announced. “I need to … to process, and I’m not doing it right, right here. I’ll be back.”

Her parents looked between each other, and nodded. “Joe and Alma know, of course,” Kate said.

“Of course,” she repeated with an eyeroll, childishly, before she could stop herself.

She hadn’t intended to go to Scott’s parents’ house, exactly, but there was no place else in the world to go, not with something like this. It was inevitable. As she knocked, she remembered, *duh Tessa,* it was two days before Christmas. Danny and Tessa Two and Charlotte, Charlie and Nicole and her book of wedding ideas, probably Carol and at least two of her girls and grandkids, and god knows
how many other Moir cousins and those cousins’ children, would be there (she invited all of them to her wedding and she still couldn’t name at least three of them).

Alma, in a Christmas tree sweatshirt, opened the door, her face sliding into compassion when she saw Tessa. “Oh, Tessie,” she said, wrapping her arms around her. “You know they love you so much, right?” Instead of saying anything, she just tipped into Alma’s hug, and she stroked her hair. “Scott’s in the kitchen, leading a gingerbread decorating competition.”

Tessa laughed, because of course he was. “Thank you,” she finally choked out.

Alma patted her cheek. “We love you, sweetie. All of you are family.”

She pushed through to the kitchen, hanging in the doorway as Scott egged four tiny Moirs into adding more gumdrops to their creations. When he finally saw her, his eyes lit up, and he started with, “T! I didn’t think …” before trailing off when he got a good look at her. He dropped the knife with frosting. Walked over. Started to reach for her face. She grabbed his hands instead, tilted her head upstairs. He led her through the dining room and the back hallway to avoid the throng of relatives in the living room. Once they finally made it upstairs and he shut the door to his room, she started pacing, pressed a hand to her eyes, then turned to him. She slid her palm to stare at him one-eyed, keeping pressure against her developing headache. “My parents are separating.” Her voice was pinched, disbelieving.

“Oh my god, Tess,” he wrapped her in a tight hug, and her breathing began to slow as she wrapped her arms around his neck and inhaled, choking back sobs that had finally showed up. Her heartbeat evened to match his. “I’m so sorry. I love you. Are you OK?”

“I … don’t know.” Her voice was shaky, but steady. “I’m … here. Right? That’s a start.”

“OK,” he nodded. “Are they … doing Christmas, or do you need …?”

She realized she had asked zero questions of substance. “I … don’t know,” she said, and then she started laughing, “I don’t know. I don’t know anything. I mean, which one is living in the house? Who knows. When did they separate? Sometime. What happened, really? I have no clue. My family fell apart, and I was too busy to notice. I’m a jerk.”

“Hey, hey,” he ran his thumbs over wet cheekbones. “You’re not responsible for everyone else’s decisions, kiddo.”

"I feel a little responsible for this one," she admitted, though she wasn't entirely sure where the guilt was coming from.

"Tess—you can’t start thinking that way. What happened when you got home?” God, had they just left Canton at noon? He bear-hug-walked over her to the bed, tipped them both onto the bed, ran his hand through her hair as she recounted their brief conversation. They huddled, faced each other.

“I mean, I knew there were arguments, and stuff,” she shrugged, still mostly disbelieving. “And Dad’s traveled so much, and Mom spent so much time with me in Canton, and on the road.” Maybe her partnership with Scott had warped her (okay, fine, it had definitely warped her) but the choosing to not be partners was still so utterly foreign. "God, I couldn't even tell you if they were happy. I'm the absolute worst." It wasn't self-pity; it was a realization.

"You're not."

"They … probably drifted, I guess."
“Separate lives,” he volunteered.

“Did you see it?” she demanded. “Was I just … choosing to ignore things?”

He inhaled. “I think it’s actually pretty hard to tell from the outside what’s happening inside a relationship. We of all people should know that. Do I think they were happy all the time? No. Does this completely shock me? No. Am I still sad, and kind of surprised? Yeah.”

She leaned forward, closed the gap between them, bringing her mouth softly to hers. He reciprocated easily, bringing one hand to her hip and another to her hair, pushing her mouth open, drinking her in.

They made out softly, for god knew how long, his family’s shouts distant beneath them. When her mood evened out from hysterical to sad to calm and turned the corner from need to want, she reached for his jeans, pushing her weight above his.

He broke the kiss. “Hey,” he said. This was different than whatever was happening when they danced Carmen, softer and more vulnerable and far too intimate. “You want to, T?” His eyes were dark and heavy, but also deeply concerned.

She took a breath, and nodded. “Yes. Please.”

More than anything else, even her family—especially her family now—he had been her constant, and she wanted him.

He leaned up to kiss her briefly, then rolled her off of him to get up. He quickly locked the door—good call; Alma could turn a blind eye to a lot but definitely not a grandchild or niece or baby cousin walking in on this—and grabbed the condoms from his dresser, tossing the box onto his nightstand. “Try and be quiet,” he suggested, a teasing glint in his eyes. She laughed, softly. It was always a struggle with him.

They had had sex in so many places—their apartments in Canton; rinks on multiple continents; the janitorial closet at Arctic Edge; cars and trucks and movie theatres and countless hotels and the couch in the basement and a few grimy bathrooms here and there—and in so many moods: adventurous and exploratory and fun that first spring in Canton; moody and aggressive and rough that summer before her surgery; hot and dangerous and insatiable this fall thanks to Carmen; and nearly every tone or style in between. She knew his body as wholly and confidently as her own.

This, this was different, though: soft and reverent and somehow more deeply intimate than anything they’d ever done, on-ice or off. The brush of his nails across her nipples seemed to go underneath her skin; his groan as she reached down for him reverberated in her lungs; his mouth on her stomach and hipbone felt like a tattoo; the stroke of his fingers and then tongue and then him seemed to cut straight up to her heart. “Just relax, T,” he said, his voice husky and rough. “I want this to be good for you.”

“You’re always good for me,” she whispered, as his dick hit her particularly sensitively, causing her back to arch with a quiet keen.

“You’re so goddamn beautiful,” he said thrust into her, his voice nearly worshipful, fingers tangling with hers.

Twenty minutes later, she lay sleepily across his shoulder. “Quiet enough for you?” she murmured, hot into his ear, as she finally stirred.

His laugh rumbled through her back, fingers scratching at her tailbone. “I don’t think we scarred any of my cousins’ kids but everyone’s probably going to be wondering where we are soon.”
“My mom told your mom. So I think we’ve got a lot of leeway.”

“Bet they didn’t expect us to use it this way.”

“Bet they expected us to use it exactly this way.” She pressed one, two, three featherlight kisses to his pectoral, right above his heart, then angled herself up onto her elbow. “We should probably get up though.”

“You wanna stick around? We have some gingerbread houses to decorate. I should warn you though: they’re actually graham crackers. Amelia hates gingerbread and Graham thinks those belong to him so we have to use them since Tim told him every time someone buys a graham cracker, he gets a penny in his college fund.”

“I hope someone is adding actual money to that, or he’s going to have a pretty rude awakening in fourteen years,” she laughed. “Can I? Stick around?”

“Of course. Tess, you can stick around here forever if you like.”

She side-eyed that, and he had the sense to pinken slightly. “I’d like that,” she finally said, and he side-eyed her. “I mean, I’d like to team up and kick Danny and Tessa Two’s asses at graham-cracker-house building.”

He leaned up and kissed her softly. “Let’s do it.”

They cleaned up and divvied up the pile of clothes—bra for belt, boxers for shirt—before heading downstairs, hand in hand. He gave hers a light squeeze as they separated at the bottom. The pack of baby Moirs had migrated to the basement to watch Brave, but when Uncle Scott announced that T was going to make a gingerbread house and did anyone want to help, all four immediately got up. “Aunt Tess, you gonna stick around for Christmas?” Graham, LeAnne’s oldest, asked.

All of the minis had been calling her that for years, definitely encouraged by Danny and Charlie. She didn’t mind, really—it wasn’t like Scott was technically Graham’s uncle, even, just a double-first-cousin-once-removed—so she just took his hand and said, “Probably for a bit. It’s pretty fun at Aunt Alma’s house, isn’t it?”

And it was fun—they pelted Danny and Tessa Two (Tess was a little guilty that her presence had relegated Danny’s poor wife to that nickname, dreamed up by Charlie and Joe; she did marry in eleven years earlier and all) with gummy bears during the competition, got frosting in her hair courtesy of a sticky-fingered Charlotte, piled her coat on for a snowball fight. Scott was at his most exuberant and funniest, and it worked, finally pulling her into the holiday spirit. She stuck around for dinner—at one point, she knew her mom called Alma to check in, caught Alma’s look across the big old kitchen as she ‘assisted’ Scott with the mashed potatoes—and then Moir Movie Night, and then as she was falling asleep on the couch to Die Harder, Scott wrapped around her, he whispered, “We’ve got rink time at six kiddo, and then the gym at ten.” He nipped her ear softly to wake her up.

“I’ve got my skate bag,” she mumbled, elbowing him because he was five inches from Danny. She hadn’t even unloaded her car. “Can I just crash here?”

“Yeah,” he said, placing a dry kiss at the joint at the nape of her neck, then patting her hip. “Get up.” She uncurled. “Alright, Tess is gonna stick around since it’s so late. We’ll be out by 5:50, so we’ll see you guys in the afternoon.”

“Sure that’s why she’s sticking around,” Danny said, with an unimpressed eyebrow-raise. Joe punched his thigh lightly.
“Thanks for letting me avoid my problems here today,” she said as she hugged Alma.

“You can’t avoid them forever, but you know you’re always welcome here, love,” Alma replied.

They had sex again before falling asleep, something quiet and deep and giggle-filled and sacred underneath the old comforter and the 2001 Leafs poster and medals and trophies and a photo of the two of them at the lake the summer she was eight and missing her front teeth. Instead of falling asleep on his side close to, but not touching her, the way he always did, he arranged his limbs around her, wrapped her tightly in a hug, nose in her collarbone, before passing out.

She was a shit sleeper, had been always, which was why he had never been exactly game for sleeping close to her in the past, but his arms were like the fucking cow-hugging machine she'd seen in that Claire Danes movie, and they were just ... soothing.

Sleep came a lot more easily than expected that night.

If she was distracted through practice or the gym, he didn’t give her grief; when they finally packed it in around noon he suggested lunch at her favorite cafe, then she suggested he help her find something for her brothers at Holt Renfrew. “Free until Midnight Mass,” he shrugged, slipping his arm around her shoulder.

“Let’s hit the Christmas Village next?” she asked an hour later, after they’d gotten cashmere sweaters for both of her brothers (plus one for each of them, since Scott’s shoulders looked great in the cut she found and the hunter green brought out his eyes. And she just wanted one, so she put that one on her parents’ credit card.).

“Sure, but gonna have to go home eventually,” he reminded her.

“I know,” she said, and she did. “But it’s pretty out, isn’t it? The square’s going to be beautiful. And this is fun. I’ll buy you a hot chocolate.”

“She’s hot chocolate,” he chirped.

They wandered around the square, stared at the lights, talked about the gossip from the Holiday Show at the rink the other week—apparently, two novices had been caught making out by Carol—while sipping on the hot chocolate. They stopped at the huge tree in the center, and she smiled up, finally full of the goddamned Christmas spirit.

Scott did something—make a noise? Move? Breathe?—besides her and she turned to look at him, taken a bit aback by the dark, inscrutable look in his eyes. “Hey,” she said, but before she could ask Are you OK? his lips were on hers, soft and warm and so Scott. She kissed him back, because he was an amazing kisser, but eventually she pulled back. “What’s up?” she asked quietly. Checking in.

Because unless ‘public’ included abandoned storage rooms at Grand Prix competitions, they had never kissed in public. It violated every real and artificial and emotional rule they’d constructed five years ago—barriers that had held with the strength of wrapping paper, but. Barriers. “Just wanted to, I guess,” he whispered into her hair, barely moving, hand cupped over her hair.

She stepped back. “You did?”

“Yeah,” he tipped her chin up to study her. “You ever think—I know it fell apart, back in 2008, with the surgery and … everything. And I know we’ve been doing whatever—literally, whatever, we haven’t addressed it—this season. But you ever think of, you know, giving this an actual shot? See where it goes?”
“Well, yeah. Of course, Scott.” That, with him, was never off the table. But they always were dating other people. And “but there’s skating. We can’t … we can’t ruin skating.” Always skating. They couldn’t risk skating. There was simply too much at stake.

He grinned. “Tess, we’re older now. I think … I think we can handle it.”

She was hesitant. Hell, she wasn’t even sure she wanted it, not right now. If she had a little more objectivity, she might revisit a nagging suspicion that he had been little more into her than vice versa the last few years, might assess if he was mature enough to handle it, might flag his impulsiveness —“only one arrest; no longer punching people” didn’t exactly earn a gold star for behavior. She would come to the conclusion that was a dangerous balance to play with. She might examine their competition schedule, interrogate her feelings about her parents’ impending divorce, might question whether she could handle him being her everything, because that’s what he would inevitably be. She would say I love you and not yet.

But somewhere in alternate timelines, eight-year-old and eighteen-year-old Tessa were melting down, and he was here and hers and always has been and he was kissing her and while it was freezing and her parents were splitting up it was Scott and it was still somehow stupidly perfectly imperfect. She let herself believe that yes, they absolutely could.

(Spoiler alert: they couldn’t.)

Chapter End Notes

One of my biggest pet peeves in fic is an absence of conflict. As a reader I can find the good in shitty grammar, but an absence of conflict—or poorly thought out conflict—is at the heart of many plot and character woes, and separates the good from the great. Conflict exists in fluff—Scott trying to figure out how to say ‘I love you’ is conflict—but is necessary. I write to escape, so I understand the impulse to write about situations with a lack of conflict, but that is so much less revealing and cathartic than writing through conflict.

What I wanted to do here was set up two characters that are inherently in deep conflict with each other, and put them in situations where they also are on the same side—because they love each other and they love skating and are incredible at it—and let that all play out. JF finally points out that they often arrive at the same conclusion around chapter 12, when they’re finally addressing conflict productively, but it’s baked in. Scott is an emotive dreamer and Tessa is a rational planner; Tessa hates to lose and Scott loves to win; Scott is a cool asshole, while Tessa is a nerdy try-hard. He’s an extroverted homebody, she’s an introverted social butterfly; the list goes on and on.

My process for plot is to write through each and every bit of conflict (emphasis on the each and every), and to ground that conflict in who the characters are, and what they’re responding to. In a lot of this chapter, the characters that we’ve set up in the last four scenes are beginning to respond to the external pressures: the Games and the sport, yes; but also each other and the ties that they have on the other. The conflict should always be, IMO, MECE (mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive). Dig into it. See every side. Embrace the ugly. Think through every consequence and the chain reactions. Leave no stone unturned. As my grandma says, the only way to get through shit is to go through shit. I saw each chapter as a major loop that had its own internal logic (within-
chapter plot), but when added up they told a very traditional story—a Freytag structure with a nonlinear twist (which I termed between-chapter plot).

Which is why this one is so heartbreaking, even as you know that they work it out: because you watch her buy the bear. You see the Sexagon in action and it’s awful—and yet they can’t quite quit each other, not even a little. You start to get a glimpse of the Cassandra fight, and you get an incredibly raw Tessa telling him that she wishes she could hate him and walk away. You learn that they’ve been hooking up, and that they choose to fucking have sex in his parents’ house on Christmas Eve Day after she runs away from her problems. Because you see her stubbornness and perfectionism; his cockiness and charisma. Their drive and their blind spots. Because we know the characters well now, we see how this is them jumping off that cliff. You see how these two people stay fundamentally, wholly the same, and how that causes such deep rifts. In each instance we see the things that make them who they are—and that make them so precious to each other—thrown up against each other and find each other wanting. Understanding what makes your character them, and then forging or revealing that through conflict, is how you build momentum in a plot. Take characters to the brink and push them through and let them fall and fail; the world they find on the other side is usually pretty beautiful.

When we get to nine I’ll talk a bit more about Scott’s self-awareness (or lack of it), but I’d be remiss if I talk about the Adam Rippon cameo! This was conceived right around the time he started getting *real* famous (MB has a great line in Balcony Scene about how he’s been a celebrity in skater disguise since juniors), but figuring out what competition Scott could go to that made sense, and who would be there, was too fun. I’m pretty sure Tessa went to SCI that year to watch as well (based on Insta) but, you know, this is fiction. And this was the first appearance of the ballerina bear, which was definitely unplanned after the shitty Leafs bear from the previous chapter. But I really loved the juxtaposition of these sweet, uncomplicated motifs, albeit with deeper and fraught meanings, with the Eminem T-shirt, which was this super-adult Thing—her wearing her partner’s T-shirt and him thinking it’s completely sexy as they act out an incredibly adult relationship—kind of tag-teaming each other as they hurtle through this journey.
and i told you to be patient, and i told you to be fine. and i told you to be balanced, and i told you to be kind.

Chapter Notes

Hi sooooo standard disclaimers apply regarding length and intent in taking this narrative tack, though I'm done apologizing for the length — though I'll continue to be very very sheepish about it. :) But you all seem like champs for sticking through it and it's SUPER appreciated. I know it's a lot. And also continuing to try and straddle probing a really interesting story but doing it with compassion/grace, which hopefully comes across.

Will note that I went through the final edit pretty quickly since I wanted to get it up, so there may be some changes, and even a vignette-swap between one here and one earlier one, so don't be surprised if you see things change.

And while this chapter is A LOT in both length and intensity, I will say that this is seriously the fulcrum, and it's going to be considerably lighter moving forward (and who knows, maybe even shorter). But I see this as the crucible-period, so there's a lot, and there's not a ton of extended time-jumping.

Title is from "Skinny Love" by Bon Iver. “Eavesdrop” from the Civil Wars (“I don’t want to talk right now/I just want your arms wrapped around/me and this moment before it runs out”) was a close close backup.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Today, Scott

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When they first met with Jacqueline, the almost-by-default wedding planner—seriously, she is the only high-end events coordinator in Montreal nonplussed by Tessa’s clear-to-the-point-of-blunt vision or the Opinions of one Jessica ‘My Kids Were in the Royal Wedding’ Mulroney; she earns extra points with Scott by being the only one not to suggest that the tables at the reception be named after competitions—he had been a little taken aback by the idea of incorporating a First Look into the whole shabang.

“Isn’t that bad luck?” he asked dubiously, sitting on Jacqueline’s neon-green velvet couch. “To see each other?”

“It’s historically a superstition, but many couples today are opting for this. You get the moment captured by the photographer, and then you and the wedding party have a bit more time to take photos. Better light too.”

He had turned to T. “You’re not, like, freaked out to tempt fate?” God only knew they’d nearly blown this enough times.

“I think we’ve tempted fate plenty in this relationship. And we’re still here,” she had replied with a shrug.
The decision on whether or not to do one became sort of a thing—“I don’t want to do one if you don’t want to do one, because this isn’t my wedding it’s our wedding”—but the simple logistics of an evening wedding make the decision for them. Alma is happy because it means better and more photos, but honestly he is so caught up with building the perfect playlist and figuring out groomsmen gifts and planning the December honeymoon to Singapore and Indonesia (beach, warm, they’ve never skated there) to worry too much. In fact, by the time the wedding rolls around, the nerves are finally getting to him, and he’s grateful that he’ll get to like, see her first, and get the fainting-and-crying out of the way.

His brothers think it’s hilarious, laughing as his fingers slip when fastening the cufflinks Tessa gave him (specially designed by her, the rings in silver flanked by two red maple leaves, to match the blush-and-burgundy scheme of the wedding). Chiddy threatens to rewrite his upcoming speech to make it ‘truly a tell-all’ unless he gets his shit together. Jeff sighs and texts Joannie a running commentary. Patch offers him bourbon and adjusts his tie. His mother yells at him because they’re running late and Of all times to keep Tessa waiting, Scottie.

He’s waiting at the top of Mount Royal, pondering the city in front of him, pondering the vastness of the life he’s lived and the leap he’s about to take, when Danielle tells him, “She’s two minutes away. She’ll say your name, and you’ll turn, slowly.”

Half of a free skate, he thinks, humming the Mahler.

“Scott,” she says, in the same we got this voice she used before a competition.

He turns, slowly, like he was told, and then it doesn’t matter if Danielle and her assistant are there, because it’s him and Tess, just like at the Olympics when there were five thousand other people but it was also just him and Tess.

She is stunning.

She is always stunning—god, sometimes he feels stupid, if he steps back to think about it and tries to put into words how attractive she is, how vibrant and overwhelming her presence is, to boil their connection down to words invented by someone else—but now, in a dress that looks like it was poured onto her, she is gobsmackingly resplendent.

“Hey, baby,” he finally exhales. “You look … well, you look really special.”

“You clean up good,” she fingers his bow tie. “I’ve known that for a while though.”

“How are you feeling?” He puts his hands on her hips.

“A little nervous. But mostly ready.” Her eyes have a familiar glint. “You?”

“Danny and Charlie were making fun of me because I couldn’t get my cufflinks on. Fingers shaking too much.”

Her eyes are shining and she threads her fingers through his hair. “I’m usually the nervous one,” she teases.

“This is a lot bigger than the Olympics,” he reminds her, then wraps her deeply in a hug. Her arms respond, automatically. He drinks her in, his heartbeat finding hers the way it has so many times.

Thisisithisitthisitthisit.

A camera clicks. Neither of them hear it.
He’s ready.

They are ready.

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ii. Eight Years Before Today, Tessa

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She and Madison stood at the boards one day in late September, chatting about what they’d done that weekend and debating whether they would have enough energy after practice later to maybe get manicures—Tanith was in town visiting Charlie, maybe she would want to come too—when she saw a dark streak at the corner of her eye. Knowing what was coming, she automatically raised her arms into a T-bar, let Scott scoop her up, up, and away by the armpits, Madison shrieking with laughter and yelling, “Moir! Quit kidnapping your partner!”

“She likes it!” Scott called back, still swinging her through a rotational lift. “Listen, Virtch.” He set her down. “I have an idea.”

“Rocket skates won’t work, Scott,” she replied immediately, because it had been on his mind lately. “You cannot put little boosters on the heels.”

“I’m going to get them to work. Not today, but one day,” he smirked. “No, you know how Charlie and Meryl got those new Malibus from their sponsor? The ones with the sunroofs?”

“Yeah?”

“Two words: Packing peanuts.”

She raised an eyebrow. Scott had a billion of them leftover from moving into his own apartment last month. “Have you been watching The Office as you’re trying to fall asleep and giving yourself weird dreams again?”

“Come on. They always leave those roofs up. How funny would this be?”

“To pour packing peanuts into their cars?” Once upon a time, this actually sounded like something that Scott and Charlie would do to her and Meryl. They had always come up with elaborate pranks for Halloween and April Fool’s every year, dyeing the water fountain red or wrapping all of the lockers with fake cobwebs or prank-calling Marina away from the rink so everyone got out an hour earlier. Honestly, she and Meryl were far too alike and far too different to ever be really close, and the only things they bonded over were CW shows and the fact that their skating partners were absolutely inseparable best—oh. Yeah, this made sense.

It had only gotten increasingly frosty around the rink, since Charlie and Meryl quit merely nipping at their heels and started trading titles with them. It led to several tearful-lying-on-the-floor calls to Jordan, but Tessa actually far preferred it—it was so much better than lying to yourself and pretending everything was ducky and that you could totally be friends with your competitors. Mesryl’s passive-aggressive observations about Tessa’s weight and diet and costumes were now just flat-out bitchy most of the time. Mean Girl shit tended to get Tessa far more than she would like to admit, but after that last year’s awful summer on tour with Jamie, she had learned not to back down, and had made more than her fair share of swipes: complaints to Marina about Meryl’s negative attitude impacting junior skaters; gossipy observations about the quality of Charlie’s lifts during lunch; asides to Igor about the quality of Meryl’s edges; and the occasional but not-so-subtle reminder of who Meryl’s boyfriend had dated first.
Charlie and Scott’s friendship had always been their strongest connection, but it had strained and then buckled under the pressure of competition. When they all came back to Canton for the season in May, they had joined different hockey teams; the boys' Thursday night burger tradition faded somewhere along the way, too. All four were driven professionals ninety-eight percent of the time, so Tessa assumed Scott was fine with the way the cookie had crumbled, but there was something soft and sweet and sincere in his eyes, and so she said, “I’m not sure I’m fun enough to do pranks, but OK. I’ll help.”

“You’re always the most fun, T,” he assured her, a surprising amount of heat behind his words. “I’ll handle transport. And planning.”

“So I’m the muscle here?”

“And the beauty. Obviously.” He grinned. “Wait—” Suddenly, his thumb was curling over the plump of her lip, his bitten-down nail scraping her tooth gently. “There. Lipstick.” He removed his hand but didn’t move from her, his eyes dark and smirk-y.

“Thanks,” she said, staring back. It had … been like this, a suspenseful stasis, since sometime after her second surgery. One moment he’d be looking at her like she was as interesting as a biology textbook, as prosaic as bubblegum, the next his mouth would be open, his eyes would be hungry, and her skin would prickle, like it had those years ago. When she was giving a speech or an interview, his stare would make her shiver. He had always corrected her when she said something self-deprecating, like she wasn’t funny enough to do pranks, but lately, his response was just a little too insistent. His hands, his body, sometimes were just so close, so sensitized and charged, that she had to stifle a gasp.

It wasn’t always, of course—hell, sometimes they could go for days in companionable, joking proximity; their focus entirely on their skating and their equilibrium restored to the sturdy giggling near-sibling bond of their most innocent days—but there were what she would absolutely, definitely categorize as moments. They caused her vision to blur, just slightly, just like the lines between skating partners-slash-best friends and … very much not. It felt like his half of the walky-talky that had connected them since they were preteens was suddenly tuned to a different wavelength, one that beeped I’m interested. One time it happened, her knees honest-to-god went weak, and she thought she was having a stroke. The way he would just look at her sometimes, especially when she wasn’t looking … she was pretty sure no woman anywhere could be worthy of such awe. Marina always said he gave great Face.

And then the moment would pass, and she’d be left to wonder.

He definitely, probably was still dating Jess, though she would be equally surprised if he proposed or broke up—the relationship was both intense and intensely untethered. Tessa supposed that was their age and the distance. And she loved Scott, would always love Scott, but was very, very firmly clear after the last go-round that they simply wouldn’t happen again. Even if, right now, he might actually be more into her than vice versa.

That is actually an absurd statement, she reminded herself. That is eighteen-year-old Tessa thinking for you, and she was an idiot.

“So when are we doing this prank?” she asked, shaking herself back to reality.

“It needs to be a warm day. And I’ll need to get more peanuts, I can pick some up from Walmart … We’re going to need to store them here, a bag a day until we have enough. Maybe Friday?”
“We’re leaving after dance practice and doing cardio and weights back in London on Friday,” she reminded him. “We have the—”

“Skate Canada meeting, radio interviews, TV interviews, that Tom and Julia thing,” he recited off. Finlandia was in two weeks and so naturally, they’d packed 36 hours on the Friday and Saturday beforehand with media. It would be stressful, but the CBC was letting her dress like Audrey Hepburn to showcase their new *Funny Face* routine, so she was pretty fucking excited. “Are you still doing that…”

“Ab-workout video thing? Yeah.” She’d agreed to do a quick interview and demo with *Seventeen* about her fitness routine.

“Tessa Virtue, personal fitness guru,” he teased. “You could be a YouTube star if this skating thing doesn’t work out. A brand not unlike Russell Simmons. Prettier obviously.”

“Oh god, stop. And green juice only for the next four days.”

“You could eat ice cream every night for dinner and still look amazing,” he said, confidently, in a tone that was much more Supportive Best Friend. “I don’t see why we need to see Skate Canada though, we’re perfectly media trained. Media-trained monkeys.” She rolled her eyes; Scott might be terrible at sticking to a script or focusing in media training, but he was a natural, so genuinely warm and kind and interested and able to just know empathetically what others wanted from him. Plus, he was an unassuming but undeniable magnet for cameras and the spotlight—damn that natural charm.

“Refresher,” she reminded him sympathetically, because it was a bit annoying—they had been doing this for eight years and usually did just fine at coming across as the best versions of themselves—gracious, kind, humble, Canadian kids next door. “Especially since Charlie and Meryl won and I had surgery, we need to have a message.”

“OK, fine. So Friday is out. We’re leaving from Toronto on Monday so next week is out. It’s gotta be Thursday. You might need to steal Meryl’s car keys but that’s totally cool, right?” He skated away, smirking. “This is going to be great, Virtch!” He yelled as he started to chase down Alex and Evan.

He didn’t bring it again, but he did make it to the rink before she did every morning the next three days—while he was plenty improved over his early-career tardiness, he was exactly on time and never early—and on Wednesday afternoon, he showed her the closet he had appropriated. “Oh. My. God.” It was stacked to the ceiling with clear garbage bags full of packing peanuts. Her jaw dropped. “How much did you spend on this?” She noticed he had even gotten pink ones, presumably for Meryl—it was her favorite color.

“Whatever I spent, it was worth every penny,” he declared, with a shit-eating grin.

(Scott always loved a grand gesture.)

It was straightforward prank, when all was said and done. They told the dance instructor Marina needed an extra twenty and Marina that the dance instructor needed an extra ten; grabbed the keys from the change rooms; used a platform cart that Scott had found and stashed to get everything outside. Ensuring none of the peanuts flew away as they tipped them into the sunroof was actually pretty hard; at one point with both cars she had to shimmy down to distribute the peanuts evenly. But they made good time, and soon there were two Chevy Malibus filled within an inch of their roof with a ridiculous amount of packing peanuts. They stepped back and admired their handiwork, his arm around her back and hers around his waist.
“We’re the best team,” he said, pleased and proud. He held out his palm for a high five, and she twisted so they could do the latest high-five they were working on—this time, from the *Parent Trap*, though he didn’t know that. At the conclusion, he snuck a not-very-platonic-feeling kiss to her temple, his lips lingering a millisecond too long, his breath hot above her ear, like he was smelling her shampoo.

“How are we going to make sure everyone sees it?” she asked, ducking from under him. “We want everyone to see it right?”

That was simple—Scott just burst into the rec room during lunch and promised that something *insane* was happening outside. Everyone trotted out, wary and definitely a little disgruntled at missing lunch, and then stood squinting in the parking lot as *what the fuck, Moir* trailed through their heads.

Charlie noticed almost immediately, though. “You asshole!” he laughed, his voice full of mirth. He picked Scott up and swung him around, almost as easily as if he were Meryl. “How the fuck did you *do* that?”

Meryl noticed next. “Oh my god,” she said, covering her mouth but then bending over with giggles. “That is *so* environmentally unfriendly! Twenty penguins could die because of this pollution!”

“We live in Michigan, Meryl,” Tessa pointed out dryly, and Meryl looked over and smiled.

Everyone else started noticing too, with Alex muttering, “Remind me not to try and beat Tessa and Scott,” which earned an elbow and an *of course we will* from Maia.

“You’re helping us clean these out, Scottie,” Charlie decreed, still literally running around and shrieking with laughter, manic the way he sometimes got when he was too keyed up before a competition. Tessa was struck by the use of the old nickname.

He did, and so did everyone else, and when Marina came out to yell at them for messing around as they turned cleanup into a packing-peanut fight—Meryl standing in the middle still yelling about the damn penguins, Maia dutifully chasing down every errant piece of puffy plastic at her command—it was totally worth it. She and Scott got reamed out for lying and cutting practice, but there was a crinkle in the corner of Marina’s eyes that Tessa could swear was the precursor to a smile.

If this was the last time they could all be truly friendly, she thought with a melancholic, wistful fondness as chased down the bits of plastic—feeling something like nostalgia for the present—this was not a bad way to do it. With the season about to get underway, she was pretty sure this was *it* for their friendships.

(It wasn’t, but it definitely was the last moment for a very very long time.)

Scott swaggered over after dumping a thirtieth fistful of foam into the trash can. Hands on her elbows, he kissed her forehead softly. “Thanks kiddo,” his voice was husky, his eyes deep. “I … I really needed to do that.”

See? Fucking *moments*.

But she wrapped her arms around him instead, buried her face in his neck, savoring this moment in the warm late September sun and his goddamn scent and this crazy community they belonged to. “What are best friends for?” she simply reminded him.

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*iii. Six Years (Plus One Day) Before Today, Scott*
“You know, I’m always sad, every year we miss Christmas—though this year I definitely could’ve said hard pass—because of Nationals, or when we skip Thanksgiving because we have an early Grand Prix assignment, but there’s something that always really bums me out about having the world’s lamest New Year’s Eve.” Tessa—his girlfriend? maybe? skating partner? definitely—mused, her head in his lap as they sprawled on her couch. “I think because it’s the holiday where everybody is out dancing, you know? And I don’t know, a new year … It’s sappy but I like the thought of a clean slate.”

“Next year,” he promised grandly. “Next year we’ll go dancing.” It was bold proclamation for a relationship that was a week and a couple hours old.

She laughed, so hard her body convulsed, and she took the opportunity to shift up, curling her legs over his and settling her head into his shoulder. She tugged her fingers through his hair, kissed him lightly along the neck. “Scott, we’ll be six weeks away from the Games. No fucking way we’re going dancing. No drinking even.”

“Oh right,” he replied, because sometimes Tessa goddamned made him forget time. “Year after then.”

“So in two years, we’ll go dancing?” Her voice was grainy, straining against hope.

“Well we’ll dance plenty of times before then—” Including tomorrow at six AM, on the ice, ”—but yes. December 31, 2014. You want bottle service in a club in Toronto?” He liked the thought of Tess in something small and sparkly.

“Mmmm let’s do somewhere warm. And super bougie. Like Miami.”

“Sure,” he agreed, easily. Smaller and sparklier. “We can get a yacht too.”

She thumbed at the buttons on his shirt. The Princess Bride played in the background, his (one) beer warmed as her (one) plastic glass of champagne deflated and their discarded takeout sushi developed salmonella. “That sounds … really nice,” she said, her voice thick. He learned forward for a small kiss, but she turned, open-mouthed, and then basically pulled him on top of her. An indeterminate amount of time later, they were both startled when their alarm went off for a minute to 8 PM.

“One sec,” he apologized as jumped up, toggled the DVR to the recording of the ball dropping in Hong Kong earlier in the day.

“Thirty seconds,” Tessa called, monitoring the phone.

“Yeah, yeah, got it T.” He kept toggling. “Ready.”

“Twelve, Eleven—” He hit start, and they counted down with the newscasters. “To 2013! Woo!” he cheered, and then kissed her. “Happy New Year, babe.” It was a new one in his Lexicon of Tessa Nicknames. He kinda liked it.

“To winning Nationals and Worlds.” She kissed him back, “And kicking ass.”

“So much fucking ass,” he agreed, then tried to stifle a yawn. “We should go to bed, eh?” There was a reason they were celebrating four hours early.

“Yeah,” she said, not making a move. “Tomorrow … we should probably leave by what, two? So we can settle in a bit.”
“Back to real life, eh?”

“Nats is in two weeks,” she reminded him, her tone a little dazed.

“Yeah,” he sighed. “Soooo speaking of real life … I told my brothers about this.”

“Oh?” She quirked an eyebrow, then admitted, “I mentioned it to Jordan.”

“What’d you say?”

“That we were giving this a try. You?”

“Same, mostly.” Danny had pressed him for details, which were scant, so a you better fucking know what you’re doing lecture had followed.

“Jordan asked me how the fuck this was different from, you know, skating together, being best friends, and hooking up. I said that I was mentioning it to her so that was a first step, wasn’t it?”

He laughed, picturing control-freak Tessa getting huffy with know-it-all Danny Two. Watching the two of them arguing was like watching two mountains trying to incinerate each other with glaring and logic.

“Basically what I told Danny, too,” he admitted, then moved in for another kiss. He meant for it to be light and reassuring, again—that comment about Jordan was clearly T warming up for a relationship talk, he thought—but she opened her mouth pretty quickly, again, and then was pulling him on top of her, and yes. But … “So, should we talk about this? Lines? Rules?” All favorite Tessa topics when it came to them.

“Probably,” she conceded. “But .. with Sochi, and Marina, and my parents …” Her voice trailed off, and he tried not to roll his eyes at the Marina comment, though he did have to admit they weren’t getting equal time much these days, and their tech scores were suffering without Igor. “This year is going to be hard, Scott. You know that.”

“You want this?” he checked. If they … They needed to step back now, if that was going to be a thing.

“Yes,” she emphasized. “I want you. But besides the old standby of not bringing this into the rink I think I … I think I’m more comfortable with the Scott Moir School of Thought on this one.”

“I have a school of thought named after me?”

“Yeah. Just … go with the flow. Don’t overthink it.”

“Well, no one has ever accused me of that,” he joked. “You sure, T?”

“I am,” she insisted, and she did sound confident. “Come on. It’s almost nine. I wanna sleep.”

“This is something new we do too,” he said fifteen minutes later, as they read books side-by-side—he was rereading The Mind Gym while she barrelled through This Is How You Lose Her. “The reading-in-bed thing.”

“Beds can be used for more than just sex,” she quipped, then tossed her book down and rolled on top of him. “Though they’re good for that too.”

Thirty-three hours later, as they stared up at the imposing facade of Arctic Edge, practically glowing through the winter darkness, he took her hand, kissed her knuckles, and reminded her, “We got this.”
The thing was, though—and he felt it pretty early on, just like he could feel when a step sequence wasn’t perfectly in unison—they didn’t. Not entirely. With anyone else they could have faked their way through, but … no, not possible here.

He was knocked a bit off balance because on one hand, holy shit, she was Tessa, the girl that he’d known was wildly out of his league since he was sixteen. It wasn’t exaggeration when he said that she was the smartest, most driven, kindest, funniest, most beautiful girl he knew. Nobody else compared, literally. And while being best friends with her was easy and being skating partners he knew how to do and sex with her was amazing, dating her felt like something else entirely. He’d been wondering for a while what it might mean to have all of her, and was sort of stunned that she actually had agreed to his (half-assed; he proposed with much better foresight, thank you) suggestion. And the answer was ‘all of her’ was pretty damn intimidating.

Because he had always pictured Tessa ending up with a lawyer or a consultant or someone who called the Tokyo office pretty frequently, living in Toronto or New York and killing it in a career where she wore a lot of power suits. That perception didn’t change when she started showing up at his door for a movie or in the passenger side of his car for dinner those freezing January days. Still gave him a who me? gut check. She was going to leave him one day, and she should. It surprised him, because he’d never been un-confident with women, but—yeah. Suddenly getting it right mattered.

But also, on the other hand, holy shit, she was Tessa. He had assured her when she was eight that yes, the tooth fairy existed. Failed at shielding her from the sex scenes in Moulin Rouge! Egged Kitchener Eric’s house for her when he broke it off with her for a blonde cheerleader in his grade. Shared a thousand meals with, watched a hundred dance movies with, slept with dozens of times under the guise of friendship and sex twizzles and competition and tour and Carmen. Everything they tried to do that felt like Normal People Dating also felt a lot like Scott and Tessa Friendship. Which was already a fairly fucked-up dynamic, but definable because it was so distinctly them.

Against the illicit turn-on of rehearsing Carmen or the adrenaline at a competition, the quotidian aspects of a relationship, like her face masks and his attempts to teach her to cook, were thrown into almost asexual relief. They didn’t feel hot, or fun, or really particularly comfortable. Their mental prep coach would probably have a lot to say about the fact that they only functioned when they were fucking or in a rink.

(And finally, though he didn’t realize until right before the Do We Really Need A Charger It’s A Plate Under A Plate argument—but after he basically had to beg Max Kerman to get over his crush on Tessa and serve as the cover band for the wedding—and that was: he knew, somewhere in the back of his skull, that Tessa was it. But he hadn’t put together that loving her and wanting her and knowing her and accepting her all added up to being in love. Because that was terrifying, because of the aforementioned holy-shit realizations, and the fact that she was already his past and present and now probably his future too … yeah, that was pretty overwhelming. One needed to be ready to date both Tessa Virtue and the love of their life, and he hadn’t gotten to that chapter in the book of love yet. Wasn’t mature enough to realize and process and handle that, and that was the emotionally loaded Chekhov’s gun throughout the entire damn thing.)

(She had put it together, and was equally terrified.)

And then, of course, there was the skating, the white-knuckled sprint to a home Worlds—literally in their backyard—and the end of the most tumultuous season of their career. Their business and personal relationship had swirled together so tightly as to be indistinguishable, at exactly the moment that they needed to be a team in sync, at the exactly the moment they needed to draw on each other’s support as partners, at exactly the moment they needed to be clear-headed—well, it was poor timing.
He texted Trankov *i think i’m dating tessa; you and tati have any tips?* And Max texted back *whatever the fuck you are, make sure you can still be there for each other when you are losing as much as when you are winning.*

He and Tessa had never really been good at losing.

They tried, they did, to keep it all together, to block and tackle all the aspects of the relationship. At first it worked alright—movies and dinners in Detroit with a ban on skating talk; rock climbing double-dates with Madison and her boyfriend; as much sex and skating as possible since that was where they both felt most confident. There was a lifetime of laughter and conversation and knowing each others’ bodies that helped convince them it could work. They had fun, they had history, they have a lot of love. There were several small, rumpled, sexy, lived-in moments that gave him a flash of what life with Tessa *might* be like, and it was really damn good: choreographing a dance to Van Morrison in the kitchen; a flour fight when he tried to teach her how to make pizza dough; her soft murmur of *hi* when he slipped into her bed after a night with his buddies; her sitting on the counter in his Leafs jersey as he made breakfast the next day. His hand at the dip in her back; her fingers carding through the baby hairs at the nape of his neck; their bodies curling toward each other at night. But in the smaller interstitial sighs in between, he could feel himself dragging them through the approximate motions of dating; could feel her holding her breath and smiling for him, and suddenly those bigger moments felt like set pieces, the two of them arranging themselves in a diorama of what a relationship should look like.

He told her *I love you,* almost experimentally, one night when he was pretty sure she wasn’t entirely asleep. It was true, because he fucking loved Tessa more than anyone else in the world, but he also wasn’t sure of the ways that this, now, was any different than the other nine thousand times he had told her that.

She was everything to him, and he realized, with a sense of growing dread, that maybe that was not a good thing.

She didn’t respond, and he was almost relieved.

“Julia called, with a pitch,” she said, one Saturday over pancakes and fruit salad at her London place. They hid out there most weekends, and she would sleep in the aforementioned Leafs jersey, and it really was one of those sights he’d never get tired of. “A reality TV show. Or a documentary, really.” She speared a single raspberry and looked at him. “Us, over the course of the Grand Prix season. I think they’re really interested in the Canadian Sweetheart’s angle.” Finally, truth matched the reality that they had been evading in interviews for years.

“I mean, we’re adorable,” he replied, forking off a corner of her chocolate-chip pancake and holding it out to her, because she should eat. She rolled her eyes, but bit it. “I don’t know, T. We’re already having enough trouble. Do we really want the cameras? During an Olympic year?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she hemmed. “It would be a really great way to give the fans a peek, like a thank-you. And if this is the last—it might be nice, one day. To have a record of the season. I mean we have home videos and old interview clips and stuff, but would be different. And it would be fun.” She ran her foot up her calf. “I’d get to brag to everyone else in Canada how hot and funny you are. We could put some thirst-trapping photos of you in it, then we’d be even after this summer’s shoot.” She eyed his abs and winked.

“We are *never* talking about that shoot again,” he said firmly. He took a bite of pancake. “But yeah, we could think about it.”

“So there’s also this photo shoot idea she brought up, which I think would be a hilarious inside joke,
but it would also be good since we are a year out for the Games and our chemistry is one of our strongest assets as a team …”

(He protested that those photos would follow them everywhere, and they fucking did—they were the third photo, after the engagement photo and shots on the Olympic podium, in the fucking ET Canada story on their engagement. But Tessa had literally sat in his lap, kissed his neck, in the jersey.)

For the first time ever their programs, per Marina, lacked the required heat. “Nine years I worry this the year you get her pregnant, we all say have a nice life and go home, and this is the year you have sloppy hips, sloppy hands, cannot find the rhythm together, cannot meet eyes?” Marina snapped, watching them do the no-touch in Carmen for the eleventh time. “It is sex! On ice!” She stalked off to go watch Meryl and Charlie and for once Scott didn’t mentally tick off the minutes to make sure everyone was receiving equal time. Tessa cast her eyes down because holy fuck Marina was on to them.

The choreo pulled together beautifully for Nationals and he thought they were golden, but they lost three points in deductions. From Canadian judges. He stalked through the mixed zone, trying not to punch a camera. Tessa jogged after him and whispered that it was just a fluke, totally crazy, the judges must have lost their minds, collectively—though she was the one who was attuned to whether or not they were getting a fair shake for months. He swallowed a growing sense of dread.

At Four Continents she whispered I can’t do this as he was about to swing her into the reverse lift, and they were already shaky enough to wonder if she was breaking up with him during a performance so he couldn’t protest. But she slid away, fear and pain in her eyes, and he realized it was much worse.

“We don’t have to keep going,” he said as they skated back onto ice, after talking to Marina, whose advice had boiled down to a dismissive Do what you want; you have lost already. “We can withdraw.”

“We are not. Giving. Up,” she hissed back, barely breathing through the pain. Jesus, Tessa.

They finished, the terror white in her eyes, and they lost to Charlie and Meryl, like they knew they would, and it was absolutely awful. He barely stopped himself from cursing on TV, turned toward Marina and muttered This is bullshit, and you know it, into her ear. Her face didn’t change. After physio and ice and chocolate milk and a lot of tears, Tessa initiated sex that night, needy and silent, and went back to her room after.

Maybe it was easier that way.

A week later, while flipping her into The Lift, she nearly took his eye out with a skate, her boot heel knocking his temple and her blade a flash in the corner of his vision.

“Jeez, T,” he groaned, putting her down and skating off. “The only thing worse than losing an eye would be losing a ball.” He wouldn’t put that past her these days. They barely talked, let alone about things other than skating.

“Sorry,” she said, but didn’t come after him, just skated in concentric circles to calm herself down. “My head wasn’t in the game. Let’s go again. I’m sorry. I’m here now. We got this.”

That, there, was the staccato thesis of the back half of their season.

They could have talked about their fears and anxieties, but they didn’t, instead expressing their
emotions physically and channeling them through the ice and assuming that their vast knowledge of each other was sufficient fallback—if you know what your partner was thinking and feeling, and why, did you really need to talk about? He wasn’t sure if it was the stress of the competition or if it was the stress of them and he was too scared to ask because he wasn’t sure which one would be more damning.

They never came up with an adequate definition, ever, either. He got the sense that was probably important, even though, like most things involving him-and-Tessa, words felt stupid.

Sometime in early March, after botching the straight line reverse lift’s entry six times, she held up a hand as they were leaving the rink and said, “I’m going to my place tonight.”

“OK, that’s fine,” he said. He had plenty of stuff there.

“No, I mean … I’m going to my place, and you’re going to your place,” she clarified. “And actually, I think we should do that until we get our heads back in the game. Clear our heads.”

“OK. Do you have a … timeline?”

“When we get through all our lifts, I don’t know,” she said. She sounded irritated, but mostly sad. “Scott, I … I can’t lose, not at home in London, OK? We can’t do that.”

He stepped in, cupped her face, kissed her. “I agree,” he said, because he did, completely.

But they did lose, and it was a white-bright shattering of his soul; the black-mirror inverse of winning gold in Vancouver. Besides Tessa’s surgeries, it was easily the lowest moment of his career. All of their maybes had been pushing past the whole season—about Marina, about the ISU, about them—crashed around his ears.

They had been such idiots.

He had been such an idiot.

They were too stunned to comfort each other in the back hallway, Tessa curled flat against the wall, tears silently running down her cheeks; him in a metal chair, quietly telling himself not to punch anything. His hands shook too much to do that anyways. Finally he got up, her eyes darting over to him, and stalked out of the room, door flying open with a bang. He haunted the hallways until the last possible moment, then found a stoney-faced T ready to go. When they hugged Meryl and Charlie, Charlie said, “Hey man, really sorry,” and even Meryl couldn’t look them in the eye.

Fucking Marina. The fucking ISU. Fuck you, Skate Canada, you sucked too.

They made it through the press conference—obviously we’re disappointed to lose in our home arena, but Meryl and Charlie skated really well and, you know, London really turned out a great crowd, and we’re really proud that we’re able to highlight a bit of Ontario pride to our international skating community— and there was no question they would go to Chiddy’s celebration, but she gripped his hand with such a brittle, thrumming ferocity that he knew if anyone tried to hug her she might actually cease to be Tessa, just be a pile of thousand tiny glass shards of his former partner.

They wanted to support Chiddy, they really did—he had earned it, had worked so hard—but the sympathetic you skated the hell out of that program murmurs and the empathetic you know those levels just seemed off; has Marina talked to the ISU? queries made him want to scream. After they each bought a glassy-eyed Chiddy a drink—seriously, he was so excited he randomly burst out into cheers or screams—he leaned across her and raised an eyebrow, wanna get out of here?
She just nodded.

Paul and Baker and Jake were at Joe’s Taproom, and it wasn’t her favorite place or her favorite people, but it was dark and anonymous and if she wanted to cry in a booth for three hours and get ragingly drunk, it was pretty perfect. He bundled her in the car, pointed them silently toward Ilderton.

“We need to talk,” she finally spoke, voice tight with fury and sorrow, five minutes from the bar. “Now. About what the fuck went wrong this season and exactly how we’re going to fix it next year, because Scott, we did not work this hard to lose in London and then lose the gold next year.” She leaned forward, wrapped her arms around her jeans, buried her face in her lap. “Marina’s a fucking snake. She saw the way the winds were blowing with the ISU, how Charlie and Meryl have waited their turn, and she took the USFSA money and she’s abandoned us. I fucking knew we should have left with Igor once she started working with Charlie and Meryl.” It wasn’t accusatory, only miserable.

He pulled over to the side of the road, because this was not a fight to have in a parking lot of a bar advertising Beer / Pool / Wings / A Good Time, and this conversation was probably beyond overdue. Put his head on the steering wheel, a near-mirror of her. “He asked me today,” he admitted dully, “If we wanted to go to Novi.”

With a strangled grunt, she yanked the car door open, and he yelled, “Tess, what the—” But she didn’t run, just lapped the car before standing in profile in the headlights. He could see tears wet on her face, and she was struggling to keep her breath in check, but she wasn’t full-on crying. He got out to join her, leaned against the hood of the car.

“We can’t leave now,” she said, and her voice was so tired he just wanted to tuck her along his side and sleep for days. They had discussed taking a vacation post-Worlds but had been too busy to plan one. He wished they had. “Because everyone knows. The ISU will see it as a sign of weakness, of pettiness. We’ll look like losers. We’ll confirm their narrative. If there was a time to leave, it would have been when Marina fired Igor. Goddamnit, Scott.” It was again directed at the situation, not him.

“I’m sorry, Tess,” he said, because she was sad, and he never wanted her to be sad, and she had wanted to leave, and he had said no. He had said to trust him, and she had.

He wasn’t sure what he was expecting—we’re a team, we make decisions as a team, probably—but the pinched, broken, definitely probably-accusatory this time around “Yeah, me too,” wasn’t it. Then, she quickly, weakly added—“I should have pushed harder.”

It hurt, more than words could express, but he also knew he deserved it. “OK. So we need to move on from it, then. If we can’t move rinks now,” he said. “We need to move on, mentally, and come up with a plan.”

“Skate Canada is pretty useless with the ISU,” she said slowly, thinking out loud. “There’s no money and no Didier. They can’t back us up if we leave.” She pondered some more, leaning against the car. “We need to change the narrative ourselves. We can’t leave Marina, but we need to take control. Marnie will be good, but we shouldn’t say anything real to anyone from Marina’s team. We can’t trust them. We need new people.”

“I can talk to Mike and see who the Wings are using. He’ll loan them out.” His chest involuntarily puffed out—besides getting to skate with Tessa, being friends with Mike Babcock was easily the best perk of their career.

“Good, yes. We can talk to Jenn, that won’t look too unusual. Maybe Patch and Jean-Marc?”
“I’ll handle them,” he said, reaching out to rub her neck. It was almost impossibly tense.

“Thanks. I think we need to do the reality show.” She stared at him, wide-eyed and earnest, and he noticed that her mascara and eyeliner had been reduced to a trail of charcoal crumbs on her eyelids.

“Tessaaaa,” he groaned. He’d been holding out—it seemed impossibly invasive and distracting, and they didn’t need that right now.

“No, hear me out. We’ll be able to get people sympathetic to us, at least in Canada, so we won’t look like has-been’s here after the Games. Whatever we want to do, skating, otherwise, the doors will be open. And we’ll be able to lay breadcrumbs about Marina and Charlie and Meryl and how the entire thing is rigged, anyways. We’ll be on the record ahead of time.”

He had to admire Tessa’s ability to fucking think this through in the midst of the worst day of the professional lives. “OK,” he said.

“I’ll set that up, and a bunch of interviews and stuff where we can talk this through,” she said. “And I’ll start talking to Skate Canada and see if they have any leverage.” Her head fell forward onto her palms, and she took a deep breath in. “We need to break up, too.”

He thought of Tessa, at thirteen, saying yes to moving to Kitchener to chase a dream. Tessa at fifteen, staying late every practice and getting her levels up because Igor said she didn’t have the technical skills. Tessa at nineteen, trying to will away compartment syndrome, Tessa at twenty mentally blocking out interminable pain so they could win gold. Tessa at twenty-one, pushing through Jamie and Meryl and David and him treating her terribly, rebuilding her body into a veritable sculpture of muscle and retraining her legs so she, they, could keep skating. Tessa a month ago, finishing a skate they would lose anyways. Tessa two hours ago, refusing to cry on the podium. All of the times that Tessa simply willed as a matter of course. It was her superpower, and he came to an erratic, devastating conclusion.

“You must really not love me if you’re willing to give up so easily.”

(It is, hands down, the meanest, most reckless thing he ever says or does, to anyone.)

She inhaled sharply. “I … everything you, Scott Moir,” she said carefully, and he realized that yes, finally, they were on the exact same page. “I have since I was seven. But yeah. I love our skating career more.”

(It is, hands down, the biggest, most self-preserving lie she ever tells.)

“And you do, too.”

(He doesn’t, though at the time he thinks he does.)

“So that’s what we’re going to focus on. Can you take me to my mom’s? I don’t feel like Joe’s tonight.”

The drive was silent, and there was no goodbye, and he sat for twenty minutes willing himself to go in and talk this out, but in the end, I love our skating career more and you do too won out, and he drove off, with a grim determination to get as shit-faced as possible and forget this entire fucking day.

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iv. Four Years Before Today, Tessa
Tessa got the relationship question, too. Probably more than Scott ever did, because women were the ones were expected to Feel Romantic Feelings, but he always complained about it more, so she usually just shut up about it. She usually gave vague, press conference answers, because fuck if it was anyone’s business.

But she slipped one time while out in Ottawa with Ryan and a consultant friend of his and the guy’s wife, splitting a bottle of wine after a concert, when the the wife asked, “Wasn’t it hard to pretend you were in love with Scott all the time?”

She just rolled her eyes and blurted out, “God, no.” Then, quickly, “I mean … It was our job. We were good at our job. So we worked at it, but believe me—timing the twizzles to the music was the part of Carmen that gave us the most trouble, not any of the crazy, lecherous, sexy stuff.”

Wait, that didn’t sound right either.

Later that night, as they walked back to his place, her arm tucked into his elbow to ward against the January chill, he asked, “So I know you slept with Scott, which is like, basically inevitable after the sixteen years you guys had. But were you … in love with him?”

She stopped. “You’re right, it was sixteen years, which is a long time,” she replied, squinting off in the distance and trying to figure out the best phrasing. “I mean, I had a raging crush on him when we were in middle school, which Jordan and his brothers still find hilarious since Scott didn’t go through puberty till like, seventeen. And it was always so intense, being nineteen and hooking up and always feeling like our lives would end with one bad skate. But no, I wasn’t, like, real-adulthood in love with him. Good enough answer?”

He looked a bit startled. “Wasn’t a test, Tess,” he said, and she remembered that right, her life and her responses and her choices were no longer scrutiny to an arbitrary external metric set by an international panel of judges.

They started off again, and she wondered why she had lied. Ryan wouldn’t have judged her negatively if she had said yes, might have appreciated the insight the honest answer provided.

Her mind flipped back to 2013, and she wondered if Scott was right about her being a liar after all.

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v. Six Years Before Today, Scott

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When Scott awoke, in his shitty London condo, with a blaring hangover and a cloud of dark hair in his mouth, his first thought was, “Why the fuck would Tessa and I come here instead of her place?”

And then he realized: not Tessa.

Cassandra, from last summer, instead.

Fuck.

He leaned forward, trying to breathe through the pounding in his head, and fished for his phone. Don’t forget, gala practice at 9 from T.
Fuck.

He checked the clock. 8:20.

Fuck.

He scribbled a note on a pad of paper—I have gala practice, let yourself out. Coffee and cereal in the kitchen if you’d like—and left it on his pillow. Even he had to acknowledge this was extremely shitty behavior. He grabbed an armful of clothes from the dresser and hoped it amounted to an outfit, and shut the door quietly behind him.

“Hey, you’re up.”

“Paul?” he asked, eyes focusing on his friend. “Did you crash on my couch?” The fuck?

“Yeah. I came over at two, so I wouldn’t, you know, interrupt that … but someone needed to talk to you before you saw Tessa.”

“I’m heading to gala practice, I need to deal with that and then I can figure this out, and Tessa and I kind of had this blowout fight last night—”

“I know. Do you remember anything you told us?”

“Clearly not.”

“Great. Well, anyways, I know about the fight. And Marina and the ISU and who the fuck is Didier? And then I know about the, oh, eight, I think, shots that you took. I also know … Tessa came by Joe’s last night. To talk to you.”

“What.” His heart, he swore, stopped.

“Yeah, I don’t know, but she showed up about an hour and a half after you, looking for you. But you were …”

“Making out with Cassandra?” He didn’t need Paul to confirm. Fuck.

Fuck .

“I can talk to Cass if you want to go, you know …”

“Yeah. Thanks, buddy.” He wasn’t being sarcastic. Paul was a good friend. And he was truly just fucked.

He sent Tess an omw text, and stopped at Starbucks to pick up a large coffee for him and a bone-dry double-shot cappuccino for her, hoping against hope that her drink hadn’t changed in two days again.

He didn’t see her in the scrum of coaches and officials and athletes in the hallway; asked Yuna and Tati if they’d seen her in the change room; checked the Skate Canada HQ room. Nothing. Finally, he threw on his skates, took a deep breath, headed for where she inevitably was.

She perched on the low ledge in front of the camera embankment, small and very very still, wrapped in a pink sweater. He knew she didn’t see anyone skating in front of her.

Coming up beside her, he stopped a few feet from her. “Hey T,” he said. “Can I sit?”
“Sure,” she replied, still looking vacantly over the ice. He crouched next to her, tentatively, handed her the coffee. She dropped her head onto his shoulder. It felt cold, though, not fitted to his body at all. Like her head simply was too heavy for her neck.

He didn’t wrap an arm around her—wasn’t sure he had the right, anymore. He took a deep breath and started, “So after we talked I was pretty mad, and after the fucking silver and everything—“

“Stop, please,” she said, and she sounded so … old, so tired. “Just … please stop.”

“I think … we should talk about it,” he pleaded. It had been five years. They needed to talk.

“I just … I don’t have words, Scott. I’m not saying no. I’m just, I’m so tired.” Her voice still sounded dead. “I didn’t sleep, we lost, we fought, I broke up with you, and you—you slept with Cassandra. I broke up with you. You slept with her. We lost. We lost, at home. It was a lot. Yesterday was a lot. So, no. I can’t talk. I don’t have the words.” The actions sounded like a chant, coming out of her mouth.

“Tessa I am so, so, so, so sorry, I just—“

“Yeah,” she said simply, and he could tell … she sort of got it. It would be so much easier if she were just mad or sad or one thing, but they were, as always, everything. “And we weren’t together. We’d broken up. I broke up with you. I broke us up. I can’t be—“

“You can.” He kind of wished she would. “You should, actually.”

“I won’t. Because it’s not an excuse but it’s something. And I don’t have an excuse for what I said, the way I started that conversation about Marina, either. And again, I don’t have words, yet. So I can’t … be, anything, yet.” Her voice was so heavy and so tired and so knowing.

“Ok,” he said. “So … we’ll just sit, then.” The laughs and shouts of the skaters, of Jeffrey as he tried to corral them for choreography, all felt very far away. “As long as you need to. We’ll just sit here.”

“I want to die,” she whispered, very matter-of-factly, head still on his shoulder.

“I know kiddo. Me too,” he exhaled.

“We broke us, didn’t we?” Her voice was so small it was practically nonexistent. “I wasn’t entirely sure that we had a something to break but … we broke us last night, didn’t we?”

“A little bit,” he admitted. “We’re a little broken right now, yeah.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, blankly, and he wasn’t sure if she was apologizing to him for the fight last night or expressing remorse that they, the separate entity that was Tessa-and-Scott, was probably irreparably damaged. He thought the latter. “I’m so sorry,” she repeated, and he knew that was for the former.

“Me too,” he whispered back. Touched his lips to her temple.

“You two! Up now, come on. Don’t make Canada look bad,” Jeffrey smirked. He stood, reached out his hand. She took it.

She texted him the next day informing him she was going to Paris, that she needed time to think and when they got back they needed to start off-ice for next season. He didn’t see her until the Toronto meeting three weeks later.
vi. Seven Years Before Today, Tessa

The second time around, it started on tour, because of course it did. All bad ideas started on tour. She’d never done the study, but Tessa would bet serious money that more than half of the Olympic-ring tattoos skaters inevitably got were done in sketchy tattoo parlors in Asia on fucking tours. At various points in her career, she had to talk Chiddy, Jeremy, Eric, and Scott—him, three times, actually; drunk Scott really wanted the damn tattoo—out of doing this, since the ISU judges would not take kindly to gaudy body art peeking out of a costume.

Any post-competition blowout was always insane—Exhibit A, strip poker with Scott, Chiddy, Yuna, Joannie, Anna, Luca, Nath, and Fab at the 2006 Trophée Eric Bompard; Exhibit B, throwing up into a potted plant at Worlds in 2008; Exhibit C, her first and only time singing karaoke, with Meryl, to the Spice Girls at GPF in 2009; Exhibit D, she and Scott and Chiddy nearly getting arrested trying to cross the border to Monaco after the Nice Worlds without their passports. But people had money on tour, and they were on at least a short break from training. Chiddy once described it as summer camp by day, Vegas by night. Everyone was primed to blow off steam.

Anyways. Her point was: of course it started on a tour. A week in Taiwan in July, three cities, six shows, a long ways to travel for a short period of time, but good money. A karaoke club where he started with Gangster’s Paradise and then sang Wind Beneath My Wings to Chiddy and Baby Got Back to her—Chiddy playing the part of Becky’s friend—followed by too many poorly mixed cocktails in Jeff’s room as she reclined between his legs, followed by him walking her back to her room, her dragging him inside, and him fucking her against the wall before they even made it to the bed.

“Sorry,” he said the next morning, looking genuinely and tremendously guilty, laying back. “I know we … I know we said no more sex twizzling.”

She shrugged, soothed her thumb over the half-moons she’d dug into his shoulders. They were older, and it was nice to have a break from Canton, where everything with Meryl and Charlie was only intensifying, so— “What happens on tour stays on tour, right? Technicality.”

He grinned and turned toward her, his eyes deadly serious. “Still on tour, eh?” In response, she pressed her lips to the nailmarks instead.

It was fine. It was nothing. Sex twizzles, for real this time. It was refreshing, to not be in love with him. Stress relief when it was most needed.

(If she had known this was the decision that would kickstart eighteen months of out-of-sync twizzles and Meryl’s smirks and Scott’s brash trash talk and their ill-fated attempt at a relationship and a goddamn TV show and desperate bids to just keep it together that ended with them losing the Olympic gold medal, she would have been a lot less fine with it. Yes, obviously. But it was just one little, easy, fun decision that started a chain reaction.)

They came back from tour and back to finalizing Carmen’s choreography, which basically amounted to sexual chicken, and began to skate on technicalities thin as skate blades. For the first time ever, she didn’t know exactly what he was thinking, couldn’t tell you what he was feeling about her. She genuinely couldn’t say exactly where the lines between them and their characters stood: If she moved his hand two inches higher on her thigh, was that because it was the better look for the performance, or because she liked it more? If he yanked her hair tightly, was that because Don Juan was losing his
mind or Scott appreciated the noise that came deep from her throat? Or—and this was probably the right answer, after all—was it both, and were they finally at the point, twirled together so tightly after sixteen years, that they finally couldn’t see the difference between real and not real?

So was it any surprise after a day of practicing feeling each other up, of her hands trailing down his stomach, of his just barely avoiding her nipples, that when they were sent off to practice a lift that simulated oral sex, all alone, that they’d be so turned on that they ended up getting each other off in the corner of the unlocked room, his body hunched over hers in a laughable semblance of privacy? No, she maintained, it was not.

When they were done, he looked at her sheepishly.

“Sorry,” he said, tentatively, like he wasn’t sure if he needed to apologize.

He didn’t. Neither of them ever crossed a line unless they were crossing it together. “Don’t be,” she finally said. “We didn’t even kiss, so.” Technicality number two.

The next day, he got her off without taking off her underwear: technicality number three. Then they had sex in his car, which was not a bed, so: technicality number four. And then they stopped counting the technicalities.

Thus they obliterated whatever lines existed, together. If after he got chewed out by Marina for a sloppy-awful lift and he hissed, need you now, and she rode him in an empty change room, it was simply peppin him up. If she showed up at his place after watching Meryl execute spins perfectly for four hours and USFSA reps fawn over Marina after a lawsuit meeting, it was fine because she didn’t spend the night. If after a gorgeous clean skate and shitty GOE scores, they hooked up in a closet before giving Press Conference Face as they emphasized that no, they weren’t worried at all about being multiple points behind Charlie and Meryl in the GPF rankings and yes, everything was peachy at Canton and no, there was no rivalry, just four old friends bringing out the best in each other—well, that was just being fucking supportive partners. Or supportive fucking partners. It wasn’t the same type of angry sex that had populated the summer after her Worlds slip-up and before her surgery—hell, it was Scott, so it was usually fun and always pretty great—but it was hot, reactive, saucy, powerful, a chemical combination that was always one element away from combustion.

Throughout the fall the off-kilter logic spiraled dangerously outward from the sex, mutated into off-beat twizzles and off-edge step sequences, brought them closer and closer to the sloppy-choppy point of total loss of control as skaters and friends. If they went to a concert or a party or dinner together, if nobody called it anything, it wasn’t a date. If she pessimistically assumed that her dear sweet romantic serial monogamist Scott—withoout checking, obviously—was maybe seeing other girls for real, it was fine, because it just reaffirmed they weren’t anything. If Ryan, bored at retired life, flew into Detroit to surprise her for a weekend in November, if she and Ry fought a lot more than they fucked and the one time they did fuck was because she was sick and tired about talking about why they weren’t fucking—and if it felt redundant and weird in a way she didn’t really want to dive into—it was fine, nobody promised anyone exclusivity. (Though she got steadily worse at returning his texts until they stopped.) There were no rules so she wasn’t breaking any of them. And it was different, she told herself, because there were no feelings, only realism. A sixteen-year-long partnership nudged over the edge by Bizet and Marina and Charlie and Meryl and the ISU and Igor and the fact that Scott’s hands were basically magic and their own capacity for denial.

So if their skating started to suck, to fray and frazzle and fall apart, if the ISU started favoring Meryl and Charlie’s boring French Disney routine when they had a bold exciting new reinterpretation of a classic, it had nothing to do with the extent to which they were fucking with themselves and their
skating and everything to do with everything else. There were, after all, plenty of very very real external factors at play, all her worst nightmares coming true at the Final about judges and narratives and coaching and objectivity—that medal had all but been stolen. But if she and Scott were messing with their skating, they would be doing something wrong, and if they were doing something wrong, they would stop.

If. If. If.

(She wasn’t proud of these mental contortions, more complicated than the most absurd rotational lift, but they were the stories they told themselves. And after everything, after they burned themselves down and built themselves back up, they committed to real honesty, and that meant being really really honest about their behavior. And it … wasn’t great.)

(Though the other thing, the thing that really got her the most—was that Carmen was an amazing routine, one that let them push the envelope and showcase really innovative skating and storytelling. It was crazy-creative, a ton of fun to put together and they looked amazing doing it. Despite the wild behavior, building that routine was one of their most fun, inspired times at Marina’s, and at the end of the day it was a far better routine that Meryl and Charlie’s over-emoted, stuffy Notre Dame piece. That lift was the fucking hardest thing in ice dance. She had a lot of regrets about that year, but the fact that they never had an amazing performance of the routine all season, and then the judges were over it by the Final and the narrative of the Olympic season was set by Worlds—that stuck in a very very particular way, like a splinter she shouldn’t care about but also couldn’t quit focusing on.)

Scott’s impulsive We Can Handle This declaration, made in the crucible of her parents’ separation and Marina and their search for the lost twizzles, sparked hope for a fantasy life. If they could handle it, could be together, it might calm things down. Scott had never been anything less than the person she felt safest with, her partner in crime as well as skating and business and laughter and sex. Adding actual dating—whatever the hell that meant, when the guy you were dating had been there the day you got your first period and had organized your goldfish’s funeral when you were 9 and held your hand for ten hours a day as his job —was only a matter of time, she reminded herself. They were good at being good to each other.  She grew to love unfurling next to him as she slept, the furrow in his brow every time she burnt rice, the bump of his elbow as she washed her face and he brushed his teeth. They unconsciously stopped saying I love you after every phone call or at the end of practice—not that they really separated then, anyways.

So if she had doubts, insecurities, outright fears, about the timing, about how exactly, this was supposed to work, with skating and with their career and with everything else, she also had so much faith and trust in her and in Scott and in her-and-Scott. They had worked through so much together. She did the most un-Tessa-Virtue-like thing in the world, and went with it. Some days it felt less like a leap of faith and more of a plunge into uncertainty, but his hand was in hers.

And so they tried, and it worked, for a while. They kept it out of the rink—even with Tessa’s No-Rule Rule, figure skating still had a don’t-ask-don’t-tell policy, and for as much as the sport demanded the illusion of romance, a nascent relationship between partners looked unprofessional and potentially volatile. But they held hands in the rec room at Arctic Edge; they told Danny and Charlie and Jordan but not their moms; they worked on Productive Conversation with their shrink in Detroit and went over to Windsor to talk to Marnie. They were good at being good to each other. She grew to love unfurling next to him as she slept, the furrow in his brow every time she burnt rice, the bump of his elbow as she washed her face and he brushed his teeth. They unconsciously stopped saying I love you after every phone call or at the end of practice—not that they really separated then, anyways.
—because now it would mean something different.

But she heard him whisper *I love you* one night and her heart almost cracked. She had wanted this so much at various points in her life and now it was here. This was big, and probably *it*, in a way she couldn’t quantify. And she didn’t feel prepared. Tessa hated that feeling almost as much as she hated losing.

When her legs gave out at Four Continents, when the overuse injury flared up to remind her, excruciatingly, of how much pain she could cause herself simply by trying too hard at one thing, by putting too much pressure on herself, he held her hand through massages and tears, brought her ice and chocolate milk. When he took the international judges’ arbitrary calls on his twizzles too personally, she ran her hand down his bicep to his forearm before twisting their fingers together and kissing his knuckles, reminded him how great he was, how great they were, and they worked through it.

Because she believed in *them*, always, she began to believe in the story they’d written. It was the magic that everyone said they were; they were, finally, briefly and triumphantly, exactly what people believed. Instead of laughing away a fucking *bridal* photoshoot, she said yes, thrilled at the private joke; instead of saying *Uh no we’ve got the Olympics to prep for* to a reality-show pitch—her! On a reality show! She gave fellow Team Canada members a fake *email* address because she valued privacy so much—she said *maybe, let’s talk.*

In retrospect, after it became clear it was too much to hang onto one partnership, when their bond began to crackle every day in practice and then splintered as Charlie and Meryl sang the *Stars and Stripes* and then fractured sitting on a car hood halfway to Ilderton and then shattered, completely, over the next fourteen hours—she pushed but he pulled, and then it was over—their fall was inevitable too. She’d actually paid attention to all those years in English class and Team Canada media training, and she, of the two of them, should have been able to recognize the arc of narrative as they were living it.

It was comforting, in a way, to view their personal breakup as inevitable too. Certainly it was an easier story to tell herself, that it happened because of their career, and as a way to save their career.

But that spring and summer she still hoped it *wasn’t* the end—which was stupid, which was non-Tessa-Virtue-like—and the if-if-if’s and the technicalities resumed. She was furious at him, a desperate sad and aching fury, but she hated herself almost more, for letting *them* happen in the midst of everything else she had going on, and even mad at herself for being mad at him when she had been the one at fault, the one to break them up first. She should have known better. And so she coped in the only way she had ever known, because the best place she knew to turn to was him.

So she locked out all distractions and latched onto skating, and Scott. Just like she had done since the age of eight. He was comfort and familiarity and safety and laughter and her best memories and her best friend. She pushed everything but what they needed to do to win out or down or anywhere, but her heart and her mind. They were professionals, they had never been divas; they could and did put all sorts of things aside for the sake of their goals.

And that goal was so much bigger than winning the gold medal; it was *saving* themselves. She kept the bridal shoot, reconfigured the TV show, lined up interviews galore, threw herself into practice and conditioning every day, arranged meetings with Skate Canada and with sponsors and charities. Told herself it was *fine*. Made it fine. They were doing this for something bigger. Nothing was wrong. They were partners. They still laughed and skated and made fun of other people, grocery shopped and made appearances together and seamlessly negotiated PT, dance class, gym time, choreography. They still looked after each other, her smoothing down his moods and making sure he
had everything packed and him making her laugh and reminding her *I’m here* during lift practice. No drama—no tantrums, fights, thrown plates, broken angry silences. Sublimate, focus, go forth.

The talking and the laughter. Always, the talking and the laughter.

The things they needed to do to keep the partnership together, because they had been trained by a team of coaches and shrinks on how to do so, but also the things they liked to do because they had been each other’s best friends and business partners for sixteen years and the muscle memory was strong. Normal. They were Normal.

(And it almost worked. They did get silver. That was what surprised her most, when she turned everything over carefully in retrospect, how they *almost* made this work.)

Normal. Even as she gave Ryan a call. Even as he started to go out with Cassandra, at her suggestion, and she realized he liked her quite a bit. Liked that she was simple and uncomplicated and not her. Even as she showed up at his place in the middle of the night, eyes wide and hands twisting, and he followed her home after practice, shoulders slouched and lip between teeth. Even as she brought in *Stay*, the perfect song for their relationship (*round and round and around and around we go*) and started privately wondering about what life without skating, without Scott, could even look like, even as he slept six inches from her. Even as people around them started finally flat-out saying the R-word, which they hadn’t themselves started saying—just fucking making the assumption that surely, they *must* be done after Sochi, even though they had simply only agreed to take Worlds off and see.

Even as she realized they were already done, and the TV cameras were only there to film something they had spun like sugar out of programs and interviews and old videos. Even as they spouted fresh bullshit on camera. Even as they spent ten hours a day driving themselves slowly crazy with comparisons to Charlie and Meryl, chasing the winds of a narrative and a victory that already felt mostly gone. They persisted. Together, they always reminded themselves on the ice. They were single-minded. In sync to a degree they had never accessed personally. They kept trying to make it work, to save their medal and their career and their connection even if they were destroying themselves in the process.

Technicality number 1,782: These were just PR opportunities.

Technicality number 2,109: If they didn’t mention a midnight visit, did it really happen?

Technicality number 2,431: What happens at competitions ….. Actually, that one was just technicality number 37 or so, recycled over and over and over again.

Technicality the Last: Nobody else could ever understand what it was like to be in this partnership, so nobody else could judge.

They had tried to make their relationship everything, and that had failed. They had tried to pretend like their relationship meant nothing, and that failed more.

At the end of the day, as the sweet turned bitter and even the goal of salvaging their skating began to melt as the deep *realness* of everything set in, she kept returning to one thought: They were so great. She had seen it, she had lived it, she *knew* it. It was a law of the universe, their greatness, the way that together the two of them created beauty. The way they made each other laugh, the way they made each other strong, the way they could work a crowd, the way they could build a program, the way they found equilibrium. They had glowed, once, together, at least for a little bit. None of that felt like a performance, or a story.
Once she had described their partnership to Meryl—their technical, platonic, skating partnership—as a binary star system. She hadn’t loved science, had had to be tutored through it by Scott, who was always better at the concrete subjects that didn’t involve writing your way out of trouble. But she had always liked astronomy-as-a-metaphor, and the idea of two stars shining brighter together as one appealed to her greatly. Meryl had stared at her, and finally, gently said, “You know binary stars turn into black holes, right?”

Occasionally, as they slid into the fall of Seasons,skidded toward the sputtering end of a once-great partnership, he turned to her, on the ice or in an airport or after he’d needed a second take for a fake dinner (Andrew and Kaitlyn and Chiddy asked them about eighty-six times, if they were nuts for still doing the show, and the answer was an obvious yes but they said no, and adulthood meant there was nobody there to stop them but themselves), he would say, “I’m sorry,” sort of randomly, for something that didn’t really need an apology. Holding her bag for a second too long when she needed it, unintentionally blocking her guards and water at the boards, checking out and looking bored on camera.

She would raise her eyebrows, for the hundredth time, to say, “It’s totally fine, don’t worry,” and give him a hand squeeze that looked for the cameras or the coaches to be a gesture of comfort, but they both knew meant I’m sorry too.

And the spinning continued. She wasn’t sure why he didn’t stop it (didn’t figure it out until much later, when they were in therapy for the umpteenth time, the level of guilt he felt over Marina and the depths of his save-the-princess complex and his anger at her for the TV show and his self-loathing because of Cassandra and the surety he felt that she would never associate with him again after the Games, and the realization that he was suffering as much as she was, was crushing), but she didn’t ask questions, when he showed up at her door or kissed her in an elevator at ACI or grasped her hips just so at a gala.

And they kept spinning, all the way through Paris. And then they stopped.

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vii. Six Years Before Today, Scott

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“Oh, hey,” Tessa said, a little hesitant, noticing him in the chair by the door. “I didn’t know you were filming your talking heads today.”

“Yes. Last one so,” he swallowed, “I wanted to get it over with.” The production company, in an effort to not eat away any more of their precious training time, had rented out a studio at a radio station in London, allowing them to film their more-scripted parts of the show without schlepping to Toronto.

“I can’t believe it’s the last one,” she replied, chatting at him vacantly, like he was her neighbor she saw sometimes when picking up the mail. She’d brought up how many days they had left of filming at least every other day for the last several weeks, with the frequency only increasing since Paris last month, so he knew she was both ready for this to be over and crazy-nervous around him as well. She looked very nice, like always—nice black top and her hair curled just so—but he noticed the tiredness in her eyes and he wondered if she was sleeping. “You think you’re going to watch it? Probably not when it airs since we’ll be so close to Sochi—”

“Yeah, no way,” he interrupted.
“No way?”

“No way am I watching it,” he clarified. “Ever.” The damn thing was just a necessary evil toward a greater goal, he’d gone along with the absurd Cassandra idea because, well, he didn’t really know—guilt, probably, and Tessa had asked nicely—and what little enthusiasm he had possessed had just diminished to nothingness over the last three months. With every voiceover session he could hear the boredom and affect in his voice growing, but the sound guys and producers knew by now not to ask if he could do a second cut at the script or the questions. Second takes sounded actually surly. Mike had pulled him aside after he’d filmed a bit at Canton and given him shit about representing Skate Canada well—he had given the fed more than they had earned over the years—and he’d rolled his eyes so hard they had nearly disappeared. Instead of a record of a triumphant bow showcasing him and T through a hard, ultimately rewarding season, the show was going to be a time capsule of some of his worst behavior and an ass-over-elbows tumble to silver.

It had been a means to an end, and whatever the result at the Games, it was pretty clear it hadn’t even been worth it.

“Where are you headed next?” he asked.

“I was going to go to the gym to meet the trainer, and then head back to Canton.”

“You wanna get coffee? Like, go to the gym, I have to do this … But then let’s get coffee.”

“In London? Us?” she asked, almost nervous. They hadn’t been alone—hell, had barely talked —since Paris, so he kind of got it.

“Yeah. I think we need to talk. Or Canton, tonight. I can come over.”

“Coffee’s good,” she said immediately, and his lips upturned grimly, utterly unsurprised at the option she chose. “I’ll see you at The Bag and The Bean in two hours.” She nodded, and left swiftly.

He shook the snow out of his tuque a while later, looking around for her, eventually finding her at a tiny wooden table in the bay window overlooking the square. She was staring at the tree, two carry-cups in front of her. He followed her eyes out to the ridiculous tree in the center. Christmas was in a week, and all of London seemed to be out shopping.

Had it really been less than a year since he proclaimed *We Can Handle It* on Christmas Eve? Jesus, he felt so much older now.

“Hey,” she said, finally spotting him. “I got you a mint tea.”

“Thanks,” he said, taking a sip. Still hot. “We should talk.”

“I don’t disagree, but …” She ran her nail along a split in the wood. “I think we should wait until after Sochi. This has already been one earthquake after another this year. We’re in a good groove right now and I think it’s best if we just focus.”

“We’re not, though,” he responded.

“I’m sorry?”

“Tess.” He leaned forward, his voice heavy, “this isn’t a ‘good groove’ at all. We’re barely speaking, we came in second at Worlds and the Grand Prix, we’re at war with our coach, who is actively plotting against us, and we’ve spent the last seven months—” he looked around to make sure nobody was near “—screwing each other when we’re both in other relationships.”
“I’m not,” she replied, her face stony. “I’ve never stuck my nose in your relationship with Cassandra, but I’ve been quite clear to Ryan that I don’t have the time for a commitment right now.”

“Oh, so he knows about us?” he challenged, and he sat back, satisfied but not proud, when she ducked his gaze. “Right. Tess. We’ve had good grooves. We’ve had so many good grooves. This just … isn’t.” He unpeeled the sleeve from the coffee cup and Frisbee’d it at the napkin holder, just to have something to do. “I think we need to stop lying. I think that’s where we start.” He kept his tone light, optimistic. But he was firm. There was only way out of the mess they’d made.

“What lies?” she said, her mouth getting angry, thin and red.

“Jesus, I don’t know, T. Let’s go all the way back to when you were never in pain, with your legs. That I …” he hesitated. “That I heard you say I love you back at Worlds in ’08, and we both remembered. That you didn’t hear me say it earlier this year. Everything we’ve ever told the press about being like brother and sister. Everything we’ve told the press, ever, basically. When we tell ourselves we don’t have feelings for each other. Half the shit we’ve said on the damn TV show, when we say that everything is fine but it’s not, when we convince ourselves we don’t care about the GPF scores. That you weren’t furious with me when I slept with Cassandra. That I wasn’t hurt when you broke up with me. That this is a good groove.”

“I have … so many responses, I’m not sure where to start, Scott,” she said. “Half of those examples are just being a good professional. You think we should just spill our guts in a press conference? No. None of that is real. I’m not giving anybody the satisfaction of hearing our real opinions on Marina, and that would ruin our career, as an added bonus. Second,” she said, and he could tell she was just gearing up, outlining a case like the lawyer she would never be, “we are a team, and we are, again, professionals, and whatever my personal feelings are about you, I want to win a gold medal in two months. I still do. You do too. Us getting along is kind of critical to that. Also, you’re my best friend. That means something. God, I can be upset and also still love you, you have to get that. And third — we’re a team. Every decision, we’ve made together. I’m not sure where ‘lies’ come in; it’s not like anyone was deceiving you. You’ve been actively engaged in every decision we’ve ever made.”

“I know. I’m not saying I wasn’t involved. I’m saying I was deceiving me,” he explained, tiredly, not even sure if he was making much sense. Tessa was better at living in the grays; he needed things to be so much more black and white, and just couldn’t explain himself. “I was telling myself stuff just to make it through. And you were deceiving yourself, probably, too. And we were deceiving a whole lot of people. We make up narrative after narrative and it started with the judges—first the storylines in the routines; then flirting in front of them to up the romance—but it is so much more than that at this point.”

“I want to win Scott. Everyone—judges, coaches, you—are clear on what that takes.”

“Come on you’re still Tess. I know you. I know the real you, the private you. Not the one who just recorded an entire staged season of fake bullshit with Press Conference Face. Nothing in that show is remotely real. We literally made conversations up.”

“We—it is a documentary.”

“Tess. Listen, I’m not saying we didn’t have good reasons—especially with Marina, we did.” His eyes flashed back to another pair of furious green ones, back in Paris. “But we brought a lot of people into that. We hurt our relationships with a lot of people in the last four years, and we hurt a lot of people. Ourselves, too.”

She went quiet. “Scott, I know you feel really guilty about everything that happened with Cassandra, and I know that you weren’t thrilled with the TV show, and that I talked you into it. But you cannot
take the moral high ground and accuse me of being a liar when every decision I’ve ever made, going back to when I was nine and turned down the National Ballet, has been in the service of this team.”

“Tess, I know,” he said, but he could tell the strangle in his voice sounded more angry than anything else. He took a deep breath, tried for softer. “I know, baby, alright? I’m just asking … have all the lies we’ve told ourselves, the things we’ve said and done to keep this going, the stories we’ve told to keep our career going, to keep us going … Have all those lies become the truth, to you?” As soon as he said it, he realized how terrible that sounded. “I mean …”

“Stop,” she said, tiredly. “Please, stop. This is another impulsive Scott Moir moment, this outburst from on high, and after sixteen years of your shit I don’t deserve it.”

“It’s not,” he insisted. “I’m not sure I’m saying it right, but this isn’t impulsive, Tess. I’m not saying anything about our intentions—I think they were good, I was doing them for the right reasons, and I know you were. But I think we did some wrong things. I think we lied. I think we need to work on honesty, together. I don’t understand why you’re so afraid of being honest. I’m saying we’re both in this mess, and I think the only way out is if we try and be honest with each other.”

“Fine,” she said, evenly and with a tone of deep, un-bitter resignation, and he was struck by how civilized this conversation was. Their therapists might not be proud of the fact that they were deeply fucking up the lessons on communication, but would be proud of the tone. He had no idea how they could do so well at this in therapy and on ice, and so terribly with each other. “You want honesty?”

“Please.” His eyes and heart were open.

“I want out, Scott,” she said. Then added, because they were true Canadians, “please.”

“Like, now?” he asked, astonished.

“No. We’re winning another medal, unless our plane from Geneva crashes in Poland. But after … I want out.”

“We’re taking Worlds off.” They had decided a while ago.

“I don’t want just Worlds off. I want a lifetime.”

He sat back, still stunned. “Like, retirement?”

“Still shows, obviously. The money’s good. And this conversation … this isn’t acrimonious. We’re just over each other, aren’t we? But … yeah. No more competitions.”

“No more us,” he corrected.

She lifted a shoulder, and looked away, bleak and composed, “You wanted honesty. It’s not a good groove. You’re right. I don’t know what we’ve become, or how we got here anymore. I barely know who I am without you, without skating. Scott … I can’t do this anymore. And I want other things, too. School. Free time. Maybe some of these design collaborations.”

“No more us,” he repeated. He shouldn’t be surprised, since he demanded honesty. She’d given it to him.

She looked down, swirled the teabag in her cup. “I think maybe we’re too codependent anyways. We’re obviously capable of being pretty terrible for each other. I think this’ll be good for us.”

“If that’s what you want.”
“Is that your honest answer?” She chewed the side of her mouth and eyed him.

“I don’t want to,” he stated, his voice bald and blank. “But we definitely can’t continue the way we are right now. We were rocky when we tried to date. And since then everything’s too fucked up and blurry, and I can’t do that anymore, either. So I guess, yeah. Let’s do it. We’ll retire.” He sat back, stunned.

They had been running on fumes and anger and deceptions and dreams for a while, he realized, and they were out of all of them, now.

“Alright, so …” she said, when she finally got over the shock of what they had both said.

“We go back to Canton tonight,” he said, still processing what they had just said, what they had just decided.

“Yeah. It’s going to be a tough two months of practice. Is your head in it? You still want Sochi?”

“More than anything,” he promised, his eyes and intentions clear. This was sixteen years in the making. “And you know what, fuck Marina and Mike and everyone else. If this is the last skate—

“—It is.”

“Then we have nothing left to lose. This is for us. We go out we do it for us.” One last partner thing.

“Agreed. Absolutely,” she nodded, even cracked a tiny wistful competitive smile, and they both knew there was no reason to doubt the other on this. Their heads would be in the game. “OK. I should say goodbye to my mom.”

“Tell her hi,” he said automatically.

“Yup. If your mom has any banana bread lying around …”

“I’ll bring some,” he promised.

They stood. Threw away their cups. “This is weird. Is this weird?” she asked, as they stepped aside. He shrugged. “I can’t think through it right now, Tess,” he said. Honesty.

She nodded. “I should probably start figuring these things out on my own,” she finally said, and her voice wasn’t accusatory—almost experimental. “I’m gonna go.”

“Yeah,” he exhaled, two puffs blowing out of his nostrils. “See you there. Safe driving.”

He thought she looked lost briefly, but then her eyes armored up. “You too, Scott. You too.”

For so long, he realized as he walked toward his car, their problem had been that they had been too much too each other, as they delicately tried to carry forward a precious, unusual gift without dropping it, and now, at the end of the day, they weren’t enough.

How was that for honesty, he thought as he got behind the wheel. He started the ignition, swallowed deeply, and drove off.

Chapter End Notes
Oh, my god, you guys—the next two chapters hurt to write. Not because of the emotions. Because this was the last place I really had a ton of stuff thought out before posting and I was freaking out. I had some hints going forward in here—the aside that “Scott always loved a grand gesture” in 6.ii is a reference to the proposal—but these chapters were very much the cumulation. And then I had to rebuild, too. Everything that followed, for them and for the story, had to come from these two chapters. So we really needed to burn everything to the ground.

There are a couple major moments and lines in this one. The fight on the car hood, both of them so right in their convictions, is one of my favorite things I’ve written. His “you really must not love me” is the most devastatingly succinct statement I’ve ever written. And her “I everything you”—we’ll get into the evolution of that statement later and why it’s important—is the most fucked-up summary of what they are to each other. But even earlier, it was important for Scott to mentally take responsibility for not leaving—“he had been such an idiot”—because of his aforementioned bullshit-buying issues. Her tendencies to try and control and shape the narrative have been pretty prominent, but we really cannot highlight his bullshittery enough, from his breakup with Kaitlyn in 1 to his idiocy in suggesting sex twizzles in 2 to his cluelessness about the Fedor thing in 3, it’s been there all along, and shaping the narrative with its passivity.

I always like digging into the skating/business/strategy side of things, because I mostly neglected it and undersold the really driven, competitive aspects of their characterizations, and the byzantine politics they have to be fluent in. So this was a nice way to merge them both. And then in the last scene, I’m really not sure why, but the “baby” kinda broke me. And the “have the lies become the truth?” is referenced way back in chapter three post-Joannie—that one really stuck, but I was surprised how well it fit back in.

There are a few major sections that span *a lot* of time—Tessa’s in this section; Scott’s on the Kaitlyn relationship; and Tessa during the early days of her and Scott in 2016. I really wanted to just do mostly snippets, but felt there was way too much to drive home on this point. On one hand I’m super sad that the amount of content didn’t allow me to dig into the edginess and uncertainty of those times; on the other, there’s a ton of pretty great fic that digs into that side of story with enough brutality and discomfort that I wasn’t sure if I could do it differently enough. I don’t do angst or fluff well.

But it was largely a narrative choice—a lot of action happened in each, and we simply needed a tesseract to accomplish that. Plus, here, I wanted Tessa’s ‘Seven Years’ section to clear up any lingering narrative confusion about what the fuck was happening, and why. There had been a couple of offhand references to the relationship being like gravity—the tone of these changes as we go along as the question whether the answer is in the stars or in their selves evolves—but really tried to hammer it home in the Tessa section as she tries to rationalize their actions and make sense of what had happened.

To do that we needed the vast scope and, importantly, the realization, which we would not have gotten in a vignette about her sleeping with Scott after a date with Ryan. The accordion fold of their decisions are devastating. In the final two sections, I wanted to evoke the feeling of everything in the last 3-4 sections catching up with them, trapping them, miring them—and, at the same time, it being a weird kick-in-the-pants for their skating. Forcing them away from their bullshit, and to refocus on what makes them great: their skating and their friendship. It’s entirely fucked up, and ends up being what saves them. As we say in the next chapter (and again in chap. 11) in their end is their beginning.
Chapter Summary

alright, we're officially at 'consequences' I think it's actually less angsty. Still long though ;p But it's got a couple of my favorite speeches and some *damn* good insults.

Title from the high priestess of heartbreak, aka Adele, aka "Make You Feel My Love."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

i. Four Years Before Today, Tessa

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“I’m telling you, it’s gotta be Drake,” Scott insisted, as he flitted around her London kitchen repacking boxes that she’d done wrong (according to him. And Jordan. And Kate). “It’s our patriotic duty as Canadians.”

“It’s a tour. Our nieces and nephews hear this,” Tessa pointed out.

“This will go down as the greatest missed opportunity in the Virtue-Moir partnership,” he deadpanned.

She prickled a little at the casual, freighted phrasing, but ignored it. “That was, is, and always will be my Pride and Prejudice free dance,” she chirped him, still scanning Sam and Marie’s list of suggestions. “Four Five Seconds?”

“Too hard to find a through-line. Cheerleader?”

“Nobody will remember that song in five years. Call Me Maybe?”

“A classic, but kinda overplayed. See You Again?”

“Ugh. Too depressing.” She wrinkled her nose. “I’m still not over Paul Walker.”

“I know, sweetie,” he teased.

She stuck her tongue out, then slid her mouse down another file. “Actually…” She clicked play, and a synthy beat filled the room. “What do you think? I could really get behind this.” She started dancing in her chair. “He’s also Canadian, you know.”

His face was stunned, frozen into a near-smirk. Finally he said, “You don’t, uh … think that one’s a little close to home?”

Oh. She stopped dancing. “I … just thought it was fun. I wasn’t, you know…”

“Pulling a Stay?” He rubbed an eye to avoid making full eye contact.

She struggled not to roll her eyes. They both liked music that was a nod to their personal lives—
partly for the emotional connection, and partly to find a storyline easily, but yes, also as a way, like sex, to work through whatever they didn’t or couldn’t bring up. He did it as much as she did. Even during the break, *Try* and *Good Kisser* had been way, way too demonstrative—and he’d fucking chosen *Good Kisser.* They both knew this; it didn’t need to become something they discussed.

“Yeah. I wasn’t. I’m not Taylor Swift, here.” She personally liked doing that since it added emotional investment for them and for a fan, but that wasn’t logic Scott would be open to just now. “It’s fun, it’s sassy, it’s light. And, sure, if it were something subliminal—well, it’s exactly what we’d want it to say, about recognizing mistakes …” She trailed off as she hit the lyric ‘missing more than just your body.’ “Anyways. I do think it works on that level, too. If we’re at that point.” She knew she was there. They were good. They were so much better than around Sochi, clearer and energized and on the same page for Montreal and Marie. She was so excited to return, so thankful for this second (third) chance, and she wanted to skate it out loud. “But if we’re not, we shouldn’t pick it at all.”

He considered. “Are you there?” he checked. “You’ve forgiven me? Personally?” It felt like a test.

“Yeah,” she confirmed. “Still working on—anyways. I wouldn’t do this comeback otherwise.” She licked her lips. “But if you’re not, I’m not.”

“The characters might take a little getting used to,” he admitted. “But, I mean—yeah, I’m there, with you. It’s fun. We can choreo something hot.”

She stared at him intently for a while—she’d honestly far prefer to drop the damn thing than scare him away, just as they were starting their comeback. She didn’t like Bieber that much, even; he seemed like such a jerk to Selena. But Scott’s eyes were clear and steady and warm, and his back was a strong sinewy line, so she straightened her own spine and resolve.

They had to be careful.

They couldn’t afford to fuck this up again.

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*ii. Three Years Before Today, Scott*

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They sat, next to each other, close enough but definitely not touching, and stared at the new mental-prep coach. JF was perfectly nice. He’d been helpful, since they moved to Montreal a few months ago, with helping them get back into the competitive mindset and overcome fears about their return.

Maybe he was too nice, for the shitstorm they were about to unleash on him.

“Well,” Jean-Francois said, tapping his pen against a yellow pad of paper crisp as his Quebecois accent. “Shall we get started?” They’d been unusually withholding today.

He looked at Tessa, who gripped the notepad she always brought to these sessions, to write down words of affirmation and homework (he also has always suspected that she didn’t want the therapist to have the sole record). He pulled out his own. It was new, but he was taking this seriously, and the notebook was either to help with that or just reassure Tess that yes, he was taking this seriously.

She looked back at him, nodded, and took a deep breath. “Yes,” she said. “So, before we really dive in for today’s session, we decided earlier this week that we wanted to … go back a little. We’ve very much appreciate your support with our on-ice mental preparation. However, with you, and with past therapists—as you know, we first went to mental-prep session in 2008, after my first surgery—”
“However,” he picked up the thread before she twisted herself into a knot of words. “We have always focused entirely on our on-ice relationship with them, and haven’t really discussed our off-ice friendship—”

“Off-ice relationship,” Tessa amended. She was right; it was a better word.

“—Relationship. And when we have, we haven’t been …”

“Entirely truthful with them,” Tessa finished, in a rush, looking at him. “Or. We actually actively avoided a lot of the … truth.”

He nodded. “We lied,” he stated baldly.

JF’s eyebrows rose, but he didn’t look particularly surprised. “To a therapist? Trying to help you mentally prepare for competitions as important as the Olympics?”

“We creatively evaded specifics,” Tessa clarified, and he struggled not to roll his eyes. “By keeping our sessions entirely focused on what had gone down in practice or competition, and how those scenarios shaped our feelings toward each other, and using that as the basis for discussion.”

“Exactly. We lied. So,” Scott continued, as her eyes flicked away. Tessa, he had noticed over the last few years, had a very particular and visceral reaction to the term lying. If he were in JF’s shoes, he might infer that Type-A Perfectionist Tessa Virtue felt that ‘lying’ made meant she had made a mistake or was doing something intentionally malicious or without a very very good reason. Tessa hated feeling like she had failed or done something wrong—but it was hard to find another way, for him, to describe never mentioning the fact that they were definitely sleeping together and probably in love and maybe dating to their mental-prep teams. “We know that the way we have acted off-ice might impact our performance, and because our goal is to have a different approach this time—and ultimately improve our on-ice performance for PyeongChang—”

“—We thought it would be productive to contextualize our … history.”

“History,” Scott echoed, then suddenly needed to confirm something. “There is a, you know, doctor-patient confidentiality thing, right?”

“No judgment, total confidentiality,” JF promised. “I’m beginning to see a picture, though. Of where this is going.” His tone was completely deadpan.

Scott wasn’t sure where to start, so he finally blurted out, “So we first slept together after Four Continents in spring 2008.” He wanted to get this right, badly, though this seemed to boil their relationship down to just sex, and it clearly was not. Words were T’s area. But it also seemed like the biggest, most important thing to be honest about, the cleanest and fastest way of describing how the fragments of their relationship fused together, how many things they so frequently were to each other.

“Oh my god, that’s what you choose to lead with, the night we got drunk, you punched a guy and we had sex?” she laughed, her voice warm and fond. They stared at each other for a while, arguing silently, until she finally said, “We have better moments. Maybe we start at the beginning? Like, the actual beginning.”

“You wanna start with your decadelong crush on me?”

“And the fact that you dumped me to preserve our skating partnership when you were ten,” she teased, eyes sparkling. “Yeah. Let’s start there. That’s where this story begins. It’s a good one.”
By the end of the hour, they’d made it almost to her first surgery. JF looked a little dazed.

“Just wondering, is there, like a diagnosis in your encyclopedia for this?” Scott asked, nodding toward the DSM on his desk.

“Let’s unpeel those layers on Thursday,” JF replied. Scott noted that wasn’t an actual answer.

It wasn’t easy, but she took his hand as they were leaving, and smiled when he kissed her knuckles, so he thought that it might end up being worth it.

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iii. Five Years Before Today, Tessa

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Tessa turned to the soft knock on her doorframe. “May I come in?” Kate asked, a little hesitantly.

“Sure,” Tessa said. “Just don’t mind the mess.” In nine hours, she and Scott would start their endless journey—London to Toronto, Toronto to Geneva, Geneva to Moscow, Moscow to Sochi—to the end of her career. Her life, really. For once, she was not packed four days in advance, didn’t have a list beyond her skating gear, wouldn’t be double-checking anything.

“You need help?”

“Nah, I’m good. Mostly. Not like it matters, as soon as we go through processing I’m just going to be wearing maple leafs for three weeks,” she sighed, and smiled. She was convinced Canadian-themed clothing didn’t need to be so ugly; every year, Team Canada seemed intent to prove her wrong. “What’s up?” She grabbed the first aid kit and started forcing it into a side pocket stuffed with socks.

“Just wanted to chat. We’ll be up so early tomorrow and then the next time I see you you’ll be in prep mode.”

“I know. God it feels like this year has been forever, sometimes, and now that it’ll be over in a few weeks …” Her voice trailed off. “Anyways, what did you want to chat about?” She knew where to find the condoms in the Village, thanks. Not that she, unlike Mr. Two Condoms, anticipated needing any.

Her mom sighed, sat on the bed. “Now, I know we took you out of religious ed around the time you lost your last baby tooth, but do you ever remember them talking about grace?”

“Mom, I’m a dancer. I know what grace is.” She smiled, snapped a shirt into a fold.

“Not in the sense of moving gracefully, or even being gracious. From the Bible.”

She stared at her, curious. “No, I don’t think I remember what you’re talking about,” she said slowly. Though, now that her mother brought it up, it sounded familiar, like an echo of a memory.

“I mean, you’re from a family of lawyers; we hardly made faith a priority. Anyways, grace—” her mother blew out a breath, ran her fingers through the fur of the damn Leafs bear “—Grace, put simply, is unmerited favor. Wait.” She raised one hand along with Tessa’s eyebrow, “It’s what God bestows on humanity. Everyone makes mistakes, everyone falls short of perfection, and yet, everyone is worthy of grace. It’s the kindness with which we treat each other—and, importantly, Tessa, ourselves—even when we don’t think we have earned it. It’s the compassion that we use to
truly forgive ourselves and forgive others.”

“Is this a pep talk in case we lose to Meryl and Charlie, Mom?” When we lose. She shoved another pair of jeans into the suitcase—jeans matched anything red and black.

“No, sweetie,” she sighed. "This is a pep talk for the rest of your life.” Oh. "I don’t know what exactly has happened with you and Scott this year—and I’ve discussed with Alma, and we don’t want to know, truly—but I know you’re both hurting, and pushing through, pushing extraordinarily hard to reach greatness, despite that. I know you’re both scared, even though you’re angry. I suspect you’ve hurt each other, probably pretty deeply. And probably pretty evenly, frankly. I’m only saying that, whatever happens—and, importantly, whatever comes next—I hope that you treat yourself, and Scott, with grace.”

Tessa stopped moving. “Yeah. OK.” Unsure what to do next, she moved to sit on the bed too.

Kate set the bear down and picked at the comforter’s seam, her eyes going distant and wistful. “I was so happy, you know, when chose to stick with ice dance. Don’t get me wrong—I loved dance too, but I worried. I knew your passion, your talent, went so much farther than ordinary mom-boasting, but you were so sensitive and so driven and so eager to do things perfectly. I saw a lot of heartbreak—but with skating, you would always have Scottie. In ballet you would be alone. But he ... he helped you find the joy and the strength to get through the tough times . And there were so many times—when we sent you off to Marina’s eating-disorder factory, when they wheeled you into surgery, when you announced you were going to keep going after Vancouver and then they wheeled you into surgery again—that I was horrified at myself.”

“Mom—”

Kate held up a hand though. “Wait. Almost done, I promise. I worried, sometimes, if we made the right call, linking the two of you so tightly together. Made you think that you think you could only be successful as a half of a whole. Especially this year. I hope I never made you feel like you had to be perfect, or …” Kate started to tear up, and she took a moment before continuing. “Or that you, as yourself, were only worth a GOE score, instead of the fierce, wondrous, vastly brilliant young woman whom I am in awe of.”

By this point, Tessa’s eyes brimmed with tears. She sometimes felt her mom, like Scott, truly had wisdom, that intuition to know what was needed, to cut through the shit to what mattered.

She could study for hours and never pass this test, and Scott and her mom didn’t even need to crack the text.

“Anyways. That’s what I wanted to say. That you are perfect as you are, that who you are is excellent and enough if not perfect—no matter what Marina has told you, this is true, Tessa—and I’m so proud of you, especially for the way you have fought through this year. Everything was stacked against you and you kept fighting. And whatever happens … I hope you and Scottie treat each other with grace as you figure out what’s next.”

“Mom, I … Scott and I, this year—” she started to babble. She suddenly wanted to unload everything, to cry, to fling herself onto a bed the way she had as a teenager.

She shook her head, quickly. “Tessa, you’re an adult, and one of the best parts of adulthood is that you’re allowed to have secrets. And truthfully, Scott is still Scottie, who once left a stink bomb in the trunk of my car for ‘safekeeping’ and then threw his skate bag on top of it. My Lexus reeked for days. He’s a wonderful young man but … you’re under no obligation to confess, to me.”
Tessa wiped her tears. “He’s pretty great. I’m ready for this to be over but … gonna miss this.” She needed a break—she needed a break from him, from them, especially; she had known this since before their argument at the coffee shop, since before Paris, probably—but: facts were facts. Scott Moir, generally an excellent human. It's what made it so hard.

Her mother hugged her deeply. “You’re so loved, Tessa. Remember that.”

The next morning arrived at the airport at a quarter till six, found Scott and Alma and Joe with a cart. She hugged Alma, Scott hugged Kate, Joe and Scott took care of her bags, both of them complaining about the amount she had packed. “Russia is cold,” she said with a smirk as Scott, who flung her through the air easy as a volleyball, theatrically lugged her suitcase sideways onto the cart.

One more round of hugs and photos; then security, Scott handling bags and her handling documents like always. As they were waiting in line, she burst into tears.

“Howdy. Hey,” he cajoled, wrapping an arm around her. “Little early on the arrival there.” Since they’d decided to retire, it was like all of the push-pull of the last year had been washed away—they were finally, in all areas of their lives, back in sync. There was still rawness, and some trepidation, but she felt more confident in them than she had in months. Ending things had deflated the tension and sucked the uncertainty out of their relationship. It wasn’t fun, but it was like the old days of Tessa and Scott against the world, her hand in his as they stared, bold and blazing and sure, into the future.

“Sorry,” she sniffed. “Just a warning though: Forecast for next week is snowy with a chance of tears.”

He kissed her temple. “We’re not going to be sad, remember? If this is the last—“

“It is,” she reminded him, since he was having a hard time accepting it.

“Then we’re gonna be happy,” he declared resolutely.

And so they were. They had the time of their lives, in fact. As soon as they met up with the rest of the Skate Canada team in Toronto, the adrenaline kicked in, nerves jangling against nerves and everyone’s energy levels rising. Chiddy tended to get manic before competitions; they had collectively banned him from watching comedies on flights since he would just laugh uncontrollably and keep people awake. She swapped seats to sit next to Kaitlyn, held court among the girls, talked about winning on home ice. It made her miss Joannie deeply. Across the aisle, the guys sat in a clutch, and Scott was exuberant and extraverted and she knew he would spend the entire time making everyone else laugh and feel awesome. She smiled, a feeling of deep comfort radiating from her chest.

(Her heart was overflowing and breaking, at the same time.)

Sochi was a different vibe from Vancouver’s hometown-party atmosphere, obviously; the Potemkin town felt heavy, imposing, and yet familiar—she assumed from all her times spent around Russians. She actually got to enjoy the Opening Ceremony, at least, though it was bombastic and vaguely unsettling. They practiced, hard and well, kept up their routines, saw their families occasionally, kept their heads in the game, their minds aligned on their deal. While she’d had several crying jags in Vancouver—they’d had terrible skates in the lead-up to competition, too jangled by the nerves—her mind was as clear and cool as the ice after a sweep. Their practices were perfect. Even Marina seemed impressed.

They had done their best; they had done all they could; they were focused and ready. Nothing left to
lose, like he had said. Everything else was out of her control. Knowing that was strangely liberating. She said that out loud to Scott after another great practice, and he laughed and said, “Who are you and what have you done with Tessa Virtue?”

Even after the scores in the team event, even after the last two years, she felt like they could win.

She thought they had, wildly and briefly, after an amazing short, after Scott’s joyful tap dance across the ice. Her heart unburdened, she allowed herself to believe. It was the most glorious skate of their lives, hands-down. But the scores …

“We lost on the season, not the skate,” she said, tiredly, after, as they leaned against the whitewashed cinderblock in the belly of the Iceberg. It was exactly what she had mentally been preparing for for weeks, and yet … It still stung. It was heartbreaking in a way that felt completely surprising; raw anger at themselves and the ISU and judges and Marina and the country of Russia swirled together. Their finnstep was better. Sitting on the floor of the stretch room, avoiding the media and Skate Canada and Marina and their families, she didn’t quite believe it.

“We still have the free,” Scott pointed out, and she looked at him dubiously. Their free dance was awful. Instead of responding, she just rolled her head on his shoulder and sighed.

“It was a damn good skate,” she whispered.

“Probably our best ever.”

“I’m really proud of you, Scott,” she said, shifting to look at him directly. “Of us. But you, especially. That was amazing. Really.” He was once-in-a-lifetime, he always had been. And they’d done it. After everything, they’d still done it.

They were extraordinary, truly.

“Back atcha, kiddo. We can’t be upset about that.”

“No,” she agreed softly. She was angry, but she was having trouble mustering up the strength to feel anything right now. They’d seen the scores for two years. They’d lost five in a row. And just like she’d struggled the year previously with hating Scott after Worlds, it was hard to feel just one thing toward Charlie and Meryl. She didn’t think they’d ever be friends again, but they’d traded titles and boyfriends and hockey pucks and inside jokes and only-half-joking trash talk for a decade. Nobody else was remotely capable of understanding what it was like in Marina’s foxhole. She knew how hard they worked, how much they wanted this.

And god, she was just so tired.

“I love you too, you know,” she looked up at him, repeated his words back to her. “Of course I do. Just so we’re clear.” He had been so many things to her over the years, but there was really no other word that summed him up, to her. He was love, in all its forms. They had burned themselves out, and that was all, at the end of the day, that remained.

(He was the love of her life, in a million beautiful forms, and it was only beginning to dawn on her.)

He grinned, knocking foreheads with her. “Crystal, T.”

And then, when it was all over—when she realized that she had reached the mythical land of After-Sochi, was still standing—and she stared over the ice, Scott wandering around with the damn poncho flag on his head to try and make her laugh, he turned to her, said softly, “You good?”
“Yeah,” she said, lying only a little. Contemplated the end of her competitive career. He took her hand, squeezed it, kissed her knuckles. She felt detached, like she was watching a documentary of Tessa Virtue, Girl who almost Won the Olympics.

The end of competition meant they could celebrate, finally, though she was extraordinarily bad at letting loose, she thought as she sipped a gin and tonic with Meagan, Patrick, and a couple members of the women’s hockey team at Canada House. Scott, on the other hand, was leading karaoke on stage with a bunch of bobsledders and curlers and skiers, plus Little Kaetlyn, who was having the time of her life.

Meagan took a satisfied swig of her beer, and announced, “We’re coming back, we decided yesterday. Another quad. We think we can medal. What’s next for you?”

Tessa looked at her with a watery, wry smile. “A shit ton of booze,” she declared.

“You’re out?”

“Yeah,” she nodded. “Shot?” She beckoned to Chiddy.

“Definitely.” Meagan was always down for a good time.

So Chiddy ordered round after round, and they cheered at the band and booed at Scott’s Gangster Paradise and toasted Canada, and each other, and Canada, again. Everything was out of her control, finally, and she felt free. Someone got the band to play Rich Girl (Chiddy; it was always Chiddy) and she twisted her head around to find Scott. It was the one Hall & Oates song he would dance to, because singing it to her riled her up.

But he was walking out, his arm wrapped around a smiley blonde skier, whispering something into her ear as she laughed and ran a hand down his chest. Huh. She tugged on Jenn Wakefield’s arm.

“Oh, Kaitlyn? She’s a curler.” Jenn stared at her. “Are you and Scott …”


“Tessa? Oh god. I haven’t seen you this drunk—” Chiddy stopped her mid-twirl to Like a Prayer.

“Since Worlds 2008?” she asked, trying for saucy and failing. God, her head felt heavy. It was felt good, to be over. She’d been so terrified, and now it felt so good.

“I was going to say since the Nice Incident, but nope, you’re right, since Gothenberg. You’re not going to vomit into a plant again, are you?”

“We’ll see! The night is young!” she slurred cheerfully. “Dance with me.” She took another shot out of his hands and knocked it back. Chiddy, for a singles skater, was such a good dancer. Not as good as Scott but whatever. He looked like he was about to protest but then Don’t Stop Believing came on, and, well, everyone knew Journey was Chiddy’s jam. He grabbed her hips and they started dancing. Kaitlyn and Andrew joined them and it was a party.

Another couple of shots later, and Chiddy was moving her to sit down. “You need water,” he told her bluntly. “You’re hitting pissing-off-Mike levels if you leave and a journalist sees you.” Every year at Camp, Don’t Be Drunk In Front of Journalists was Lesson One during the hours-long media
training session. Lesson Two was always And Obviously Don’t Punch Anyone or Get Arrested, Ahem, which was when everyone would look at Scott furtively and he would make a sheepish and charming and perfectly-timed joke, though she knew he was beginning to get pretty embarrassed about the way he’d behaved when they were younger. (Which: finally.)

“Fuck the fed,” she said cavalierly, poking an index finger out for good measure. Skate Canada had been so harsh in the wake of Vancouver and David, so benevolently useless last year with Marina. She was so tired of being disappointed.

“Yeah, you’re not leaving anytime soon,” Chiddy patted her cheek. “Not with that attitude. Radford! Fries over here?”

“They only have poutine left.”

“Noooooo I hate poutine,” she stage-whispered, then started laughing hysterically, hand over mouth. That couldn’t ever get out.

“Better for the stomach lining.”

“Worse coming up,” she weakly retorted. He held up a fry and spun it into her mouth, like it was an incoming pterodactyl and she was a very dumb child. “Another,” she opened her mouth obediently, and moaned after she crunched the fry.

Apparently Russians made the best poutine. And apparently poutine was delicious.

He kept feeding her, one at a time, and if she was of sound mind or body she would have found the visual hilarious. But she wasn’t, so she said, “Chiddy, I fucked up.” Her tone was matter of fact, conversational, and absolutely delirious.

“Tess, you’re drunk, after sixteen years of crazy training and three Olympic medals. You’re allowed to go crazy at a party and still maintain your Ms. Perfect reputation.”

“No, no, no.” She patted his wrist insistently. “I mean last season, I fucked up. We fucked up. Scott and I don’t do things alone. Or, we used to not do things alone. We are going to do a lot of things alone now, but we decided that together. Also, perfection doesn’t exist.” She hiccuped, a little. A delicate hiccup. She was a delicate, graceful, three-Olympic-medal winning hiccuping ice dancer.

“Atone,” he corrected gently.

“Yes! It’s OK though. That we fucked up. We tried our best, you know. Scott says we hurt everybody, hurt ourselves. But even with the TV show, we were trying our best.”

She had been a little vindictive, with that, actually, she decided. She had just been so mad. No. Heartbroken.

Not that it mattered.

“We know, Tessa,” he said, softly. “Everybody knows that, OK? You two are always hardest on
yourselves, you know that, right?”

“Even with the fucking,” she added earnestly. “We were trying our best.” Shit, did Chiddy know they had been hooking up? They’d been super-good at secret-keeping.

He laughed at her blank, drained face. “Everybody knows,” he assured her. “Nobody cares. Or. Nobody judges. We just want to make sure you guys are OK.” She thought, fleetingly, of grace. Unearned favor, from people that loved her. “You OK, Tessa?” he tucked some hair behind her ear.

She was going to do better at deserving the unearned favor, she decided. “I’m not OK now, but I’m gonna be,” she mumbled, resolutely, suddenly finding tears on her face. “I really am going to be, Chiddy.”

He grinned. “Nobody doubts that, Tessa Virtue.”

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iv. Six Years Before Today, Scott

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Trophee Eric Bompard was undoubtedly Tessa’s favorite Grand Prix; Scott preferred visiting Japan, bobbing between the old lanterns at night and popping into karaoke bars and sampling amazing sushi and hitting the sake, but the look on Tessa’s face whenever they got off a plane in Paris made him hope for TEB over NHK every year. This year, despite everything, was no different. They stepped out of the airport and Tessa’s face melted into her look, and he told himself that maybe this was the chance to untie the knots in their relationship, in their skating partnership, and finally get it right before Sochi.

Yeah, if only, he thought a few days later, staring into his third? tumbler of whisky. Between filming phony pieces for the show and practices and the competition and avoiding Cassandra because he just increasingly could not with a relationship that felt too uncomfortably close to lying, where he was the shittiest version of himself—it hadn’t been a normal trip to Paris. Tessa’s suggestion to bring another girlfriend into the show to distract from the two of them had been the first (though definitely not the last) time he wondered if Tess had an overly-inflated sense of confidence in her PR skills, but he had to admit it had been sort of sneakily brilliant, put a public wedge between them that stopped any questions cold.

Of course, they’d found a whole new way to be messy, privately.

(They were always known for being a team that pushed the boundaries.)

“Hey,” Tessa said from beside him, tossing her clutch on the bar. She was in dressy silk pants and a coordinating gold jacket she insisted were very fashionable—she’d purchased it the last time they were in France, after Worlds and the Nice Incident, at a store whose name he couldn’t pronounce—but he felt just kind of looked like a very expensive tracksuit.

“Hey,” he replied, a little startled. She and their parents and the Chiddys were going to dinner after the medal ceremony; he was supposed to take Cassandra out but had begged off and suggested room service. She had left the hotel to sightseeing—“I’ve never been to Paris, Scottie; I want to see more than an ice rink and a hotel room” —and he’d ended up here. “How’d you find me?”

She gave him a strange look. “This is your favorite bar in Paris, Scott,” she said simply. Looking around, at the brass and golden wood and mirrors and low lighting, he realized she was right. “Un verre de Moët, s’il vous plaît,” she asked the bartender, her accent textbook. “We did good, today.
We did good.”

“Yeah,” he said, because they did. “You think we pulled it off?”

“Maybe,” she said, which was what Tessa said when she didn’t want to let him down. “Scores say no but … god, after everything, this year … It has to be enough.” The last part was a whisper as she stared into the distance. “Anyways. It’s important to keep perspective. So. Today, we won. Cheers to the gold.” She raised her glass, and they clinked. She downed half the glass in a gulp.

“You talk to your dad?” In the divorce, Kate had gotten Tess’s competitions and the house; Jim got golf and increasingly strained calls.

“Yeah. He says congratulations, by the way.” She looked around. “No Cassandra?” she checked edgily. Tess, for obvious reasons, didn’t really want to be around Cassandra—the producers had loved that bullshit nugget Tessa had fed them, about never meeting.

He shook his head, mostly angry that Tess, by avoiding Cass, got to avoid the physical representation of their decisions over the last six months. She absolutely deserved it, after what he did, but he was still envious. In some alternate timeline, maybe one where he’d just never left Ilderton, he loved Cass—she was sweet and fun and hot and no-BS, and he really enjoyed being with her if he didn’t think too hard, and it would be really fucking great to just commit to her and disappear from all his problems—but in this one it was just too much.

Every time he tried to be a present and good boyfriend he was reminded about how this started with him being a very not-good … whatever to Tessa. Both breaking up and staying together felt cruel, given his original sin; he chose not to do either most days. He instead avoided any feelings via Tessa and skating, which he knew was shitty and obviously made things far worse, which made him angry. At Tess, a little; at himself, a lot; at the world, in the general sense, in a way he hadn’t been since he was a teenager.

So he just flicked an old bottlecap a couple of times as Bowie played, and just said, “sightseeing.” He flicked the cap again. “Can we not talk about it?”

“More than fine with me,” she confirmed, squeezing his arm. “We’re almost done with all of this, you know. Three more competitions. Eight more days of filming. Then … we’re done.”

He looked at her like she was nuts. “We might miss this.” He just had a feeling they’d be taking off more than Worlds.

“I’m going to miss a lot of this next year,” she said. “The travel—we never would have been the places we’ve gone. The goal. The sense of purpose. You. That is gonna be weird, after everything. Doubt you’re gonna miss me …”

“Of course I will, kiddo,” he replied, his tongue scraping and heavy. After everything, of course he would. “Not as much as I’ll miss the smell of Axe in the guys’ bathroom at Arctic Edge, but I’ll miss you.” He waggled his eyebrows.

“Yeah, well I won’t miss you as much as I’ll miss Marina’s attempts to do jazz hands during Dream a Little Dream choreo. Or her kissing Johnny when she thinks nobody is looking.” He cackled at that one.

“I won’t miss you as much as I’ll miss the K-pop that Fedor plays every morning to wake people up.”

“God, I feel like I’m at my own funeral whenever that starts up.”
“What?” he laughed. Tessa came up with the weirdest analogies. You never truly knew what she was about to say next, even when you’d been by her side for sixteen years.

“It’s like, the most out-of-body experience, hearing that before coffee, in a freezing rink, in summer, at 5 AM,” she tried to explain. ‘OK, OK, I can do better. I won’t miss you as much as I’ll miss —’ And then suddenly, as Bowie sang about sailors fighting in the dance hall, he was kissing her, his mouth on hers, warm, seeking, wanting, craving. She pulled back a bit. “I won’t miss this,” she said, her eyes bright from the champagne. She leaned forward and kissed him again, and god, she was good at making him forget every shitty corner of his life.

It could have been a minute or five or fifteen or fifty when— “Scott?” Cassandra’s stunned voice echoed behind them.

They broke apart. Freddie had joined David, the beat insistent and urgent as he and Tess and Cass froze in a tableau. Tessa blinked rapidly, shocked and speechless for maybe the first time ever. She pressed the back of her hand to her mouth, as if wiping away the evidence. Cassandra turned, ran. Scott stayed still. “Go,” Tessa said. “Go after her. I’ve got the bill.” She looked miserable. No, horrified.

“Cass,” he yelled, yanking the door open and running into the November chill.

“What the fuck, Scott?”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s not what you think,” he tried.

“What else could it be?”

“It’s just … it’s Tessa.” As soon as he said it he realized it was the worst excuse possible. “It’s a shitty season and we …”

“Oh, yeah, it’s Tessa!” she yelled, sarcastically, voice pitching higher. “Yeah, it’s the woman I asked about literally the first time we were together—that just makes it so much fucking better! That’s not the first time, is it?” All he could do was shake his head. “You fly me out here, you refuse see me at all, even to go to fucking dinner, I leave you to sleep and find you making out with her in a bar. God—and she has a boyfriend, too, that skier you don’t like and don’t talk about? God. You’re so selfish, the two of you—yourselves, always before anyone else. You two aren’t special, you know. You’re just fucking figure skaters. Ice dancers! You don’t even jump.” She looked a little shocked, but pleased, at the cleverness of the dig. That one, he had to admit, hurt.

She continued, her face strong and furious even as she crumpled with emotion. Yeah, he’d definitely love her, under so many other circumstances. “You don’t get to treat people terribly, you’re not exceptions to being decent humans just because you have a couple fucking medals. You’re a shitty boyfriend, Scott, you know that? You’re hot, you’re cold, you forget brunch with my mother, you can’t tell my friends Kelsey and Chelsea apart, you use training as an excuse all the time. If it’s a shitty season, talk to your girlfriend. That’s what you’re supposed to do in a relationship. You’re not special; you’re just a lying jackass.” She looked around. “I don’t care where you stay tonight but it’s not with me.”


She shook her head. “You keep believing your own bullshit, there. Have a nice life, Scott.”

She stalked off, allowing him to marinate in his own shittiness. Because she was right, about everything.
It was so easy for her to hate him. They hadn’t known each other at all.

He stared at her retreating back. Eventually the door clanged behind him, and Tessa came out, holding his jacket and her bag and still looking lost and devastated and scared. God, they’d fucked up. He took the coat silently. “What happens next?” She finally asked, almost dumbly.

In sixteen years, he’d never not known Tessa to have an answer to that question. He took a deep inhale. “I’m going on a walk. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He squeezed her elbow, gently.

As we walked, no real destination in mind, he took a mental inventory of every lie, large and small, they’d told over the last several months, the years. The stories they’d told themselves privately, the stories they’d told others publicly. In the end, they were all the same.

_I won’t miss you._

_Her eyes were bright from the champagne._

_The guy was drunk and handsy and I felt unsafe._

_She’s like my younger, more mature sister._

_My legs don’t hurt._

_You said you wanted space._

_Scott was very sweet and present and there through the recovery._

_I’m sorry I’ve been a shit partner; I’ll do better._

_Everything is fine._

_Marina wouldn’t abandon us._

_Rivalry? What rivalry!_  

_It’s just a storyline, Scott._

_We don’t pay attention to those rumors about scoring controversies._

_Tour doesn’t count._

_It’s just a partner thing._

_Whatever it takes, the Olympics will be worth it._

_I love skating more._

Lies, all lies, piling on top of each other, a house of cards built by two nice Canadian kids one damning, impulsive, well-intentioned, career-minded, self-preserving, lust-driven, stressed-out, petty, moonshot-at-greatness choice at a time.

He was so fucking sick of the lies.

He was going to do better. For the people in his life, for himself.

For Tessa.
Tessa.

Dammit.

They’d broken so much.

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v. Two Years Before Today, Tessa

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She wasn’t sure what possessed her, lying in a queen bed in Paris alone after their win in Helsinki, her mother dozing eight feet away, to search for who had tagged either of them in photos on Instagram. And she definitely wasn’t sure why, when she saw a photo of a bleary-eyed Scott, his arm around some fan also wearing Leafs gear, to screenshot it. Maybe it was having recently competed at Worlds for the first time since 2013. Maybe it was the fact that she could clearly see Baker’s bicep in the photo. Maybe because it was clearly at Joe’s Taproom and, you know, all of that amounted to Flashbacks.

At any rate, she saved it.

She didn’t do anything with it—she was in Paris, spending some quality time with her mother for her first break in months; he was back in Ilderton spending quality time with his family on his first break in months. She had croissants to eat, champagne to drink, and a lot of hard-earned money to drop at Chantal Thomass. He wanted to see his buddies and spend time with an ill GMac and just unwind after a hard season. She was absolutely not worried—despite noisy, intrusive comments along the lines of Oh no poor Tessa I thought he was dating her from the same people who just a week ago had screamed I knew it when he announced that one of the joys of returning to skating was the chance to “do it with your partner,” which she knew would just set people off—that this signaled a shift in their relationship, just as she wasn’t worried about people thinking they had the two of them pegged as any one thing.

To know Scott was to accept that he was that he had the energy levels of a labrador puppy; to love that he was always up for dancing at a bar or on ice or at a wedding; to appreciate his lack of guardedness at home among Canadians; to bask in his graciousness and genuine gregariousness with everyone, particularly Leafs fans. Scott would never be hostile or cold to someone who approached him, or turn down a request for a twirl from a fan. She had not spent nineteen years alternately flirting with and getting platonically felt up by the man to know the difference between him being friendly and him actually flirting (he was actually not a great flirt, for the record. He was naturally very charming, and very very flirty, and very very very impulsive, and obviously hot, and those things usually led to a positive outcome, but he was not, actually, adept at picking up women intentionally. He just kind of … tripped his way into hitting on women, and then freaked out when he realized he’d successfully piqued their interest. Speaking as the universe’s foremost expert on his pickup technique.) She almost wanted to assure a commenter or two that him dancing a girl around a bar was literally the least of their issues—if only!—but that would invite far, far too many questions.

He might try and pretend-away the speculation but she’d accepted it—knew it was driven by the knot of their performances and their relationship and their interviews and the narrative they’d created and continued to promulgate for their career—long long ago. At this point, it was impossible to not egg it on simply by existing, which meant they had to at least try and work it to their favor—two things that she knew he didn’t quite understand and definitely didn’t accept. They were truths that loomed over their nearly-a-year-old deal. For now, because the Olympics was their top priority, neither that conversation, the photo, or those comments rose to the level of needing to be imminently
addressed.

But long story short—she wasn’t jealous, she wasn’t scared, she wasn’t going to call him up and tell him to stay home and away from any female with a nose ring and a Leafs hat.

It just made her think.

She texted him when they landed in London five days later to let him know she was home, but was still a little surprised to see him in her kitchen making dinner, a new arrangement of ranunculus in the center of the island. “Hey,” she smiled, sliding her suitcase to a stop in the hallway. “That text wasn’t, like, a subtle ‘come over and feed me’ thing. It was more in the ‘hey honey, I’m home,’ vein,” she sing-songed the words in the tone of a 1950s sitcom wife, and swung her hip against the doorframe, content just to watch him make the chicken go sizzly. He brought the same intense sureness to cooking and feeding her as he did skating, and she was going to enjoy the hell out of it. And his forearms chopping … things. “Also, hi, stranger-in-my-kitchen.”

“Hey babe. I know,” he smiled, putting down his knife and coming to kiss her lightly, lift her up slightly. She pulled back, kissed him again for good measure, slid her fingers into his mussed hair. Looked at him. He looked tired. “But I figured it was 50-50 if you even had cereal here. Also, I missed you.”

She hadn’t missed him, exactly, in Paris—they had spent at least 80 percent of every waking and 60 percent of their sleeping moments in the six weeks prior to Helsinki together, and it had been a lot, and she had been perfectly happy for the recharge—but she’d expected his presence in a way that she couldn’t quite quantify. She’d been staring at art in the Louvre and wondered what quip he would tell; twice accidentally ordered blue cheese for a plate even though she hated it because he liked it; had mentally added a What would Scott think component to her shopping decisions. Which, basically—“Same,” she smiled. It really was. “Brought you back presents for later.” Her tone was suggestive, and she nodded at his raised eyebrow because, yes, she was wearing one of them. He waggled his eyebrows and she nodded, and he took a quick, over-the-top peek down the loop of her sweatshirt before beginning to kiss down her neck and she laughed and said, “Later! What are you feeding me?”

“Buffalo-chicken stuffed peppers with a tomato-avocado salad and a sweet potato to split.”

“Fancy,” she quipped, realizing she was starving. “Can I help?” He gave her a dubious look, then nudged the head of lettuce and suggested that she shred it, gently.

They caught up on everything and nothing, his grandfather and her mother and the the Ilderton rink and the obnoxious passenger on her flight to Ottawa. She asked if GMac would be up for a visit the next day; he confirmed that yes, Kate would like him to look at the leak in her sink. Leonard Cohen was playing and Cohen always made him particularly handsy; he twisted her hips as he sang There’s a crack in everything, voice low and grainy, into her ear, and twirled her to let me see you moving like they do in Babylon. She started a load of laundry, sorted mail, set the table, admired the way he moved through her kitchen and knew that she owned an avocado slicer, which was brand-new information to her.

She yawned as she pushed away her plate, and remembered the screenshot. “So I thought of something for the first time in a while when I was in Paris,” she began, and at his ready expression, admitted, “There was a photo of you, on Instagram, with some girl at Joe’s. It made me think of … everything after Worlds 2013.”

His face went white. “Tess—I swear, nothing happened. There were a couple skating fans who wanted photos when Baker and I were watching the game, that must have been it.”
“Oh, I know, I know,” she jumped in, immediate and assured. “Seriously, Scott. That’s just ... you. And I’m fond of you,” she smiled. She thought about explaining to him how every time he agreed to a photo at a bar, it ended up on social media and was used to confirm whatever narrative people already had about them, but that hadn’t gone over so well at Worlds. Different conversation anyways, for another time.

“OK, so,” he said slowly, still trying to follow her train of thought, “I’d like to understand what you’re feeling. Since it was Baker and Joe’s and last time—” he trailed off.

“Not, like, angry or jealous or territorial,” she assured him, since shards of all of those had stabbed at them so many times (though they’d never been their main issues). “Or insecure in this, even. Honestly, I was … struck. It just—made me think of 2013. And how easy it was, to get to that point.” He waited patiently, knowing she had some more to struggle through. “We were selfish, and reckless, and so desperate. I mean, I remember that summer, basically telling myself that I was the one being cheated on, because I’d been there first, because we were, you know, us. Destined, you know? Best friends. Olympic gold. Inevitable. With Ryan, with Cassandra, with Marina, and even Meryl and Charlie—it all went the same way. I know it was fucked up,” she added before he could.

He shrugged. “I was the same way. We were under a lot of stress and weren’t responding particularly productively.” Well, yeah. It was so easy to see that, now. They assumed they could put themselves and their career through anything, no matter what, and would be fine.

“Yeah,” she echoed. “We just somehow … our loyalty to each other ruined all of our trust in each other, I think. After all of that.” Her tone was ruminateive. She flashed back to Scott, against that wall, drunkenly grinding against Cassandra, their conversation on his car hood, her rash and unilateral decision. “I was struck, I guess, by how far we’ve come, but also how far we needed to come, you know?” How far they still needed to go. She looked at him. “I don’t think we’ll ever really be over that year,” she finally confessed. She regretted so much about that year, and the way it had wound itself into every aspect of their partnership was perhaps the biggest.

He was quiet. “You know that I wouldn’t—if I’m at a bar, or a party, or shit gets hard with training and we need to have some space—I’m not just going to go out and … do that, again.”

“I know that,” she said quickly. “I do. Truly. I’m not going to make decisions about this without a conversation, either.” They’d gone over that night so many times, excavated it from so many exhausting angles, apologized and analyzed it to death. She paused, letting the silence stretch on, just to the point of discomfort, as she tried to articulate why she was thinking of this, again. “I actually think this realization is a good thing. Us, we’re breakable, right? We know how to hurt each other and others so badly. It’s just a … weight we have to carry.”

“We said one day at a time. Be present, give ourselves the space we need to make this work,” he said, his eyes concerned, but patient. He asked the question she knew he didn’t want to ask. “Is it too heavy?”

She’d been expecting to need a break, at some point, honestly; had expected their deal to not cover some eventuality as they worked toward Korea. For their intertwined relationships to strangle them, yet again. Hell, in her darker doubtful days, she still couldn’t articulate why she’d agreed to start this up again, even after his speech, when she knew their only true boundary was their desire not to fuck themselves and each other over so badly again. They had to be each other’s limit—not something they were historically good at, but now they knew now they were suspended by gossamer threads, strong but oh-so-slim, delicate but determined, fragile but fierce.

All they could offer each other—and they had known this from the beginning, this time—was a commitment to try.
So yeah, she had expected needing to invoke the space card. It hadn’t been easy, and they had definitely placed a midnight call to JF during a fight at Nats, but they were putting in the work, doing the reps, going through the drills daily to treat each other respectfully, to seek balance, to support each other without drowning in each other, to carve separateness and protect each other’s solitude in this liminal state as they worked toward the Olympics and … "No. It’s not. I realized … I want to grow that trust, I do." She thought back to their conversation under the covers in Helsinki—god, was that just two weeks ago? "You're not the only one with a bunch of pre-Sochi shit to work through, you know. But yeah ... I do want to keep working through it. I really want to, in fact.” He tried hard to contain a grin. She pushed her fork around, reached out her hand close to his, but not touching. “Thank you for coming over. And for the food. You really didn’t have to.” She knew she wasn’t making sense.

Scott got it though, like always. He reached over, took her hand, kissed the underside of her wrist. “I wanted to,” he took a deep breath. “And I agree we still have some trust to build; eventually, our shit to figure out off-ice, once and for all. And I think—the Olympics first, T, we’ve got way too much to get through before we even start to think about flipping the ratio. But I’m not gonna call it faith——” she smiled because he knew she hated that, “—but, you know, I’m liking our chances here.”

(She rarely trusted her own gut, but she always trusted Scott.)

“I’m beginning to, too,” she admitted, not really looking at him, but lightly swinging their hands before bringing them both to cover a yawn. “I’m beat, and I need a shower. Want to join?”

“Presents?” he smirked. “Yeah. But then I did promise Paul and Jake that I’d meet them for the game. First night of playoffs. I figured you’d want to sleep.”

“Oh right,” she said, picking up the plates and rinsing them off. He followed her, his hands chasing her waist. “Yeah. I do.” She turned to inhale his chest.

“I can come back here, or I can head home, since I told Mom I’d help at the six AM practice.” He was offering her space, and she knew it.

“Jet lag works in your favor this time, sir,” she smiled, twisted around into his arms after loading the dishwasher. “I might even be up in time to start the coffee.”

He laughed. “There is no jet lag in the world that would make that possible,” he teased, kissing her as he ghosted his hands up her side, fingers stretching toward her bra. She giggled before crossing her arms and pulling off her sweatshirt—Scott swore up and down he could care less about what underwear she wore, but he was about as tactile and visual as a guy could be. He fucking loved good lingerie.

They made their way upstairs slowly, pausing every few feet to discard clothes and enjoy getting reacquainted. Eventually he got impatient, lifted her thighs around his hips, pushed them both into the shower and coaxed a lazy rippling orgasm out of her with three fingers and the fat of his palm against the shower wall. His back and desire not to give her a concussion during a lift ruled out anything more enthusiastic in the shower, but as soon as her hair was dry enough not to ruin the carpet she pressed him backwards until his knees folded against her mattress, sat above him and rose and fell until the vein in his neck pulsed toward a shuddering orgasm. She followed him over the edge again, his eyes locked on hers in the way that she both loved and was terrified of. He could crack her sternum open straight to her heart, pick over every thought and feeling contained therein.

But it felt good. Like coming home, she thought, as she twisted her fingers in his hair again.
(She really liked the length.)

“You don’t need to stick around till I pass out,” she yawned later, settling between the covers.

He laughed, leaning against her headboard. “T, the puck doesn’t drop for forty-five minutes, and you’ll be out in five. Nah, I’m still thinking about what you said.”

“How much of my incoherent ramble?” she asked.

“About us—this—being breakable,” he threaded fingers through her wet hair. “I was just thinking, that’s true. But fact that we’ve broken—I think it makes us a better team, more resilient, smarter. Kinder. It didn’t kill us, it made us stronger.”

“How very German of you,” she smiled up at him.

“Temple of Clarkson, actually,” he corrected breezily, folding their fingers together as she closed her eyes. “But, yeah. Maybe one of the consequences is that we eventually worked through our shit and worked out being better for each other.”

She considered that. She didn’t quite see it that way yet but— “I like the way you’re thinking.” She pressed a kiss to his wrist, murmured, “Love you,” and passed out, grip going slack.

It was good to be home.

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vi. Seven Years Before Today, Scott

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Worlds had been, at the end of the day, about proving themselves: proving that they hadn’t been eclipsed by Meryl and Charlie, proving they could handle the heat, proving that they were fully healthy, proving that he could pull off Fred Astaire cosplay in *Funny Face* without looking like a smug tool. Tessa had been white-knuckled nervous the entire build-up, steel-eyed and focused on ice and alternately vomiting and crying off-ice. Even Marina had started taking reluctant pity on her, once telling her *not bad* on a step sequence where she was on a flat ninety percent of the time, lips pursed like it pained her as she patted T’s shoulder. Tessa had kept up her mental log of who Marina spent more time with every week, and while, yeah, it was more of a balance these days … She had patted Tessa’s shoulder.

But they had done it; had done it decisively. Virtue and Moir were back, and they would be celebrating tonight with fellow world champion Chiddy Chan. The Riviera casinos didn’t know what they had coming.

(Nor did French border patrol.)

“Silver looks good on you, Chucky,” he teased in the change room, his own gold still looped around his neck. “Goes with the hair.”

“Don’t get too cocky there, Scottie,” he volleyed back jocularly. “Still two years before the Games and we all know that’s what really matters. Nobody fucking cares who won what at Worlds halfway through the quad.” He was pissed, Scott could tell.

“Only times you’ve actually beaten us are when Tess’s pushing through fucking recovering from a leg surgery that would end anyone else’s career, so I think we’re good, but we do appreciate
the pushes to keep improving. Actually keeps my ego in check, so thanks.” He wasn’t sure why he was trash-talking his ex-best friend so much, but they had fucking won even though Marina had fucking publicly said Charlie and Meryl should have, which stressed Tessa out, which pissed him off. And the ISU had been up their asses for a season, and the fucking message boards had spent months wondering if Tessa’s legs would ever function again. And their hockey league days felt so long ago he barely remembered, so.

“Yeah, the Grand Prix scores sure say so,” Charlie said, with an eyebrow arch. “Don’t be a dick, Scott. You wouldn’t want to punch someone or get arrested again. Not sure how many more times Tessa can talk you out of trouble.”

“Keep T out of it.”

“You brought her into it, relax.” Charlie rolled his eyes. “God, you’re such an Neanderthal about her. If you want to hit someone over Tessa, go after that skier that keeps calling her, or the friends-with-benefits she stashes in every Canadian city, don’t come for me. Or, you know, don’t be in love with your partner in the first place, since that’s how you end up in every damn mess that you do.”


“I said, quit fucking being in love with your partner, because it only gets you into trouble. And quit being a cocky shit, because I’m not stupid enough to punch you when there are sixty TV cameras and a thousand officials around, but this is fucking unsportsmanlike, you ass, and I’m happy to if this shit continues back home. And yeah—we’re going to win in Sochi, so just sit the fuck down.”

“I’m not in love with Tessa,” he repeated slowly.

“Christ, Scott, I know you did online high school and all, but the fact that you focus on that instead of the fact that I just threatened to punch you—” really, he had just ignored it because the thought of nebbish, floppy-haired Charlie White punching anyone was hilarious “—should give you a fucking clue. Everyone sees it, you know. The way you look at her. The way she tries to ignore it because of whatever the fuck happened in ’08. You’re a fucking mess whenever she’s around, Scottie. Get your head out of your ass and back in the game. When I beat you at Sochi I want to know it’s against you at your best.”

“Charlie, are you in here? Press conference in five,” the USFSA press rep—Hilary, he thought, she had had a thing with Ben once—said “Oh good, Scott, you’re here too. Mike and Carina are looking for you too. We want to get started.”

Charlie zipped his hoodie shut decisively but pompously, tilting his eyebrows toward the rest of the world, suggesting let’s go.

Scott yanked his pullover on, stepped three angry inches from his ex-best friend, and hissed, his tone flinty and mocking, “The only way you would ever beat us at the Olympics, or in any competition, is if we’re injured, or handicap ourselves, or if the judging is shit. No matter what, you will always be a worse team than us on merit. And I know you, and I know that, there, matters more to you than any medal. So savor whatever medals you win, and you can tell me thank you one day. Also, fuck you, you’re the dick here, you dick.” He loved Tessa but he obviously could not be in love with Tessa, and therefore this was the lowest and most pathetic of trash-talking blows.

“Boys,” Hillary said, though she was, max, two years older. “I mean. Let’s go, gentlemen.”

He unclenched his fists and headed out dutifully, cheerfully and diplomatically analyzing their performance and joking about Tessa’s enjoyment of Audrey Hepburn movies and complimenting
Meryl and Charlie for being consummate professionals and competitors.

His and Charlie’s friendship was already pretty much broken anyways, he rationalized, studiously not looking to his left, and it felt good to have decisively cut it off. If losing the friendship was the only consequence of this insane fight to the gold, he was OK with that, he decided.

(Later, yeah, he was struck with not only the prescience with which he had called the next two seasons, but also the flippant, careless way he’d reacted to the loss of a once-close friend as a consequence of competition and Tessa and their actions. It left him hollow.)

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vii. Six Years Before Today, Tessa

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It was liquid-dark outside, but not particularly late, just the consequence of living in Michigan in late November. Everybody was gone, the Americans home for their Thanksgiving, but Tessa savored the quiet. Everything had been so noisy and overstimulated lately. Her, Tchaikovsky, bare feet, clear head, sounded pretty perfect.

“Oh. You still are here,” Marina’s words, but not tone, reflected surprise.

“Yeah,” Tessa said. “Just dancing. I assume that’s OK.” Her chin jutted out, just a little.

“Of course. I come to turn out light. Tell janitor when you leave; he will lock up.”

“Fine,” Tessa said, and Marina turned to leave. “Did you give us programs that will win?” Marina turned, and Tessa stared back, clear-eyed. “The Final is in a week and I need your word that you are with us; that you gave us programs that will win.” It was not a new conversation but it was the most direct Tessa had been; she was so tired of the bullshit. She couldn’t tell the difference anymore between bullshit and not. “We don’t work like this to get silver. It’s just not acceptable.”

Marina stepped closer. “I give you the program you have earned. I give you a great love story.” Tessa suspected she meant more than just on the ice, and that had always been the challenge with Marina. “What you and Scott do with it is up to you.”

“That’s not an answer,” Tessa said evenly, staring at Marina. A mentor and mother and now a menace, all wrapped up in one. Tessa’s entire life so far had been in the cradle of her palms. “Last time, you gave us Mahler. You gave us Katia’s love story to continue. This time, we get the least-renowned Russian composer ever, and a mess of a storyline. I can’t make heads or tails of it; how can the judges?”

“Then you teach them how to watch you,” she said patiently.

“You gave Charlie and Meryl a program they can win with.”

“I gave them a program that they have earned, too,” her tone remained cryptic.

“Who are you to be judge and jury here? They’re not exactly impartial, but there are judging panels in this sport,” Tessa responded, furious.

Marina, impassive, studied her. “You are always so quick to see, to understand, to assume others’ calculations. What others are doing, and why. What they expect from you. You are very smart young woman, Tessa, smartest here, you always have been the brains of the team.”
“How dare you—”

She held up a hand. “As Scott is the heart. You are very good at the press, at the PR, at the judges, the fed. The game, you play to win. You give them exactly what they want, regardless of what you need. You are very good girl, very kind girl, you want to do well and please others and think you have good intentions, of course—but of the four of you all, you most like me. Then Meryl, of course, then those boys. Very far back, those boys. Charlie especially.” Her voice was affectionate; she had always favored the boys. “No guile.”

“I could never be anything like you,” she retorted, icy, “because I wouldn’t treat people the way you do.”

“Yes, how is that television show going? And that girlfriend of Scott’s, the one that looks like you?” Marina said, voice airy, tone sound in her convictions. “What you do not do, Tessa, is look at your own behaviors. I give you Carmen last year, a chance to show the world you are adults now, you have arrived, no longer wearing white and falling in love—and you two spend every competition screwing, and screwing yourselves up, and then you blame me, you blame the judges, you blame everyone but yourselves. Then you actually try and … date, and you make it all of three months before you collapse into self. One bad result and you two give up. Now whose fault is that, mine or yours? And then your whole year now off. You choose career first, you want other things than each other but you do not let each other go, you fight, you fuck, your hug cannot save your performance. Others might play part, why do you not play part too? I try to help but after all that … you wonder why judges no longer give you chance? Why they think your levels are bad before you even step onto ice?”

“You have no idea why we did any of those things,” she said tightly. She had good reasons, mostly, countering Marina’s master chess moves. “Scott and I—”

“Yes, yes, yes, are complicated, so special, have deep connection and long ties, are grand love story—I know. You always liked the epics. I gave you Seasons for that reason,” she repeated, her voice bored and almost petulant. “What you do not see—there is never just one truth, Tessa. I have reasons, you have reasons, other people have reasons, the ISU have reasons, there are always things much bigger than one tiny strong girl in Michigan can make happen through force of will and intelligence. I have made choices, but you have made choices too. You say your reasons are good, your motives are pure—I accept you. I say my reasons are good, and motives do not matter, anyways—you do not accept me. Ah,” she clucked, “and that is where the gray areas, as you say, come in.”

She stood very stood, spoke very clearly. “Your reasons aren’t good, though, and mine are. You are a manipulative, cold woman, who plays with people’s lives—”


“You blame incredibly unfair decisions, and performance results, on us, and you facilitate those.”

“You are not child, Tessa,” she replied, coldly, though she had just called Tessa a girl. “You are smart, strong, woman. Nobody ever naive enough to call ice dancing a fair sport. Only Charlie, maybe. Is better though, truly, that it was. No no, all I say—agree with my choices, disagree with my choices, that is up to you! But you must take look at your own choices too, Tessa. It is only way you find peace with your career, your season, your Scott, yourself.” She stepped back, and repeated, “I give you the program you earn. The rest, up to you. Choose wisely. Stay long as you need. Let janitor know when you go to lock up.”

And with that, she disappeared, leaving Tessa alone with her thoughts.
Angry and irritated, Tessa stabbed her iPhone back on, let Swan Lake fill her space and thoughts. Stretched through some plies and tendus and arabesques until her legs were pliant enough to whip through fouettés. The music rose, the music fell, she kept turning.

Her thoughts first fixated on Marina, on her gall to try and equivocate her actions with Tessa’s. Tessa was perfectly aware, thank you, that nobody had forced them to do the TV show, that ever since Vancouver she had steadily sought and capitalized on opportunities for them in ways Meryl and Charlie had not. She was more aware of the long game, fine. She was open to finding different ways to fight for their career, fine. That didn’t make her the same as Marina, willing to sell out anyone if it advanced her own career. She would never sell out Scott, for instance, whereas Marina would probably sell out even Fedor if she had to. She was, fully and officially, over Marina. It felt liberating.

But she and Scott … it was hard to make the case they hadn’t fucked themselves over, deeply, in the last eighteen months. They’d been distracted, for one. They’d had the biggest rifts of their career, deep divides that didn’t just boil down to different personalities or the fact that he liked to play hockey and she liked to read in their spare time—in moments of extreme stress, they’d had dramatically different responses, and hadn’t supported each other. A lifetime of conditioning in how to make their partnership work in the service of their careers, of shutting up and subsuming their own wants and needs, even to each other; a lifetime of building empathy for the other’s perspective and experience, of being able to communicate professionally through the tough times no-matter-what, to lock in on the good in each other and on ice despite everything, to love each other and to make each other laugh, to ignore everything negative for one or two bright spots, was how they’d held it together.

Their connection had broken them; in return, they had nearly broken their connection. Its improbable—and destructive—survival was the only reason they would be on a plane to Sochi together in a month. Because they had been conditioned into being good partners, first and always, above themselves, above any of their other decisions. Because otherwise, their decisions should have broken them.

And those decisions had all been choices. She had chosen to break up with him. He had chosen to sleep with Cassandra. She’d chosen the TV show, and to push him away. He’d chosen, at the end of the day, to date Cassandra. They’d both chosen to keep hooking up, chosen to invent the technicalities that made them OK with their choices. They’d told themselves, over and over, that they were choosing each other with these decisions, but they weren’t. They were choosing themselves, buried under all those layers of codependency, choosing their own career, which just happened to look a lot like the other person. If they had wanted to choose each other, they would have. They would have been selfless, and let the other go. It was, actually, that simple.

Maybe in another story, they would end up together—a charming tale of opposites-attract whose connection was facilitated by a chance encounter in a library or on a subway, like the rom-coms Scott secretly loved. Or they would have been high-school sweethearts, the valedictorian who married the hockey-team captain, or they would have been a lawyer and a skating coach who got matched on Tinder and really hit it off. Or they just wouldn’t have been stupid enough to sleep together when they were 18 and 20, and would have made a rational, mature choice to be together. But in this story, she realized, they weren’t inevitable, and they needed to stop acting like it.

They were just really damn good ice dancers who had made a huge mess of their lives.

And accepting that they didn’t work was critical for them to have a shot at happiness, alone or with another. She thought of school, of dating, of parties and fashion collaborations, and there was an appealing ease to all of those options. She and Scott were so hard. So stubborn. And out of
stubbornness, she’d been reading the signs wrong for years.

So after the Olympics, she was going to make a different choice. She was going to choose him, for once, and choose herself, for real, and end this mercifully. It was the only way to break them out of this terrible dance they’d been locked in.

She just needed to figure out a way to tell Scott.

She wasn’t in love with him anymore, she realized with a start. Coming to the conclusion felt almost like a relief, a literal unburdening of something that had weighed down her thinking and her choices and her actions for far too long.

It was the final time she felt out of love with Scott Moir.

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viii. Five Years Before Today, Scott

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He stepped out onto the ice, the frosty give under his blades and the sweaty, cold air signaling that he was home. Across the ice he spotted Tessa, in a confectionary of hot pink and white, chatting by the chairs with Joannie and Daisuke. He headed over to them; when Jo noticed him, she shrieked and gave him a hug. “Scottie, be a dear and settle something for us,” she said as he clapped Daisuke on the back.

“Yes, I am the most attractive man in this cast, definitively,” he said, sliding an arm around Tessa and kissing her temple in greeting.

“No, since you’re the world’s foremost expert in Tessa’s pores—”

“I am?”

“Your job is to stare at her face for hours a day,” Joannie explained impatiently. “Now, do they look smaller?” Tessa stared at him, her mouth curved into a smirk of mischief. She wiggled her eyebrows a little before bursting into laughter.

“Is this some sort of trick thing?” he asked, only half joking. He looked at her seriously, then said, teasingly, “Tessa, of all the women whose faces I look at for hours a day, you hands-down have the best pores.”

She giggled. “No, when Jordan and I went to that ryokan last week I did a pore-reducing treatment. Daisuke says it was full of shit though.”

“I said merely that you deserved a surcharge for foreigners for falling for that shit,” Daisuke corrected mildly. “Good to see you Scott.”

“Yeah,” he said. “You too. T, how was your girls’ spa trip?”

It had been six weeks since they got back from Sochi, silver medals tucked into side pockets along with their regrets and what-ifs.

Five weeks and three days since she’d swung by with a box of his stuff and a sheepish “Since we won’t be hanging out as much now that we’re not training.” He’d gone through it immediately, standing there on his parents’ porch, and handed her back a Taylor Swift CD since she liked
T. Swizzle more than she would admit, a pack of cards so she could get better at poker, and a Team Canada tuque since her ears always got cold and she'd lost hers sometime around the team event in Sochi. He'd noted that it hadn't included any of the notes he knew were still in a shoebox under her bed, the Leafs bear she claimed to hate, the photo he'd signed for her when he was ten, several of his sweatshirts, or that decade-old, now-completely-faded Eminem concert tee.

Four and a half weeks since a media blitz through Canada confirming their retirement from competitive skating, and questions about Marina and Charlie and Meryl and the silver and the judging that made him want to pour sand in his eyes. They'd gotten ragingly drunk in his hotel room after, and Tessa had heave-cried out the vestiges of emotion before passing out on top of the second bed. He didn’t recognize the woman who woke up, her headband sticking funnily to her hair extensions.

Three weeks since Kaitlyn had come and spent a long weekend in Ilderton and Charlie had said “What’s not to like?” when Scott asked him what he thought of her.

Between media and sponsor appearances and a couple school visits and charity stuff and a trip to Montreal to choreograph tour routines and planning for the Golf Classic, they still saw each other fairly regularly, texted or talked about scheduling nearly daily—it was the mental rearrangement to not put Tessa first that was the weirdest part of their newly retired life.

“It was great! Jordan and I had so much fun. I love tours in Japan,” she smiled. “Wanna start practicing?” He held out his hand, snapped hers into a dance hold. “So this is how it’s gonna be, huh?” She looked down at their fingers as they skated off. It was one of the million and half tiny changes. “How’s retirement treating you otherwise?”

“Good,” he said. “You wanna talk?” He nodded toward the red folding chairs.

She bit back her initial response—which he knew was something along the lines of because that worked out so well for us last time you suggested it—but she nodded and said, “We probably should, yeah.”

“I just wanted to check in and make sure we’re good, you know, after everything,” he said, sliding over to the row of floor chairs. “We’ve got about six weeks of tours coming up we’ll need to be focused for.”

She parked next to him, crossing her ankles and staring at her toe picks thoughtfully. “I—yeah. I think so. Right? It’s weird, I’m still pissed and processing and kind of have that dizzy feeling, right after you stop spinning, about our … us, but I think we landed on our feet. This is just … us now. And I’m good with that. Honestly, I am. I regret the way it all went down, last year, but I think this is where we needed to be, and I’m good. You?”

“Yeah,” he agreed. Everything did feel weird, from what had actually happened to how clinically they were autopsying the end of their … them. The metaphor of spinning was pretty apt. But the conversation also felt necessary. “I think we—we forgot, at the end of the day, that we’re also each others’ careers, you know? We’ve always known that we’d both put our career first. And everything else kind of got caught up in that.” He’d given it a lot of thought since they’d spoken in December, and that was what he had kept circling back to: Tess was his career, at the end of the day; it was the foundation of everything. You didn’t mix business and pleasure.

It was lesson number one in ice dance—Danny had sat him down for a whole lecture on it when they were fifteen and seventeen; he had gone beet red around the ears—and they’d been stupid to ignore it.
She looked surprised at his logic, blinked as if she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “It’s one of the reasons we always have worked so well at our career,” she agreed. “We’ve always been so single-minded and competitive.”

“That, and we’re insanely talented and good-looking.”

“Obviously,” she agreed. “But, yeah. I agree. Actually, I completely agree.” She seemed stunned that he’d come to the same conclusion as she apparently had.

“So we’re agreed, that we’re agreed,” he confirmed. “Good. And ... doing our job ...” —their job, which entailed, among other things: pretending to be in love in front of crowds/feel each other up in front of crowds/breakup via Stay in front of crowds/still be Canada’s Sweethearts in front of crowds — “that isn’t a problem?”

“Not at all,” she said immediately. “That's more your thing. To take issue with having to play the game.”

“I’m good,” he reassured her. He’d just officially closed the door to them because they were too good at their jobs. After sixteen years he knew how to do it.

"OK," she smiled tepidly, crossed her arms and stared out onto the ice, a resolute look on her face. He did the same.

Tessa would always, he realized with a start, be his first love: He wasn’t in love with her, had never been (yeah … ), but she was the person whose opinion of him, whose tastes and humor and moods, had imprinted on him, shaping his preferences and reactions and needs. He had always known she would be significant, in an abstract we-grew-up-together-and-won-gold-medals-together way, but he could see it more clearly now, now that it was all behind him.

Sure, if they’d proceeded a little more maturely, if they’d been adult enough to wait until they were done skating to figure out if they were just business partners or absolute best friends or had a romantic connection as well, maybe they could have … had something. Or maybe not—they were staggering, their differences, they knew that now. And skating—every performance, every practice, every gym session, every early morning, every acting class, every footwork drill, every Hug, every therapy session, every interview—each of those was a piece in the chain linking them together for life. It had held them too tightly together to see if those differences would be surmountable under less pressure. He’d never know.

At any rate, he knew, they’d crossed all their wires, crossed every boundary, crossed every line between what was reality and what was performance and what was narrative and not. Taken something great, something with potential, and created this reality as easily as they’d once created the Canada’s sweethearts bullshit Skate Canada wanted or the Carmen choreography Marina dreamed up for them.

But this was entirely them, because of them, and you couldn’t go back. Not that he wanted to. Tessa was his past. His future was … somewhere else. Someone else.

He could finally figure that out.

“Do you regret last year?” she asked, experimentally.

“I regret a lot of things about last year,” he said, tone careful, “but not you. Never you, T. And definitely not our medal. Might not be the color we wanted, but those were our two best performances ever.” He licked his lips. “You? Any regrets?”
“Several, but never you,” she whispered softly. “I would like to be friends, still, you know. I still need a break but … It’s what we’re best at, honestly. Well. Besides skating. We’re really fucking amazing at skating.”

“Of course, Tess,” he said automatically. Honestly, one of the hardest parts about the last year was that he couldn’t tell Friend Tess stuff about what was happening at work, the crazy frustrating girl he was seeing and how he’d hurt her deeply, the guilt he felt, the way the rivalry was slowly driving him insane. Friend Tess was the best, funny and smart and crazy-supportive. Over sixteen years their romantic chemistry might have been encouraged and manufactured and exploited by all the adults around them, their shared preternatural drive and talent might have been the kept them together through anything and everything—but their history of terrifying experiences and tough challenges that were only made bearable by their years of hand-in-hand friendship had been real, and true. He’d missed her.

(It would take them more than a year, though—until they sat on a bench in a dog park, Tessa crying and him looking ridiculous in her sunglasses—before they got there again.)

“Good,” she said, relieved. “So, Kaitlyn? Tell me about her. Kevin says he saw you guys at brunch. And that she seems nice.”

“She’s—yeah, she’s great,” he answered honestly. She nudged his shoulder with hers, a nonverbal go on, and he started to elaborate, his voice warming as he described her passion for curling, her sense of humor, her no-bullshit attitude. “I think you’re gonna like her,” he finally said.

She smiled, “Looking forward to meeting her,” she said, gently. “You wanna skate?”

“Yeah,” he said, offering his hand. She took it—dance hold again—and they stood.

And the spinning that they’d both been feeling since Sochi, since Cassandra and the show, since Worlds, since her parents’ separation, since Igor’s departure, since Vancouver, since her leg surgery, since Gothenberg, since Seoul, since Turin, since Canton, since Savage Garden in some high-school hallway, since Carol said come hold hands with each other … It stopped.

In the end, he realized, was their beginning.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was also a freakout, like the last. It was a weird mix of stuff that I had mentally scoped out pretty early—Tessa’s version of the Sochi Games and her confrontation with Marina and Cassandra’s dressing down of Scott—and stuff I needed structurally but hadn’t really thought about. The jump to April 2017 was one of those. I needed something that, years-wise, wasn’t 2012-2015 (the first two because they were in the surrounding sections; 2014 and 2015 because I knew it was already stacked, later). I chose 2017 to change up the tone and give us a glimpse of the “future” even as they burned everything down. I really hadn’t thought through too much of how 2017 might look and feel, and so I needed to first think through my timeline for them in the comeback (last we heard Scott had a Two-Year Plan); figure out emotionally where that put them throughout that year; figure out how thematically that would tie to the rest of the section’s theme of ‘consequences;’ and figure out how much I *didn’t* want to reveal, in order to keep an interest in ‘how they got there’ alive. 2014-2017 required the most editing as I went along. And that section probably took the most thought and time.
in this section.

Because the rest of it was a train crashing, and we’d laid out all the track. Going back to one of my main concerns being that behaviors and gestures would be perceived as romantic or OK or justified, I really was cognizant of balancing how two lovely, genuinely good-hearted Canadian kids could both do awful things and then recover to the point they get to in 2018. The answer: Genuine consequences (and my favorite aside of the piece “You don’t even jump” as Cass gives the dressing-down to a scummy boyfriend that we all wish we could give). Scott and Tessa fully see the full scope, to themself and each other and other people and their careers, of what they’ve done, how they’ve treated each other. Peacefulboo and I talked in the comments in 14 that it’s as much a story about how you grow up as it is about anything else, and this chapter was really critical to those realizations, and propelled the growth in the next two.

The thematic tie is a little underrated here, but it’s one of the strongest of the piece, IMO. Without the scenes with Charlie, Cass, Marina, and Kate, there’s no way the rest of the piece happens. From a construction standpoint, this becomes incredibly important.

I think by this point I’d drafted the Charlie rebuilding-friendship piece that comes much later, so it was super-important to signal that Charlie knew them, and knew them well, early on, as well as for him and Scott to have a brutal friendship breakup. That thread was probably the easiest to just remove (it impacted so few others) but even though it added words and maybe was nonsense, it was weirdly important for me to keep that thread, and that friendship, alive.

It was very intentional to put Kate/Marina here and set them up as foils, and then Marie in the next chapter, which was all about reclaiming agency. Marie has more of the 360 perspective on Tessa the human, while the other two see one facet of Tessa much more strongly than the other. Marina compels Tessa to examine her morality, Kate offers her a path toward forgiveness, and Marie finds her a path forward. And yes, the name Grace (and the many meanings behind it) had been selected at this point, and most efforts after were to bend toward the name and the theme. It was around the time that I was writing this that I decided to start including flash forwards (late breaking!) and decided Tessa’s final major vignette was to be the two of them, with three kids (three Olympics, three relationships, three first kisses).
Oh, my god, you guys. This chapter was stress-ful -- turns out that "and then stuff goes here" in my 2014 outline didn't suffice. But I *think* we're in decent shape, though one section will probably get some smoothing over because it still kind of feels rough to me. I'm actually a little flail-y and insecure and frustrated about this one guys, so be nice and grade on a curve :)

This one is all about new beginnings and restarts and is (shock of shocks) way too long, but there are two sections that I stuck in specifically as a counter to all the angst I've put you all through. You'll definitely know which ones :) There are also about 100 words that I'd written ages ago and then edited out because they were filler, but then something on Tessa's Instagram made me go GIRL PLEASE this week and they came right back in. Will let you guess those two. Also had to throw in a little scenario that I am actually pretty sure could happen, due to Jess and Ben Mulroney — see if you can catch it! xx,

Jo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Four Years and One Day Before Today, Tessa*

The too-cool restaurant was noisy and loud, the DJ spinning in a corner as lights blasted. Dinner had involved a lot of caviar and European cigarettes, the dank kind without filters that always reminded Tessa of anorexic Eastern European girls in blue eye shadow at galas. Half-drunk bottles of Veuve, discarded heels, and glittery noisemakers littered the table. A drink high over her head, the bass thumping, and a gaggle of anonymous girlfriends pressed against her side, Tessa didn't feel the vibrations of her phone slipped in the pocket of her leather miniskirt. Only when she finally stepped out of the pack to grab some water—the temperature around her dropped about five degrees once she got off the dance floor—did she feel the buzz on her hip. She pulled it out.

10:26 PM: *happy new year! hope ur dancing T.*

It was 10:38. She turned to—was her name Alex?—“I’m gonna get some air,” she yelled, trying to keep her voice over the remix of *Levels.* Who the fuck had decided to remix EDM, anyways?

“Want company?” Alex shouted back, shimmying as the dubstep kicked in.

“I’m good; gonna call my sister,” Tessa said, grabbing her sparkly bomber jacket.

She took a deep inhale of frosty air as she made her way out to the balcony, thumb hitting the third name under Favorites.

“T!” his voice was merry and far away. “Happy New Year!”

“Hey,” she exclaimed, feeling closer to him, suddenly. “Happy New Year!”

(Though, really, her excitement was just *sad.* Even with their pledge to give each other space, even
with their studied casualness toward each other, the fact was that unless he was with Kaitlyn at curling or she was traveling for promotional stuff, they saw each other at least a couple times a week for skating or an appearance or some other joke of an excuse. They’d gone to High Performance Camp and ACI for no reason, spoken at schools from St. John’s to Saskatoon, taken interviews at every third-string radio station in Ontario, conceptualized the Gold Classic to professionalize their golf outings. Hell, they’d performed every day at CNE and added extra tours in Asia that year partly because it was nice to have cash that wasn’t direct-deposited to Marina, but largely because they were like two points on a rubber band, capable of stretching apart only so far before snapping back together.)

(That, and sometimes she felt like she was drowning in normalcy, and his hand was the best life preserver.)

“You get my text?”

“Yeah. I’m dancing,” she confirmed.

“You end up in Toronto with Jordan?”

“Nah, I’m in Vancouver—Ryan and his friends rented a house with a hot tub. Are you in Winnipeg?”

“Outside Calgary, actually,” he said. “One of Kaitlyn’s teammates has a cabin in the Rockies.”

“Mountain Man Moir,” she teased. “Did you chop wood for the fire and everything?”

“I’m handy,” he protested.

“Yeah, it was super handy when you wired the chandelier in my dining room to a switch in the bathroom,” she said dryly. “Or when you built that IKEA dresser in Canton backwards.”

He groaned. “When are you going to let me live those down, Virtch?”

“Probably around 2035,” she smirked. “So how did Kaitlyn like Ilderton Christmas? I’m sorry I flaked and didn’t make it over for the gingerbread competition; I was in Toronto until like five buying gifts.” She’d said I promise as they left the final Holiday on Ice show but she had been running so late, and she felt terrible for blowing Alma off. And then she’d felt so bad she hadn’t contacted him again except for a Merry Christmas text, she realized with a start.

Ugh. Be better, Virtue.

“It’s alright, eh,” he said easily. “She had fun! Survived Attack of the Mini Moirs. Excellent gingerbread-decorating judge. And she complimented Alma on the eggnog so she won a bunch of points.” Tessa hadn’t been surprised that Scott had dived right into a relationship post-Sochi, though she had been surprised at the fact that Kaitlyn had stuck around, slid easily and smilingly and perfectly into his life. He was a lot lighter these days. “How are the Virtches?”

“Good. Kate redecorated the house completely in white, you would hate it. Casey thinks it’s because of the divorce. Jordan brought Ben for three whole days. Oh, and Kevin’s expecting again! Well, Melissa is. Due in July. It’s a girl; Christopher isn’t thrilled about the sister thing. I’m going to have as many nieces and nephews as you do soon.”

“I mean, T, you’re the youngest of four. That’s actually more than my family, much as you act like we’re a rabbit coven out here in Ilderton.”
“Rabbits come in *covens*?” she laughed. “I don’t know why I used you for help with my bio homework.”

And they were off, trading family gossip—Cara’s new boyfriend Andy was actually pretty good at hockey—and catching up—she’d taken Chiddy shopping for clothing to adult in, and it had gone poorly, so she and Scott had some fun at his expense—and briefly discussing tour season—Scott hadn’t read the list that Tom sent over fully but was game for a week in Switzerland, especially since Max and Tati were going.

“Any resolutions this year?” he asked. “Finish school? Scale Everest? Launch your clothing line?”

“I … don’t think so,” she said, running her toe up her leg, right along a scar, to scratch a phantom itch. School had been fine … but so monotonous, and everyone felt basically twelve. She missed having that college experience, but she was definitely too old to go back. “I mean, I think it’s a resolution to not have resolutions year, you know? Still trying to go with the flow and explore what’s out there. Keep saying yes to as many things as possible.”

“You liking it?” he asked.

“Yeah, absolutely,” she said quickly, then added a “mostly,” so quietly she wasn’t sure Scott heard it. “It’s very liberating. And god, it’s so much more fun to go to Fashion Week than Finlandia. I’m thinking a jewelry line would be really creatively fulfilling, and I’m talking to Adidas about a business partnership too, which would be cool.” She felt slightly guilty for giving Scott, of all people, the cheery canned answer. “And, you know, trying to be a good friend and sister and daughter after all those years of ignoring people for skating.”

She really had been diligent, she reflected, about trying to be better and nicer in retirement; while she wasn’t sure she’d reached *grace*, exactly, her efforts certainly made her a more content, centered person, she guessed. She was more compassionate and thoughtful to her mother; polite and patient with her father; spent weekends in Toronto with the recently-repatriated Jordan. Babysat her niece and nephews every other Thursday; visited schools and taught master classes in nearly every province; coordinated birthday parties for at least six friends; been attentive to Ryan, calling him her boyfriend and meeting up with him regularly and laughing at his jokes. It was great to finally spend time with her family, and the charity stuff, especially anything with young women, was interesting, fulfilling, motivating.

(Interesting enough, fulfilling enough, motivating enough.)

She’d gotten Instagram and Twitter, which allowed her to continue to be Tessa Virtue, Somebody That Did Something Well. Sometimes the ‘Where’s Scott?’ comments made her want to break her phone, but often it was nice, to have someone, somewhere, think she was great, still. Fashion was definitely creative, like choreo; business resembled the savvy and strategy of navigating judges; photo shoots kept interest floating along. The response and the attention from social media and fans was gratifying—validating—after so many years of judgement. And she had been sheltered her entire career, she knew: always rushing back to the rink, to Scott's side, to practice, isolated and cold and alone and laser-focused and naive about the rest of life. There was a whole wide world beyond Arctic Edge, a world that left her wide-eyed and almost dizzy.

She'd tried, so hard, to be the best partner to Scott, too, which mostly meant giving him as much room as possible and committing to liking his girlfriend. The latter was actually pretty easy. Over Canada Day, when Danny had gruffly observed that Kait was probably responsible for the fact that Scott hadn’t backflipped into spectacularly shitty behavior once liberated from their skating careers—and, it was implied, her—she decided Kaitlyn was far better for Scott than she ever had been. He would probably marry this girl. And he should.
“T, you’ve accomplished more goals in twenty-four years than most people do in a lifetime, it’s OK to take a year off,” he said encouragingly. “I hope you still have dreams though. A Tessa Virtue that isn’t dreaming big, setting goals and kicking ass makes the world a sadder place to be.”


“Well, I should probably drink less beer, eh,” he said with a laugh. “Uh, Paul keeps talking about starting up a skate shop at the rink. Charlie wants to renovate a house.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that.” She meant the drinking, actually—it came up regularly—but kept it vague. Everything about him felt curious, the jumbled pieces of Scott no longer adding up. She couldn’t tell if that was the emotional scrim they’d dropped between them, or something actually going on.

He always sounded so happy-go-lucky, but she knew better than anyone at how good he was at telling stories.

“I’d definitely help out there. So yeah, that’s what I’ve got. Last year, win an Olympic medal; this year, drink less beer and resolve to resolve nothing. We’re quite the pair, huh?”

“Always,” she whispered. She checked her watch. 11:07, which meant— “Oh my god, Scott, you missed New Years!”

“What? Oh. Yeah.”

“How come nobody came to get you?”

“I guess I wandered away from the cabin a little bit. Hey, we’re lucky the cell service worked.” He actually sounded cheerful at that.

“Scott, you wandered away from a remote cabin in the middle of the Rockies at midnight? There are bears,” she gasped, trying not to laugh too much. “How much beer have you been drinking?”

“Relax, Dorothy Gale, I’m walking back.”

“I’m going to stay on until you find civilization.”

“It’s a light—I see it, Tess, I swear. It’s like, 300 yards from here.”

She kept talking as he insisted the light— not that light, T— was getting closer, then she heard a chorus of voices speaking at him, a muffled explanation of where he was, a resoundingly smacking kiss then— “Alright, Tess. I’m back safely, and need to make it up to my girlfriend that I missed midnight.”

Distantly, she heard Kaitlyn yell, “Hi Tessa! Happy New Year!”

“I should get going too. Only forty-five minutes till the ball drops here. Happy New Year, Scott,” she smiled.

“Happy New Year, Tess. Love you.”

They said that now, because it meant something uncomplicated and definable.

“Love you too,” she said. “Night Scott.”
She slipped her phone back in her pocket and rejoined the party.

When Ryan kissed her at midnight, she made one resolution: be a better partner in 2015.

(Scott did finally take her dancing, when the clocks turned to 2019, and promised to do so every year thereafter.)

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ii. Five Years Before Today, Scott

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Scott had resolved to have a good attitude going into the Games despite everything, part of their fuck-it-all approach, but he forgot that the sheer awesomeness—and he said that with a literalness otherwise reserved for curly-haired dogs, Leafs playoffs wins, and Tessa’s cry-laugh—of the Olympics just plain made it impossible not to have a good time anyways. After sixteen years in a tiny cold rink, the spirit and the other athletes and the celebratory fans—well, it put things into perspective. You stood up a little straighter. It was impossible not to enjoy it, not to crave the feeling, not to be on the purest of highs.

He never understood why people did drugs when they could be athletes instead.

So yeah, his mood lifted. Tessa was liberated from the stress and the exhaustion and the awfulness and toxicity of the last fourteen months; she was still overwhelmed, a little, but in a good way. She was resolute—her eyes sparky and determined, her mouth a thin line curved just slightly up, her playlists pumping Drake and Rihanna.

She was ready.

He was ready.

They were ready.

(Finally.)

He gripped her hand as they stood at the boards, ready to hear their names, the only two people in the world who knew this was their last free dance ever. The way he had done nearly every day since the age of nine. He’d once joked that he could make a cast of it from memory, could trace every line and scar and callous. He’d held that hand as they crossed the border to Michigan and before their first interview and during their first competition and after her second surgery and when they hadn’t made Turin and when they won in Vancouver and he was holding that hand, now. He’d held her hand on the worst days of his life and on the best days and on the days he remembered and the many more he forgot. Some days that hand had been the only thing keeping him grounded.

He definitely would not be here without that hand pulling him forward.

His entire life, really, boiled down to the simple act of taking Tessa’s hand in his, turning to face the world, and trusting it would work out.

“No matter what,” he said, and she turned, and he cleared her throat and started over—“No matter what happens, we’re together; no matter what, I love you; no matter what, we’re going to enjoy this.” He nodded, and she inhaled deeply and then exhaled, and her eyes hadn’t shut up.

No matter what, she was the only person who would ever truly understand this life, this partnership,
this journey.

And they’d gone out, and they’d kicked ass, and while he would change the color of the medal of their performances, he wouldn’t change another damn thing.

They got their perfect, shining, Olympic moment, unburdened by pain, by expectation, by anxieties, by pressures. A moment entirely on their own terms: Just them, out there, skating their hearts outs, reveling in the sixteen years of magic that they created together.

Just with the smallest asterisk.

Ultimately, he decided it didn’t matter.

(He did, at one point, turn to Marina and whisper, By the way, you’re fired, effective immediately, after the gala, and while it felt damn satisfying, it hadn’t even needed to be said.)

(It had made Tessa smile, though.)

And after the release of the endorphins and the tensions and the potential, when it was over—well, they still had Canada House to take over.

He was holding court—and his first beer in literal months—with a couple luge and bobsled guys, doling out poker hands, when a particularly well-coiffed head of hair walked past. “Patrice!” he yelled. Their old mentor and friend turned and headed toward him. “Good to see you, man.”

They manly-back-slapped in greeting. “Excellent skate. I’m sorry I haven’t said it already.”

“Thanks. We’re really proud of it, really,” he shifted. “How’s coaching? And Montreal?”

“It’s wonderful,” he smiled. “We’re adding another head coach, and bringing in several new teams. I imagine we’ll have a few pairs of our own in Korea.”

“Wanna play?” he held up his cards. When Patch hesitated, he said, “Come on. You taught me how to play, remember? Let’s see if the student has become the master.”

After he won fifty off of Patch—and five hundred off the rest of the suckers—he laughed and said, “Alright, Patch, I’m going to buy you a beer.”

“It’s the least you can do,” Patch agreed, deadpan. They wandered toward the bar, and he said, “I’ve been hearing about the Marina situation. Neither you nor Tessa look well.”

“Yeah, it’s been a bit of a nightmare,” he admitted. They’d reached out to Marie and Patch throughout the season to try and improve the shitty Seasons choreo—and Patch had been a rock of support at Skate Canada and Nats—but had kept a lid over most of what was happening. “But, you know, we’re not going back, so it’s over.”

“Well, if you need a new training home, you know Marie has always adored you two.”

“No, I mean … we’re not coming back.”

“Oh.” For some reason, that surprised Patch. “At all?”

“I … yeah. It’s been a really rough year, just … personally, for us.” He let out a sharp exhale. “And you know, we’ve been doing this together since we were kids, we moved away when she was barely thirteen, it’s been fifteen hours a day together. We just … It’s a lot. And Tess definitely isn’t going to come back to competition—she wants school, and to do some fashion-y stuff, and …” he
trailed off, because the honest answer was Tessa didn’t want to be around him so much anymore. “That kind of thing. I don’t know, she's Tessa. She's brilliant.”

“You’re doing the tour this summer though?”

“Oh, yeah. We agreed. The money’s good, it keeps us skating, we’ll figure out the rest of it.”

“I’m sorry. We knew it had been rough, but if we’d known it was this bad …”

He waved it off. “We’ve been keeping it pretty locked down. And the retirement, we haven’t even officially told the fed.”

“You have your show numbers?”

“Just *Stay.* Fucking *Stay.* God, breaking up with Tessa night after night, the ice cold on his back, was going to make for a *great* tour season.

(He learned to appreciate the song eventually, what it represented for them, once Tessa admitted she felt like his hatred of the song made her feel like he blamed her for their Sochi-era issues in a JF session. It just took a damn long time.)

“Come to Montreal; we’ll do the rest. Marie will take Tessa shopping; we’ll go to the dive bar down the street. You two need to enjoy skating again. And if you ever want something more, we’re here for you.”

“Thanks, man,” he held out his hand and they manly back-clapped.

“Are you guys … OK?” Patch asked tentatively. “You two have something special.”

Scott squinted, picked at the wood of the bar. “Honestly, we kind of need people to stop saying that,” he said. “It’s been a lot of pressure, having all those expectations of who we are to each other and how well we work together and the romantic bullshit on the ice and with the judges and with the fucking media. We lost track of what was bullshit and what wasn’t, when we were just skating and when we were using it for … other purposes.”

“Are you two …”

“We’re going to be fine,” he insisted quickly, because it was *him* and it was Tessa and it was *him-and-Tessa* and god, if they’d fucked that over completely, he wasn’t sure he was going to make it through the next four years, period. “But we have a lot of shit to figure out on our own. So Retiring.”

“Sounds good,” Patch said, eyeing him sideways. “You know … you both know that you’re the hardest ones on yourself, right? Not you, together, on the Virtue/Moir team—you are Scott’s hardest critic and she’s Tessa’s hardest critic.”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “This time, though—it’s warranted. Just trust me on this.”

He looked alarmed, but said nothing. “And yet, you remain each other’s biggest fans,” he mused. “Well. A toast to an extraordinary competitive career,” Patrice raised his glass. “And some future artistic collaborations.”

Patch bought him a few, then the bobsled guys bought him some, and then the women’s ski team showed up and they could *drink,* and Little Kaellyn appeared out of nowhere, and then Jenn Jones’ crew showed up, and suddenly they were on stage with the band and he was leading everyone in
The Weight as the room sang along.

God, the Olympics rocked.

As they swung into a choral cover No Cars Go he noticed a pretty blonde dancing by him, and he impulsively grabbed her arm for a twirl. She responded with a kicky snap of her shoulders, and soon they were dancing around the stage—she was obviously not a dancer, but had an innate, easy sense of rhythm that matched his internal wavelength.

As the song died down and they took their bows, she turned to him with a laugh and lifted her long hair off her shoulders. “Hey,” she smiled brightly. “I’m Kaitlyn.”

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ii i. Three Years Before Today, Tessa

“Ready?” Tessa asked, folding her foot to her glute and releasing. They’d already done an hour of strength as their fellow cast members slept off last night’s karaoke. “I was thinking, if we do six miles, we can get in the cherry blossoms after. That sound good?”

He heaved a sigh and rested his palms on his thighs. “You’re kicking my ass, Virtch.”

She smiled, sympathetically, trying not to feel stung. They were still a bit over-sensitive around each other. It was taking time, being around each other every day, practicing grace and gratitude with themselves as their skating partnership ramped up again. “I know it’s a lot, especially with the travel—” they were heading to Switzerland next, before spending a month on the road in Canada “—but we really need to build up endurance if we’re going to survive Marie and Patch when we really get into this.”

“I know,” he said, gently, looping a finger around her wrist in apology. “Just regretting ninety percent of the beers I drank over the last two years. Seriously, how did you come back in better shape than when we retired?”

She shrugged. “I’m really not, but I did start eating an actually healthy diet, as opposed to subsisting on yogurt and oranges, and kept willingly agreeing to do photoshoots to showcase my abs.” She popped her earbuds in and toggled her Spotify to a mix heavy on Rihanna and Beyonce. “You ready?”

He straightened, pulling his own headphones in, probably to a Kanye/Kendrick/Jay playlist. His eyes locked into the laser-beam place they’d go before a competition. “Yeah, let’s go.”

Despite his admission that he was out of shape, he was still an Olympian, still incredibly competitive, and still a twenty-eight-year-old guy, which meant that he was much faster anyways and set the pace, somewhere around a seven-minute mile. About a half-mile in, he winged out his arm and tapped her bicep with an elbow, then pointed to a coffee shop: “Let’s go a little farther so we can end there, yeah?” She nodded, because that was an excellent idea.

They didn’t really talk on runs—they needed to be pacing faster than would make that comfortable, though on anything from Late Registration she would hear him singing along—and she worked to keep up because she’d mapped out the route mentally. When they were about two-tenths of a mile from the coffee shop, she tapped his shoulder and sprinted past him, sticking her tongue out as she went. He nipped her at her heels, laughing the entire time; then, when they were about five feet from the curb, gracefully scooped her up, spun her around. “It’s a tie,” he murmured into her ear before
setting her down.

She turned, so far in his space their chests were touching. “I’m closer to the coffee,” she pointed out, breathing out just a little bit, eyes locked on his. “So I win. Loser buys the coffee.”

“The one with the pockets buys the coffee,” he retorted, since his held her credit card. Nevertheless he twirled her around again, placed his chest on her back, arms wrapped around her waist, and walked her into the coffee shop. “You’re a lot easier to deal with post-caffeination, though, so I’m happy to oblige.” She elbowed him in the rib and laughed.

They stumbled through ordering two almond-milk cappuccinos—especially when abroad, he just ordered whatever she was feeling, had for years—and then wandered down to the promenade, where the tourists were beginning to mill about. She sighed, content. He looked over at her with an eyebrow raised.

“Nothing,” she smiled, leaning back to nudge his shoulder. “I just … I love Osaka in April.” She hummed contentedly. “Even though I hate waking up at five to run and I know you hate missing karaoke, but this … is nice.” Ever since dinner with Joannie last month—and Tessa’s mindless repeat of a stupid story she’d made up years ago once the boyfriend started asking questions—she felt the need to reassure him, and maybe herself, that they were in this together.

She was so happy they were back, in more ways than one.

“It is pretty,” he agreed, then cleared his throat. “We should get dinner tonight.”

“Yeah,” she replied. “There’s a sushi restaurant that Javi wanted to try out in Namba.”

“No I mean … we should get dinner tonight.”

“Oh. Sure,” she was somewhat surprised—one of the things Scott loved about tour was hanging out with everyone else. He’d been living it up to the extent that he could, with their early-morning training, but she knew he was bummed not to be the life of the party. “Anything in particular we should be talking about?”

“No, just … not skating. Wear something nice. We’ve been working so hard. We should have fun.”

It was nearing eight, so they started wandering back to the hotel in companionable silence, shoulders brushing as they walked. Aliona and Javi and Max and Tati were standing in front of the hotel, squinting sleepily into the light, dressed in street clothes. “Some of us have been up for three hours, slackers,” Scott greeted them cheerfully.

“Some of us like to enjoy our tour,” Max smirked back, his hand on Tati’s spine. They were enjoying retired life, still.

They stopped to talk briefly, but soon it became an entire conversation about restaurants and plans and the group numbers and the hockey playoffs, because Scott and Max and Javi were involved and so it always turned into a conversation about hockey playoffs, and so she cleared her throat and said, “I really need to shower, so I’m gonna excuse myself and see you all later,” before slipping her hand into Scott’s shorts pocket and pulling their room keys and his credit card out. She grabbed hers and handed him his stuff. “Good run,” she said. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Max’s eyebrow lift.

“Yeah,” he nodded, squeezing her wrist gently. “See you in an hour.”

She gave Max a look, daring him to say something. He didn’t.
Eleven hours later, she was curling her hair and stroking her mascara just so and wondering what, exactly, she was doing.

It was dinner. With Scott.

He texted her to meet in the lobby, and she grabbed a leather jacket to throw over the dress she’d purchased while out with Tati yesterday, a mid-length light-pink thing with a deep V, a nipped waist, and a bird-and-flower print that reminded her vaguely of kimonos. “Hey,” she greeted him, when she spotted him, in his good dark-wash jeans and a T-shirt from a bar he liked in St. John’s.

It used to drive her nuts, in the Sochi quad, how mismatched they always looked off-ice, always like they were attending two dramatically different events.

Now she kind of liked it.

“Where are we going?” she asked, automatically kissing him on the cheek. Since this was not a date, this was fine.

“Javi’s sushi restaurant actually sounded pretty good, so I got us a reservation. That OK?”

“Sushi? Always. Come on, Moir.”

“Good,” he joked, putting a hand on her back to steer her outside. “So, remember the rule. No skating talk.”

“At all?”

“We’ve known each other for nineteen years. We have other things to talk about. For instance, did I tell you that Charlotte cut Ava’s hair? It looks awful. Tessa Two’s freaking out.”

“We have to stop calling poor Tessa that. It’s been eight years. Ten since they started dating!”

He shook his head adamantly. “You were here first. All the Moirs are clear on that.”

The restaurant was tiny, one of those legendary holes-in-the-wall with a ninety-year-old sushi master. They did a pretty good job of sticking to the no-skating rule—though, obviously, the rule had an exception for gossiping about their skating friends, because Chiddy’s breakup with Other Tess was dramatic—and split a sake sampler and then ten types of sushi and then mochi. They wandered through the streets dotted with tiny shops, back down to the blossoms, afterwards; when his hand slid into hers, slotting her pinky neatly, she didn’t stop to question it. Music played, the lanterns bobbed, boats floated by the water, the cherry blossoms rustled in the wind.

Since it wasn’t a date, she could appreciate that it was a beautiful and romantic evening, objectively.

“Did you ever think we’d get here?” she asked, impulsively.

“To Osaka?”

“No, I mean … here. Us. Eighteen years of skating, trying for our third Olympics, coming back, all of it.”

“You mean, when we were like, seven and nine, did I think, hey, we’re going to win an Olympics one day? No. Pretty sure, given how much I hated skating with picks, that this is fate laughing at me.”

She prickled, just a little. “I don’t believe in fate,” she shrugged casually. “Chance, destiny,
inevitability. Any of it."

"Tess, you wrote down that you and Danny were going to win the Olympics when you were eight. You watched every Disney movie, and then every Audrey Hepburn movie, and wrote down your plans every New Year’s Day, and you accomplished all of them. I have never met anyone more assured of their own destiny.” His voice trailed off. “It’s one of the many things that’s extraordinary about you.”

She swallowed, and sank her shoulder planes into his pecs so they didn’t have to be face to face for this conversation. “Anything that’s extraordinary about me has only happened when I’m holding your hand,” she reminded him, because sometimes he forgot that. “I’m not saying I didn’t have big plans. Just that it’s our choices that make us who we are.” His hands slipped around her waist and he squeezed, and she knew he caught her *Harry Potter* reference and was being kind enough not to call her on it. “We chose this, this time. We worked for all of this. We’re choosing to try for extraordinary.”

“And what’s the plan now?” he asked.

“Korea.” She could picture it so clearly. Hard work, clear-headedness, good decisions. She had such a bone-deep sense of sureness about this plan. They stood there for a while. “I didn’t think we would get here,” she finally admitted.

He laughed. “T, if it’s a choice, you can’t know, first off, and then it’s all in your control anyways, right? So of course we got here.”

“I mean … I just didn’t know our choices would take us back here,” she said softly. “For a while, they weren’t.”

“Maybe that’s the case for chance, then,” he replied, but she knew he was mostly playing devil’s advocate. He released his hands, but didn’t move from her.

“Do you think we’d still choose each other under any other circumstances, though? That’s the case for destiny.”

“What is this, a metaphysics debate? Listen, I don’t know if I’d choose to be with you in any other universe or whatever. If you were a ballet dancer and I was a hockey player, if we met at a bus or at a college party or online? I’m not sure I would. Honestly. But in this—we work. I’m a fan.”

She pondered. “I still like choice, now.”

“Of course you do.”

“I mean, I like feeling like we’re in control. Don’t laugh,” she explained, anticipating his chuckle. “Inevitability makes it sound like it would happen no matter what, that the hard work we put into skating—into this partnership—doesn’t matter. It's important—vital—that we chose this comeback, that we choose to work hard, we’re doing this our way. We have agency.” She went quiet. “And I’m glad we’re choosing this.” She turned to stare at him, connecting the dots. “You believe in chance?”

He always had been more religious than her, so that might make sense.

He shrugged. “I don’t believe it gets you out of anything,” he said. “But it wasn’t finding skating that made me a great skater; it was finding you.” His eyes were liquid and dark, a little hungry, and if this was a date, this was the point where he would kiss her. “And, yeah, we’ve made plenty of choices, but when you add them up and we get to this, kiddo? Three Olympics, touring the world, TV ads and charity appearances and influencing the future of our sport, and experiencing all of this with your
best friend … Well, that seems like there might be a little bit of chance involved. There’s something there I can’t quite explain with our choices. That should count for something.”

She had to push back, a bit. “Our choices count, too,” she reminded him, clearing her throat. Getting this, them, right mattered so, so much.

“Oh, agree,” he said easily, but his eyes were deadly and deep and sure and she couldn’t look away. “Though, you know—I’m not getting us out of anything, but I think that now, the only thing I can do is try and be better.” That sounded familiar, she thought ruefully. They both had a tendency to forgive the other too easily and blame themselves internally for whatever wasn’t perfect in their partnership. “And every day, work hard, be kind and humble, be a better man to the world and my family and the skating community and others. But especially, be a better partner to you. And so yeah, we need to be honest about those decisions and what we learned from them, honest about why we’re making certain choices in our comeback, honest about how we’re feeling—” His eyes shifted slightly, so imperceptibly that if she didn’t know him so well, she wouldn’t notice “—but we’re still here, we’re still real, aren’t we?”

Wrong. That was where we would kiss her.

And he really damned looked like he wanted to.

She stepped back, trying desperately to break the spell, knowing this would be a bad choice. “We are,” she said, taking his hand. “Always. We should start getting back, though.”

He dropped his eyes. “Yeah, let’s head back. Five AM wake-up is gonna be here soon.” He took her hand, kissed her knuckles, and she leaned her shoulder into him.

They meandered back the long way, through the stalls and the lanterns, stopping at one point so she could buy a bracelet. “Here. Let me,” he said, and she held out her wrist so he could fasten it on, his fingers butterflying across her skin, the wispy hairs prickling upwards, reaching for him.

She pressed six for her and nine for him when they got in the elevator—saying hello to the group going out to the bars, led by Max, as they passed each other in the lobby—but he got off with her; at her look, he shrugged and said, “Walking my favorite girl to her door, Virtch.”

They didn’t say goodnight immediately, though, just hung there and talked, her shoulder against the door and her arms crossed loosely, his arm perched high on the frame and their bodies leaning into each other like they were coeds and this was a rom-com. It made her roll her eyes a little, how they so easily fell into this proxy relationship, even though the feelings underneath, she knew, were real and true and far deeper, now that they had gone and come back, than anything she could quantify romantically.

(She wondered, briefly if Tour Rules were still a thing in 2016. While there was a very large part of her that wouldn’t have minded if the evening ended with her back flat against the door to her hotel room and his hand curling into her underwear and his stubble on her neck, she realized she wouldn’t want to invoke them.)

They stood there, murmurs and low laughs, until they couldn’t mask their yawns. “Alright. You’re going to bed or you’re going to be nonfunctional when you’re kicking my ass tomorrow,” he declared.

“How can I both be nonfunctional and kick your ass?” she parried back, half out of habit and expectation.
“Because you’re Tessa and you have superpowers,” he straightened and stretched, a hint of his rapidly re-toning abs peeking through. “Alright. Night, kiddo.” He leaned forward and kissed her cheek, right on the corner of her mouth.

Involuntarily, she closed her eyes. Leaned forward an unquantifiable distance, their lips millimeters from each other, noses basically touching.

He didn’t move.

Inhaled just barely.

And then he moved back, pushed her hair off her shoulder. “I’ll see you in the morning.” He started walking backwards, a knowing smirk in his eyes. “I’ll bring coffee.”

“You better,” she said, again out of habit and tiredness, and quickly used the keycard to open the door.

She tossed her purse on the dresser. Took off her shoes. Flopped on the bed. Folded her arms across her stomach.

Goddamnit, Scott Moir, what were you up to?

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iv. One Year Before Today, Scott

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“This is insane,” Scott croaked, his throat still burning through its now week-old protest cold, recently morphed into an Olympic plague: his sinuses were the size of Ontario, his nose was basically full of clay, his head was burning with a low-grade fever as well as a headache, and he had no idea what time it was or time zone he was in. His email, literally unopened since before PyeongChang, stared unmercifully at him. He threw his head against her headboard.

“Yeah,” she sighed, curled next to him in blue flannel pants and a Canada shirt and a face mask, hair piled on top of her head. Her laptop was out too, they both wore glasses, had boxes of Kleenex and glasses of Emergen-C and blister packs of pills on the nightstands. He felt a pang of shittiness as he realized she was probably more exhausted than he: she’d been a good sister-in-law and visited Michelle’s school since that morning, while he’d begged off, after a long night at a family party she skipped to save her own voice.

Being the most decorated Olympic ice dancers in history was sure glamorous.

“We could ignore the emails?” he suggested hopefully.

She hummed sympathetically, but her eyes were bright-eyed at the possibilities. “After the Toronto blitz next week, we have no idea what’s out there. Julia says it's a lot of opportunities. Did you know you had the fastest growth in your social-media following of any Canadian athlete? You saw 400 percent growth in your followers, apparently.” Her tone was amused. They’d been completely isolated from the Internet and Twitter and Facebook and whatever during competition, and he only now fully appreciating the level of attention they had attracted, as skaters and as people and as Canadians and specifically as … a them.

(And that their strategy may have backfired spectacularly, but that wouldn’t really start to penetrate until they had to deal with Ellen.)
(And yeah that was a fun argument.)

“Given where I was starting from, is that really that hard?” he asked. He was so out of fucks.

“They don’t know the Old Man Moir side of you yet,” she chirped him. “Alright. Let’s start with Tom’s sponsorship pitches, starting with the earliest. We’ll get through as many as we can tonight, but we’ll need to address the rest tomorrow, especially media requests. Feb. 1, go.”

They flicked through pitches, sorting into yes/maybe/fuck no/check timing. They quickly OK’ed updating the book—“Are we allowed to edit out some of the bullshit from the 08-09 era, or no?” “Absolutely not, but happy to push Marina under a bus. A little.”—and to Yuna’s shows in May. He quickly realized she had about forty percent more emails due to—duh, Scott, you idiot, way to be whiny—Nivea and Adidas and being super-hot and into workout gear and fashion-y stuff as well as actually present on social media, but she sorted those quickly and mostly just made sure everything made it onto her calendar.

“What do you think about sponsoring a meal-kit delivery service?” she asked.

“Isn’t one of your ‘things’ like, being completely unable to cook?” That, Hall & Oates, and liking chocolate—somehow the blandest, flattest parts of Tessa—managed to come up in every interview.

“It’s accessible—”

“And completely true,” he snarked.

“—appealing to busy Millennials, and worth a thousand dollars per post.”

Nice. “Make it rain, baby,” he danced his fingers down to the keyboard, where he quickly typed Sorry, no pets yet in response to a dog-food pitch. They really needed to talk dog soon. “Wait. Is it any good? The food?”

She shrugged. “I’ll request some test ones but they’re offering cheeseburgers instead of turkey burgers in lettuce buns so….”

“Take it,” he said immediately. God, the last two years had been so bleak.

She giggled before straightening, reaching out to grip his forearm. “Oh my god. Scott. Did you read the TSN one?” Her tone was awed and deadly serious.

“What?” he asked, concentrating on getting all the Gold Medal Plates commitments into his phone’s calendar. He flicked back, found the email she was talking about. “Oh.”

“That could be really cool,” she said slowly. She kissed his cheek, smudging avocado onto his barely-there three-day stubble, and said, “I’m gonna go take this off.” She rubbed the gunk off his jaw and scampered to the en suite.

He knew the photo of him yelling at the refs and drinking beer had gone Canada-viral—not ten minutes earlier he’d begrudgingly sent Molson his Montreal address for a fridge delivery—and he’d even gotten questions from Tanith and Scott about it, but this was entirely unexpected: TSN was offering them both a role doing color commentary, as well as his own show. He mentally nixed the idea of calling figure skating immediately—he did want to coach, at some point, and that would be a huge conflict of interest—but apparently his passion for Canada transcended any particular sport. But it was the second idea that even his publicity-despising ass thought sounded pretty epic: A Friday-night half-hour show that was simply him taking his favorite athletes and sports figures out for beers and talking to them about their careers.
“What do you think?” Tessa asked, shucking her pants as she climbed back into bed. “I thought of a name: *A Little Moir Conversation*. I’ll even come onto the first season, if you promise not to ask me if we’re dating,” she said, gorgeous green eyes sparkling.

“I’ve barely made it through these interviews without saying, ‘oh hey, I’m actually in love with Tessa Virtue; nope, not dating, not my girlfriend; skating team and business partners and best friends actually does cover about 95 percent of it; yes, fine, we had sex last night and it was great,’” he drawled, as she folded against his bare chest, moving his computer out of the way for better access. Excellent. He wrapped an arm around her. “We’ve done commentary, and we’ve done interviews, and we did a freaking *reality TV show*, and none of those have been exactly pretty.”

“You’ll be *doing* the interviews, though,” she shifted to look up at him. “Though, honestly, at the rate you’re going—I wouldn’t be surprised if you let it slip up when interviewing one of the Leafs,” she teased. “How do you feel about your win against the Jets? Also, yes, Canada, I am banging my platonic business partner.”

“I really am sorry,” he said. He’d totally been trying to deflect and just brought more attention.

“I’m not.” She brushed his hair out of his face, her eyes darkening. She *really* did not like this, had not since the Sochi quad. “I mean—people are going to write and think and say whatever they think, no matter what we say or do.” Her tone, the way it normally was with questions she deemed too intrusive, was circumspect and clinical, distracted and distant.

“So I can say my second-favorite body part of yours is your collarbone?” he sucked at it lightly, ran his nose along the ridge.

“You *licked* it last year during Prince and people noticed, so I doubt that comes as a great surprise,” she said dryly. “No, really—what do you think of the show? I actually think it could be great.” She turned to look at him, disrupting his exploration.

He shifted. “I hate the publicity crap, you know that,” he groused. He would be perfectly happy to fade into the background and just focus on sport, and the skating community, and Tessa’s collarbone. “I’m so bad at TV.”

“I mean, you’d have to show up for some network stuff but I don’t think you’d have to, like, do Facebook interviews about what you’re eating for breakfast or whether or not I like oldies or pop.” At his upturned eyebrow, she said, “Or you wouldn’t if you didn’t want to. Honestly, it’s probably part of your charm at this point, how much you hate technology. To everyone else, not to me,” she teased lightly.

“And I don’t want to be known as, like, the drunk guy at a hockey game.” That shit stuck with you. While the opportunity to be Canada’s biggest sports fan sounded amazing, he didn’t want it to interfere with his plans for skating. Or with T.

They had time, but he wasn’t going to waste it.

“I think this could be a chance to show everyone the commitment that goes into sport, which I know is important to you,” she suggested. “If you were interested in it, you could talk to them about changing up the format. Take them rock climbing or to trapeze school instead of for drinks. I do think you’d be so great at this. You make people comfortable, you’re super-engaging to watch, you’re so funny, and you have such a love and respect for all sports. Everyone would much rather listen to me than you.”

“Well, yes, because I *answer* questions, for better or worse.”
“Not just because of that. And you could showcase some smaller, cool sports, like luge, who don’t get much love. And,” she finished with a smile, “you would like it. Scott—talking to other athletes about their sports and getting people super-excited about Team Canada? They might as well have pulled it out of ten-year-old Scott Moir’s dream journal.” She shrugged. “If it doesn’t feel right, that’s one thing. And god knows we’ve got so many tours and other ideas now, and coaching … Just saying this is something you would be good at and you totally deserve, so if you’re interested in this, you should take the meeting. My fear is that you think that …” Her eyes searched his carefully, “that you’re not worthy of it, I guess.”

The word twisted a little, the way all weighted phrases did. “No. This isn’t 2014,” he assured her. She always was so worried, that he didn’t think he deserved the best thing.

“OK.” She took his comment at face value. “So what are you thinking?”

“Well, I’d need to think through what other stuff I’m considering, and what I want to prioritize.” For him, it was working with younger skaters, getting his sea legs as a coach. “Plus, we’re booked up through July, across three continents. And we have our thing for the fall.” It had been his idea, but Tessa had been genuinely excited, had added plenty to the initial shell of plan, had already sent thirty emails. “So the earliest I could even think about this would be winter, in a year.” He let that hang between them. “And the conversations on sponsorships and individual stuff might be different then.”

“Right, there’s a window of opportunity. You should consider it now, not in a year. The offer won’t last forever.”

“No, I mean … My, yours, our priorities will be different in a year, when I would start this. Right now, it’s just what’s in front of us. In a year … We should probably think about having a conversation, yeah?” God, he was the worst at this. They’d agreed, to be completely focused on the Olympics, on building that big thing together, and they’d done it.

And now it was over.

“So you want to have a conversation in a year? About … our future?” She tried not to make the word ‘future’ sound like a dirty sock, and mostly failed. Jesus.

“No, I mean, it kind of needs to start now. Whether or not this would make sense.” He hadn't been lying, to the none-of-your-damn-business reporter, when he said that after the Olympics were over they needed to figure out how to open that side of their lives up. They had no clue. He tried to start over. “Where do you see yourself this year. In a year?”

"I ... don’t know what I’ll want in a year. I don’t want anything to change, but I don’t know what I’ll want. Sorry.”

“Things are already changing,” he said gently, trying not to lose the faith he’d been holding onto for two years

"So we're having ... this ... conversation now?" she asked. She side-eyed him, a little irritated, and crossed her arms.

He shrugged, tilted his head back toward the computer. He didn't say you've been avoiding it for two years, babe, though he could have.

“Fine. OK, now. I mean, I think it’s tough to see super-clearly. We agreed, no crazy long-term planning this first year. For now, my first priority, honestly, is skating with you as much as possible. Skating comes first. Probably for a year.”
“Yeah,” he agreed, casually. You needed to walk T into these conversations. "And we have our big list of stuff to do." They’d laid in bed in Korea, jotted down goals.

“Exactly,” she agreed. “For opportunities as a skating team … I think we need to take as many as we can, like we’ve discussed. For the sport, but also for us.” She was genuine about wanting to showcase the sport, but Tessa also viewed the Olympics as an inflection point for her career, the opportunities a transition into her next grand phase. Being a has-been was probably Tessa Virtue’s greatest fear. He had spent twenty-one years witnessing her ruthless, white-knuckled drive to succeed. “But I guess you want to talk about ... the rest of it.”

"I mean ... Yeah."

You know, we’re both going to be flying all over the place for at least the next year, not together, not normal?” she blurted out, chewing her lip. “Are you OK with that?”

“Babe, we’re having a business meeting in bed. This is pretty ideal.” He cupped the underside of her knee, scratched lightly. “And skating, collaborating—still my second-favorite thing to do with you, and the first can’t be done for ten hours a day. Most days. Or for money, legally.” She swatted him. “But yeah. Every opportunity over the next year, to skate, to promote the sport, to earn some money, in that order. That’s where I’m at, too.” He tickled her ribs lightly.

“Hey now.” She swatted at his hand. “Still a business conversation, Moir.”

“Fine, Virtch,” he replied, removing his hand, and waiting. "So, the rest of it."

She made the of course you're making me talk first I'm onto you face. “Jesus, Scott. You want me to say it?”

"I don't know what it, is T, I'm just ... asking where your head's at. I'm not, going to get, I don't know, mad or anything." He just wanted to know.

"Fine. Individual careers, then. After skating for a year, yes. But I don’t want you to be denied something amazing like this show because I’ve made some … demand on you or your time or your physical location. And I just … I really want those choices, too. I don’t want …” she trailed off.

“Yeah?”

“I want my own thing. Like, all mine. I don’t want to keep being Virtue/Moir forever.” He’d known as much for years, had expected it for longer. It had just taken him a while to be confident that his future was both complementary and enough, to be comfortable in knowing that their future was unknown but intertwined.

“Tess—”

“—I’m not going to apologize for that.”

“I know. I would never ask you to,” he reminded her.

"I need it."

"Babe. I know."

“But I want those for you, too. I think the most important thing is that we still support each other
completely, career-wise, as we try and figure out exactly what comes next. I want as many opportunities for you that you want too. Because we ... we need to unwind Tessa-and-Scott, first, if we want this version—” she gestured vigorously but vaguely between them, “—to take off.”

“Say what you mean,” he encouraged, using a phrase that probably dated back to Marnie.

“I mean … If I’m in Toronto for three days then Regina for two while you’re in Montreal for a week and then Calgary overnight and we meet up in Vancouver before going to Seoul, or I squeeze in a photoshoot when we’re in London while you go to some charity hockey game—I’m not worried about that. That’s how I see this, for at least a year. The important thing is still us being a team, you know?”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I … don’t need to be sleeping in the same city every night, or have you be my date to some work function, and I don't want to follow you around to celebrity golf tournaments. That's not ... how I see us,” Their lingo still sucked, he noted, with a warm feeling low in his gut. “I think Being Present right now is our move for the next year, and gives us the best chance at being successful individually, as well as together.” Tessa Virtue had finally rambled to her closing argument, and she nodded, proud of herself. “If that’s what you want. This, I mean. To ... try to keep going, outside the bubble.”

“That’s what I want,” he agreed, with a smile.

“You good on the plan? The rest of it — I'm not there, yet, Scott. I'm not. I can't even ... I know it’s not—”

“We got time,” he interrupted her with a kiss. The thought of figuring out the rest of his life now was overwhelming, and unwise. “And plans. And we’ve both been workaholics since elementary school, so I don’t see that changing. But this show is a bit farther out, and I’d like to at least guess at a timeline to get from here to there. To see if it’s do-able. Are … are you still thinking school?” She’d been talking a good game about that in interviews, but she had been saying she’d finish her degree for years.

“Yes,” she said firmly. “Maybe in January, but only if stuff has calmed down by then. And then an MBA, for sure, after … I don’t think I’d do it full time.”

”Where ... are you thinking?” He knew she’d toured a couple places last summer, but she'd never mentioned it and he'd never asked.

She was surprisingly straightforward though, her relief palpable in her confidence. ”So, I'm still thinking McGill, Western, or Toronto. If we’re figuring out how stuff fits … what do you think of … wherever you end up coaching, I can use that as the base, and go to school there. I mean— if you still want to coach—”

“I still want to coach, eventually,” he assured her, unable to stop the smile from spreading over his face.

“OK,” she said, pinkening. “OK, then. How’s that for a business deal? I’ll give you preference on location in exchange for regular orgasms and dinner nightly. And we can ... go from there.”

They were really gonna do this, he realized. They were gonna give themselves a goddamn shot.

He grinned, widely, and knew he would take the TSN call. “London … nah. I love it here, love home, but—”
“Scott Moir, country boy, picking a city?”

He shrugged. Tessa would love being close to home, but it long-term wasn’t where their careers were. “Toronto would be easy. Jeff would be fun.”

“Close to home, too.”

“But Montreal.”

“Marie-France.”

“And Patch.”

“They’re gonna need your help.” Everyone wanted to go there and it was going to turn into a hormonal, competitive cluster. L’Bord Arctique.

“And you know, it’s where we …”

“Where we what?”

He didn’t know, exactly, so he settled on, “Grew up.”

She smiled, deeply. “Air Canada can get used to me flying in and out if you are.”

“Montreal?” He moved on top of her, pinning his hips over hers, sliding them both down the bed, stretching her body out long and lean, wrapping his right hand over both her wrists above them, his left trailing under her shirt and down her abs.

“Montreal.” She arced up, kissing him, twisting her legs around him to wrestle to the top.

Business meeting officially over.

(She did eventually appear on his show, on the last episode of the first season. As they set up at the driving range, he teased, “OK, T, you only banned one question from our conversation today. What was it?”

“Anything about the status of our relationship,” she smiled, warming up her swing with a smirk.

“Right, so we’re not going to talk about that. But, for my sake: you’re clear on the status of our relationship, yes?”

“Very much so. You?”

“Perfectly, but glad we’re on the same page. So with that out of the way: I know when I had this moment of ‘oh, god, we might really make it to the Olympics one day’ but when did you first start thinking we could really make it in figure skating?”

“Honestly? When we were on the podium in Vancouver.” And they were off, discussing the move to Kitchener and the choreo decisions they’d made and his opinions on velvet and her opinion on programs with unfulfilled potential and her related guilt over her legs and the competitive fraternity of figure skaters and whether Seasons really represented enough evolution for them—it hadn’t, and that was their biggest frustration about it—and that time Tati organized an anniversary bash for Max at the 2013 Final that literally ended with a fire. Everything they’d always wished they could discuss in interviews, but had never gotten to because they were so busy trying to avoid explaining their relationship.)
v. Four Years Before Today, Tessa

Staring over the terrace to the first hole, Tessa announced, “So Ryan and I broke up.” It was a windy March day, really too chilly to be golfing and definitely too cold to be eating outside. But they hadn’t seen each other since Good Kisser choreo last week and they needed to start planning the Classic. She pulled her windbreaker tighter.

To her right, Scott nearly choked on his club sandwich. “Oh, my god,” he said, wiping his mouth. “T, I’m so sorry. When?”

“Don’t be, I did the breaking-up. I’m actually pretty happy. I was visiting him in Ottawa last week and just, yeah,” she said, shifting a little under his gaze. She felt a little like a failure, mentioning this to Scott—he and Kait seemed great. This was hardly a pitiable situation—it was the right move, and she felt more clear-headed each and every day—but the competitive side of her knew you could officially add ‘relationships’ to a list that included finding an edge, letting shit go, telling jokes, and karaoke at which Scott Moir just absolutely kicked her ass. “I didn’t get my heart broken by Ryan Semple, or anything.”

“Any particular reason?”

“Just that,” she said, with a blunt shrug. “That there wasn’t a particular reason.”

“Scuse me?”

“I mean, at the end of the day, we’ve been off and on, what, for three years? I know it’s been interrupted by training and everything, but what did your grandpa used to say—shit or get off the pot, right? We were there.”

“Shitting, you mean?” he grinned, teasingly.

“Gross,” she wrinkled her nose. “But, yeah. I … got off the pot. It was time.” She nodded quickly, feeling like it was the best way to say so that is that and end this conversation, and stabbed a piece of lettuce to further make a statement.

“Are you … Tell me how you feel.” He threw out therapy words. “Three years is a long time, and you clearly liked him, or you would have dated one of the other hundred guys you met.”

She wasn’t sure she and Scott had the same definition of like but— “I mean, we were pretty off and on. Sometimes very off. And it’s not like …” her voice trailed off, not really brave enough to say the word 2013. Scott raised an eyebrow, getting it without the words. “Anyways. I gave it my Year of Yes, we had fun. No regrets.” It made the relationship, and her, seem a little pathetic, that her best friend had so little to say about her boyfriend of three years.

“You didn’t … you didn’t break up with him because your Year of Yes ended, did you? 2015 is the Year of Oh Hell No, or something?” He looked horrified. “Because, kiddo … that’s not the way that’s supposed to work. And that sounds exactly like something you would do, honestly.”

“No! Of course not,” she replied, though the truth was not really that far off: she’d woken up one day, remembered the time she’d heard Scott describe him as Bro Punchable Face to Chiddy, and
thought … why? And she didn’t like the reason.

Sometimes Saying Yes meant learning to say no to things that didn’t matter—things that were less than what you deserved—too.

She popped a cherry tomato into her mouth, trying not to be defensive about how OK she really felt. “It wasn’t acrimonious, I swear, Scott. I’m not sad or pining or googling whether it’s time to preserve my eggs. Don’t get all … partner-y on me. You don’t need to punch him.”

“When have I ever punched a guy you were dating?” She stared at him, an eyebrow up, daring him to make her mention Bryce and Jess and Korean karaoke and basically the last twenty years. He caved. Smart. “Fine. I was younger then. More mature now!” He ate a fry. “Well, you’re Tessa Jane McCormick Goddamned Virtue. You can have literally any guy in Canada, if that’s what you want.”

Not every guy, she thought wryly, watching him eat another fry. Impulsively, she grabbed one off his plate, ignoring the wounded look. “I’ll get on that,” she said, clearing her throat. She knew she liked the thrill of being pursued, getting all dressed up and being the best, most impressive version of Tessa. “I’m not worried about getting laid, if that’s what you’re concerned about.” She really wasn’t. She’d seen her abs. And she didn’t need to be in love with a guy to have a good night—honestly, it was an actual relief, to have sex with someone who didn’t excavate her soul with fingers and dick and tongue. She had a plan, too: the loose friends-of-friends network known as Team Canada was slightly seedy, but would be great for somewhat-regular connections with very athletic gentlemen.

She didn’t have the emotional vulnerability apparently necessary for a romantic relationship, and was back to being too busy to fall in love for the foreseeable future. The Year of Yes sometimes sucked—she was often busy, but felt unproductive; sometimes worried she was turning to mush—but she was definitively saying yes to herself, with this decision. It was bleak, sort of, but best, to be clear-eyed about one’s emotional shortcomings. “I can find guys. Or take care of myself.”

His paled at her comment. He hated hearing anything implying she had sex with other people—including herself—though she attributed it more to the fact that once they’d used the same Marvin the Martian pillow on car rides, not that he had spent two years, in total, becoming the world’s leading expert in the ten fastest ways to make her come. “Tess, I—”

She laughed. “Relax, I’m fucking with you,” she smiled. “Come on. Nine or eighteen?”

“I’ve got nowhere else to be. Eighteen?” He stood and stretched.

“Sure,” she agreed faintly, because she didn’t either.

They did the full course and came back in, ordered a whisky neat for him and a French 75 for her. “To moving on to better things,” he said, raising his glass.

“And independence,” she raised hers in return. Because she hadn’t lost a relationship; she had gained independence. It was vital that she live out that distinction.

“So how’s Kaitlyn?” she asked as they ordered their second round, liquid courage seeping into her veins. The three of them hung out semi-regularly but Scott never talked about her and it kind of drove her nuts; Tessa wanted to be a good partner, wanted Scott to treat her like any other friend. And he’d talk about his girlfriend with any other friend. She and Scott had come so far this year—kept performing together, stayed friendly enough via golf and texting, worked toward genuine forgiveness while gamely moving forward—growing back together while also growing away from each other. And while she understood it, it sort of hurt that he kept his feeling about his girlfriend, if not said girlfriend, away from her.
If he asked—which he never did—she would assure him that she was over any jealousy over Kaitlyn or the fact that he was in a relationship.

(This was, on any given day, between eighty and ninety-five percent true.)

His neck flamed, which told her everything she needed to know, and he looked away. “Good,” he finally said. “She’s—we’re—good. Yeah. Good.” His voice was soft, and he took a long sip of the fresh glass.

“Scott, just because I broke up with my boyfriend, doesn’t mean you have to hide that you’re happy with your girlfriend. You’re my best friend. What are best friends for?” She took another drink, feeling a little dizzy. “That’s awesome, truly. You’ve been together a year, and it’s working, and I know how important that was for you. And Kaitlyn is so great. Your mom and dad and your brothers and I all agree, and we’re the five whose opinions count.” She teased, raising her glass. “And, you know—it gives me hope,” she said lightly, smiling at him.

“How?” he smirked ruefully, his eyes crinkling.

“Yeah! I mean … I used to worry that we were so codependent on each other that … we couldn’t be happy with anyone else, couldn’t be happy doing anything but skating together, even if it made us miserable, you know? I mean, by the end … I kinda felt like I couldn’t tell where Tessa-and-Scott ended and Tessa began.” She was rambling, nostalgic, as she reached the level of tipsy where everything made sense. Her limbs felt loose, her Psych 101 lessons confidently moving closer to the front of her brain.

“Tess,” he said, with devastating gentleness, not really looking at her, “My relationship with Kaitlyn has nothing to do with your breakup with Ryan. I’m trying to make it work, here. Please don’t make my relationship a proof point about your issues.”

“I’m not,” she said quickly, trying to explain, trying not to be offended at his implication. Shit shit shit, this didn’t feel supportive. “I’m saying the opposite. I’m proud of you for staying with her, and me for breaking up with him. They’re both good examples in my argument against us being hopelessly codependent.” She wasn’t sure she believed her own hypothesis, yet. But the longer she stood on her own two feet and the longer he and Kaitlyn were successful, the more he proved that he could be a good boyfriend and the more she proved that she could be enough on her own and that her only success in life wasn’t as a figure skater, then together they proved that they weren’t beholden indefinitely to the extraordinary circumstances of their partnership. Their fuckups weren’t written in the stars. Instead their demise was something entirely ordinary—just the two of them, and poor decisions and bad timing and mismatched personalities history—that had done them in. Just Tessa, just Scott.

And god, she wanted to prove it. For both of them.

“Hopelessly codependent? The hell, kiddo? Come on. We got caught up in skating and each other, yeah, but I think we chose to be. And codependency, or whatever the fuck psychobabble you want to use, wasn’t our issue. Our issue was that we did things that hurt the other person deeply. Ben and Tanith, Charlie and Meryl … they’re not sitting here drinking at three PM debating whether they were codependent.”

“I agree,” she said. She had now spent an entire year working through their choices, processing the end of them, feeling her way toward a new definition of self and of the two of them along the way. She wasn’t sure if she was better yet—stronger, maybe; savvier certainly; wiser hopefully. “We’re not hopelessly codependent, or fucked for all time. We just really fucked over each other. We know because we didn’t get swallowed by each other. We broke free of each other. I mean, I don’t know if
we’re successful at like, life,”—certainly not by the metric of ‘winning Olympic gold medals’— “but we’re doing OK at the stuff that matters. You’re making it work with Kaitlyn, right? Which was important to you. And I took my Year of Yes ultimately to find myself outside of the partnership and I did, and I can be independent. So, we’re accomplishing our goals. And we’re still friends, right, who support each other unequivocally, and we recognize that when we are just friends, we’re able to be, you know, supportive and a healthy partnership and everything.” She nodded, definitively, proud of her line of argumentation.

(She wasn’t sure where her logic about independence and codependence came from exactly, but she had watched a lot of Girls that year, too, and thought that might have a role.)

“All of which is awesome, and deserves to be recognized,” she rambled anticlimactically to a conclusion. She gestured to the bartender for another round, because it was three PM on a Tuesday and she was twenty-five with nowhere else to be. She ran a hand along his shoulder blades, because he seemed so tense. “Anyways. I’m proud of you. Of us.”

And she was, she realized, her suddenly mind clear despite the gin and champagne. Restarting their lives and beginning to rebuild their friendship sucked, was so confusing, was so much harder she had anticipated when she said I want out, please. Some days, it felt like the emotional equivalent of resetting a bone without anesthetic. It was scary, to stare into the abyss of adulthood without knowing what came next, without Scott’s hand in hers. It was gnawing and hopeless, to give up an obsession with perfection, to learn that it didn’t exist outside the brittle confines of a rink. It was demoralizing, to realize that in her years trying to become more perfect, she became less good. It was bleak, to know that happiness didn’t suit her—wasn’t satisfying, because eventually it left, and then what remained?

But enough practice, enough Yes, enough time learning these things about herself, enough time reading Cheryl Strayed and Caitlin Moran in the bathtub, enough wine as she cried her way through Little Girls in Pretty Boxes, and she was doing it. She was as independent as her mother and grandmother and Jordan had raised her to be, at the end of the day. It had been a hard-won realization, but worth it. Even when it sucked.

Especially when it sucked.

Sure, she did wish independence didn’t come only at the end of a trajectory away from Scott. And sure, yes, at night, alone in a press line, before an interview, she ached to reach behind her for his hand, to lean against him when she was draining, to pool strength in a moment of uncertainty.

But he wasn’t there, and he wasn’t going to be.

Whenever they were skating and she was up in a blind lift (or just anytime), he’d whisper I’m here or I’ve got you, and he did, every time. In sixteen years, he’d never dropped her. And now she was out there catching herself. Sheer probability said that wouldn’t work every time, and that made her new journey terrifying.

(Sheer probability said he wouldn’t catch her every time, but he had.)

But adulthood meant secrets, and having to put a stop to your own terrible ideas like TV shows. It meant trade-offs, and they had learned exactly how much of each other they could stand in their lives.

She had to be OK with that, just like she had to be OK with Kaitlyn, and had to be OK with being independent. They were better that way. That was all she had been trying to say, really. That they’d done the adult things, that they were trying to be better adults, and she was proud of them.
He softened and smiled, clinked her glass. “If you’re happier now, I’m proud of you, too. I’m proud of everything you’ve done this year, actually, kiddo—it’s been brave, and I know a little scary. And yeah, with us … it’s nice to finally see what’s actually real. And our friendship is real. We’re still here a year later, finding lame excuses to spend time together. Meryl and Charlie and Tanith and Ben aren’t doing this, either.”

She thought back to their conversation at the coffee shop before Sochi, and realized—“I think all of it was real, Scott,” she said, slowly and contemplatively. “Plenty of the stuff around us wasn’t but you and me … That was real.” Blurry, sometimes catastrophically so, but grounded from a very real place of friendship, of deep love. “We played it up sometimes, we misread stuff, it got messy but … every dance, every emotion—all real. Every time we took center ice, there was no place I’d rather be and nobody I loved more. I hope, no matter where we end up in life going forward—” and it clearly wasn’t going to be together “—you know that.” She stared at him, smiled wistfully. “And I know I wouldn’t be me without you, so I’m grateful for that. At any rate, it was all real, always, for me. Maybe too real, even.”

He stared right back, somehow looking more distant than ever, and she wondered if he was OK. “Yeah. Same, I think,” he sighed heavily, then smiled.

Maybe that, more than anything, had been the root of the problem.

Or maybe there just wasn’t any one reason, for what had gone so wrong with them.

And maybe it didn’t matter, like Scott said, just that it had happened.

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vi. Five Years Before Today, Scott

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He’d been nervous—and hungover from a night with Chiddy and Poje—during the ten-minute interview, the last local TV appearance of the spring tour, and it probably showed in his posture and twitchiness. He couldn’t help it: games about how well he and Tess knew each other had a tendency to turn him into a live wire, hadn’t been fun since he was twenty-two and realized he should stop publicly mocking Tessa for having a crush on him as a kid, and were even more terrible now that they were Just Friends and Business Partners.

And yeah, he wasn’t really sure why he had answered the game’s question about his first kiss honestly—he knew she would evade it, and that it would lead into the old story about their grade-school breakup, and he’d given her plenty of shit over the last year (or five) about playing up the Canadian Sweetheart angle. Especially now that he had a Girlfriend, capital-letter official and everything. It was a regressive jerk move, he knew—he just kind of did it. It felt shitty because they’d had such a good tour season, laughing and joking around and finding the joy in skating and generally recovering from Sochi. They had been great, and she hadn’t deserved the needling reminder, after all that.

He said as much as they stepped out of the studio.

“It’s OK,” She shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t even remember the damn phone call anymore, just the memory of the memory. I don’t mind.”

Wait.

“What?” he asked, surprised, getting a little irritated. “For how long?”
“I don’t know when I lost a memory.” She cocked her head and squinted, a little dumbfounded at his outage. “Probably years, honestly. Mom and you and your mom have told it so much, though, I do know it, like, happened.”

“So, like, when we wrote the book … you were lying?”

“I don’t remember, honestly, but I don’t think it’s a lie, Scott,” she sighed. “It happened. You were there.”

“How is it not?” Under all the layers of bullshit, he thought they still had a germ of truth, a shared history of simpler times to keep them tethered together.

“Because it’s a story,” she explained, slightly impatiently. “And I understand how very burned out you are on them after the reality show, but you know how important stories are. You’ve made your entire career on them, and they were how you made people laugh when you were a little kid, and they’re how you connect with people. Stories and narratives in and of themselves aren’t bad. You love stories. You love performing. If we’re all about the honesty now, be honest about that.”

“That’s different.” Was it? “How can we even start talking about honesty if you’re still repeating narrative Skate Canada’s been having us recycle for years?”

“I think there’s a difference between telling white lies and being dishonest.” She pulled her sunglasses into a headband over her crazy-long—definitely fake—hair. “Who am I hurting, exactly, by saying that we’re just best friends, or by not mentioning we had sex literally in the auditorium at the GPF after Carmen? ” He was quiet, and she continued, “You say it’s dishonest, I say it’s self-protective. For ten years, Scott, we’ve done what the judges have told us and what Marina told us and what Skate Canada told us. You’ve been the first to rail against the bullshit, but you went along with it at the end of the day, too. Always. And somehow in the process, I'm the one who gave away so, so many pieces of myself to everyone else—including you. I left home when I was thirteen, I got a nose job, I dyed my hair, I lasered away all my body hair, I did online high school, I ate oranges until my fingernails changed colors. And everything was worth it. Really. But I realized something: We owe the fans gratitude, and the tour organizers mostly-good behavior, and we owe choreographers money, and that’s it. That’s it!” She raised her arms, a small smile on her face. “It’s liberating.” Her voice was tired, teary, heavy.

“I thought you were over trying to control the narrative?” he challenged.

“I am,” she smiled. “People are going to think I’m too muscular, or I’m a robot, or that we have a four-year-old no matter what. I want to make them happy—I do—and I will never be enough for them. I wasn’t enough for the judges, I wasn’t enough for...” She took a deep breath. “But I do get to choose how much of myself I give other people. What I put out there. And now I choose to keep myself. With the fans, with commenters, with you—especially with you—that’s my goal, now. I mean, god, Scott, did you watch any of the reality show?”

"Nope."

"It was terrible. They chopped it up to say whatever they wanted, in the end. I'm crying in every other shot, you're just ... it's like a greatest hits of every assholish thing you've said in the last year. We look like idiots. "

"Didn't even get gold," he said hollowly. It hadn't been worth it, in the end.

"No. We didn't. I owe other people kindness, and my best effort. But that’s it. I get to have boundaries. That might not always look like your truth, but that’s my form of honesty.” She stepped
into his space a bit, eyes flaming. “And just so you know, everything that happened? I wouldn’t ever want to share what was real, anyways. Because all that? That was for us, at the end of the day. Just us. And I know we’re retired now so it matters a lot less, but I’m—I’m keeping it.”

The woman who stared back at him, hard-eyed but somehow still hopeful, was so different from the perfectionist ice princess he’d spent years chasing, the teenager who had fallen apart at every loop of a measuring tape around her waist, the girl who could barely speak to him as they stroked the rink. He knew the sport was shit for girls and women, knew intellectually that of course the last few years had been hell for Tessa—and that he had hardly helped—but this was something new entirely.

He didn’t know her, but he sure as hell respected her.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. He didn’t agree, entirely, but he conceded the point. “For losing my shit on you like that. You definitely didn’t deserve it. And it’s still a true story and … ” He scratched the back of his neck. “You didn’t deserve that,” he finished. He got what she was saying, he really did, and she was right, she had earned it.

(He didn’t mean for that fight to have an endless, regenerative lifespan; to stick for so long, in such a particular and painful way, but it did.)

She huffed out a short breath and straightened. “No, I didn’t, Scott Moir,” she agreed. “But we’ve certainly hurt each other plenty, and we agreed, leave it in the past. But—just so you know. This year? Is my Year of Yes. I’m going to take the opportunities presented, see what’s out there, and I’m going to—be different.” Her chest puffed up, her cheeks pinked up. “I don’t know how, but I am. Just so you know."

“I know,” he smiled, his eyes going crinkley, as she would put it. This Tessa, this ambitious, fearless woman, was one he would always know, would always recognize, would always love. “And not that you’ll ever need me again—but if you ever want my help, you know I’m here, right?” Her hair was flying everywhere, like always, and he tucked it under her ear.

“Yeah,” she smiled, brilliant and free and clear. “I do.” She stepped back, out of his space.

He smiled back, and realized the armor that he’d seen creeping into her eyes since Vancouver was now fully assembled, and couldn’t help but feel guilty about his role in helping her build that.

She’d kick the shit out of the world all by herself, just like he’d always predicted.

And he was back in Ilderton drinking beers, exactly like he'd always predicted.

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vii. Eleven Months Before Today, Tessa

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The ring appeared sometime after they taught the Duke and Duchess of Sussex how to skate—selling each other out on old crushes in the process—and before she took the GMAT. Right after the second loop through Canada and right before they filed paperwork for the foundation and before Audrey Hepburn Virtue Moir came into their lives and after she dyed her hair less strikingly brown and before he got his motorcycle and after he got the Olympic rings and their initials tattooed just above his heart on a trip to visit Chiddy in Vancouver (He’d tried to keep it from her initially which — "seriously, Scott, I see you naked under like ten different contexts weekly; you thought I might just not ... notice?").
It was perfect: a stark, cushion-cut diamond, icy and unadorned, on a delicate, twined gold band with tiny rows of pave diamonds. It was unusual and striking and unfussy and modern and classic all at once.

(Jordan shared he picked it out entirely by himself at Tiffany’s and Tessa had immediately said of course, because Scott had been buying her jewelry for twenty years and obviously knew her taste.)

He didn’t even tried to hide it: she opened his sock drawer on the hunt for warmer socks, which she did all the time, and it was just there. Not even balled up into a pair of Babsocks or anything.

It’s just earrings, she told herself as she reached for the distinctive box. Christmas is in a month.

It was not just earrings.

She internally flailed for a while, paced the house for a few hours when he was out at a Can Skate certification class. Walked around the block, double-checked her payment to Western Ontario for the final two psych courses, to be taken every Monday January through April, re-organized the candles on the new dining room table. What the fuck, Scott Moir. You didn’t even hide it.

And then she remembered she had known him for twenty-one years, and she realized: he was giving her the choice. His intentions weren’t unclear—she remembered his declaration from the end of tour, a promise in a Japanese hotel room—and this wasn’t a surprise, poorly planned; this was him giving her the choice.

And it was hers. She realized nothing felt inevitable about them, nothing felt preordained or yoked to a narrative or any expectations. They had worked every since day for twenty-one years to get to this point, clawing back from the brink so many times, putting in the reps, putting each other first, growing together and separately. It had taken effort, conscious heavy toil to get to this point. They’d earned this, and there was nobody else she’d want to spend the rest of her life working with. She had known that for so long.

And so whenever she chose, they could start that. They had time, they reminded themselves every day.

They had time, she realized, but she didn’t need it, not for this. And Tessa Virtue was not one to wait once she’d made a decision.

“Hey, Scott?” she said later that night, as they worked on tiling the powder room off the kitchen—he insisted on doing at least some home upgrades themselves, since he thought he was handy.

“Yeah, baby? Hand me that trowel, would you?”

She passed it over. “I don’t need time, just so you know.”

“What?” he sat back on his haunches, confused.

She leaned forward and kissed him firmly. “I don’t need more time, I don’t need time, just so you know.”

“What?” he sat back on his haunches, confused.

She leaned forward and kissed him firmly. “I don’t need more time,” she said clearly, waiting for him to figure it out. When he didn’t—or didn’t think he did, he looked like he was entirely too scared to be hopeful—she repeated: “if you have a question to ask me, I don’t need more time for my answer.”

He leaned forward and kissed her again. “I would kiss you harder, but then you’d get grout in your hair,” he said, very seriously. “I want you to know that.”

She laughed. “I do,” she assured him, not flinching even a little at the wording. She’d made her choice, and it was a damn good one.
“Hey,” he calls, walking into the kitchen. “I brought Bistro Carine’s home. Figured you’d be studying all night for that test and, frankly, I don’t feel like cooking since I have about four hours of tape to watch, I’m not even kidding, a little bit, Tess, this is going to kill me.”

His wife is sitting at the large farmhouse table, surrounded by problem sets and books and … graph paper? God, she must be dying too. “You’re a lifesaver. Is it actually seven? Oh my god,” she replies, angling her face up for a kiss. Makeup-free and in glasses, with her hair pulled into a ballerina bun, she looks beautiful-as-always and decidedly overwhelmed. “Who the hell knew that business school would have so much math?”

“Literally everybody,” he laughs, kissing her again. “I think Casey even said, ‘You will have to do a ton of math, you sure you don’t want to go to law school?’ I remember that. Christmas, 2018, right before you burned the potatoes.”

“Mean,” she pouts. “How’s the rink?” She put down the pen as he sat next to her, stacking the bags of food on the table. “Tell me all the gossip. Distract me, please.” She curls a leg onto the seat of her chair like a heron’s, chin on the fat of her palm, expectant.

“There are two weeks till the Final. Everyone’s going insane,” he shrugs. “Hence all the tape to watch tonight.” He’s bummed; the Leafs are playing.

“Carolane fix the twizzles?”

“Yeah, but now she and Kaitlyn both are in love with that new Norwegian forward on the Canadiens, you know, the really tall one? And apparently he’s gone on a date with both, so it turned into a thing, and me pointing out that you and Meryl were able to train together for years, starting when you were like fifteen, and you dated the guy that she is now married to first—anyways, long story short, Marie-France says that is not helpful coaching behavior.”

“You did not!” she gasps, horrified but laughing at the same time. “Marie is right, that is not helpful coaching behavior.”

“They’re in their mid-twenties! You guys were seventeen. They should be over their shit.”

“Yeah, because we definitely had our shit together in our mid-twenties.” She makes her point with a raised eyebrow, and moves to unpack into the food. “What’d you bring?”

“That salad you like, and the roasted chicken to split,” he moves to get plates and silverware. “So I talked to my mom today and—you want wine?”

“I’m good, thanks.”

“OK. So I talked to my mom and they had to move the winter showcase—half the synchro team is on the volleyball team, and they made a playoff, which was apparently surprising, I don’t even know.” He grabs a beer and the silverware, heading back to the table. “So now instead of the weekend I’m at the Final it’s now the next weekend when we’re in London for Eleanor’s birthday party.”

“Elle’s party is Sunday. It’s still Saturday right? We can totally swing by.”
“So she actually wanted to see if we wanted to perform something. I would be down but it’s the weekend after your final so I said I’d check with you.”

She straightens, suddenly, pauses from splitting the salad and the chicken. “Sure, that’d be fun,” she finally says. “But no lifts.”

“Oh, please, I know you’ll be studying like whoa but it’ll take us like a minute to put it together. We can throw the Goose or something old in there. People will love it.”

“Sorry,” she shakes her head. “No lifts.” Her tone is insistent and intentional, her mouth curved upwards.

He startles. “Are you serious?” He leans forward to cup her face.

She grins.

The chicken is abandoned.

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ix. Four Years Before Today

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She hadn’t been able to sleep since their return from China, since the endless conversation in the car and on the Great Wall and then in the bar afterwards. She turned the words, ideas, thoughts, possibilities, over and over in her head.

So she did the most natural thing in the world, and left her home at four-thirty AM, and flew to Montreal to see Marie.

She arrived by nine-thirty, picked up a rental car, was at Gadbois by eleven. Marie was on the ice with Madi and Zach, but Patch, an apple in hand, was leaning against the boards. “Hey,” she called, approaching him and folding her elbows in front of her, mimicking his stance.

He startled. “Tessa, my darling.” He checked behind her. “You are flying solo today?” His eyes widened only a bit. Patch processed everything so calmly.

She shrugged. “Wanted to get tea with Marie.”

“Oh. You could have called ahead. I would have brought you an apple.” He bit into his with a healthy crack.

“I like being a woman of mystery,” she giggled, and he wrapped her shoulders in a one-armed hug. God, she loved him.

“Oh, Tessa, my baby!” Marie skated over, quickly scrambled off the ice. “Quelle merveilleuse surprise! To what do we owe this honor?”

“I was in the neighborhood,” she smiled. “Are you free for tea?”

She turned to the ice. “In an hour, yes. Do you want to put on your skates?”

“I didn’t bring them. Not in the neighborhood for that long.” She had a seven PM return flight.

“Traveling without skates! My god, are you well? Is everything OK?”
“Oh, fine.” Tessa carefully tucked her hair behind her ear. “Just really wanted tea and company.”

“There’s a cafe around the corner with an excellent oolong and croissants to die for. I feel I am in the Motherland. Shall we go there?”

“You had me at croissants. I’ll wait behind the boards and make fun of Patch.”

Seventy minutes later, Marie squeezing her bicep tightly, they walked into the cafe which, as advertised, was a little slice of Paris. Marie side-eyed her while she ordered coffee instead of the insisted-upon tea, but grinned when she requested two pan au chocolates.

“So you flee London in the dead of night, leaving so quickly you forgot skates. You say it is nothing, but Scott is not with you, so it obviously involves him.” Her eyes were concerned, but mostly concerned and compassionate. She futzed with her tea strainer without breaking eye contact.

Tessa did, though, casting her eyes down with a sigh. She had flown all this way with a purpose, had known and trusted Marie, implicitly and explicitly, for nearly half her life. Marie filled in for both her mother and Jordan in the world of skating, had given them free rein at Gadbois over the last fourteen months, which had allowed the two of them to regrow their love of skating again. She had provided encouragement and yogurts after her earliest competitions, choreo and advice on boys later on (Marie: never a fan of David’s when it came to her). She was unconditional love in a sport that offered none of it, a sanctuary in the way that only Scott and maybe Suzanne had ever been. Montreal felt like home in a way Arctic Edge never had—they’d been given keys and license to goof off, try new ideas, simply skate for the hell of it. A place for the hard sweaty work of creativity that grounded her and Scott.

Marie had given them that, so for that, she inhaled, and did her best.

“I know Scott has talked to Patch, about maybe returning to skating,” she started, then waited.

“He mentioned, I believed, that after sixteen years—understandably—you both felt a break was in order.”

“For him, it was a break; for me it was retirement,” she clarified. “I was done, Marie. I just wanted shows. We burned so hard and so bright—anyways. Russia was heartbreaking, in so many ways.”

“But now …” Marie prompted.

“But now, it’s tempting,” she admitted. “We’re—we’re better. As a team, we’re so much better. We realized, I think, how good we are together, how much we love just creating with each other, how special it felt to be on ice, how much …” she stumbled, “how much we trust each other.” With everything but her heart, she trusted him infinitely. “That’s rare, isn’t it?” Marie nodded. “Right. And we were thinking, we have this vision for what a comeback would look like. Obviously, we would be here in Montreal.”

“Since you were babies mugging to Tutti Frutti, you know we have loved you.” Marie smiled, and Tessa radiated in her warmth. The only other person, outside of her family, that she’d ever felt as instantly at ease with was Scott. Marie had that same effect on people. “If you wanted to come back, we would say ‘when?’ and let you stay at our house until you find apartments.”

“We know. We do know. Thank you,” she smiled. “So we would be in Montreal, and we would be … trying for the Olympics again. Gold, specifically. There was a lot that—the circumstances surrounding Sochi were not ideal. And we don’t feel done. We want to come back.” It was the first time she had said it out loud. Everybody else, she knew—parents and the fed and Kaitlyn—would
be upset if they chose this.

“Ah, this is so wonderful! Why do you look so terrified, my darling?”

She twisted a napkin in her hands. “I’m … I would want to get this right,” she said. “Scott and I … After sixteen years, things got pretty intense during the Sochi quad. And god, Marie, it’s not like—it’s not a relationship, not romantic, but he’s my best friend. And not in the cute friendship-bracelet way, in the I-would-call-him-if-I-needed-to-hide-a-body way. Sometimes I worry he knows me better than I know myself; sometimes I worry he’s half of me.” They finished each other’s food orders; he still knew more about her period than any guy she’d ever dated; he taught her how to drive and lied to me about the Tooth Fairy. None of that would ever change, probably. “He’s special, he’s so special. We’ve spent the last year working out our own shit, and we’re finally good again, best friends. And suddenly we think we’re ready for a comeback—” she shook her head, and then looked at Marie, steely-eyed.

“What does he think?”

“Scott wants to come back. But he’ll will follow my lead on this one. And if I think we can do it, if I want to do it, he’ll jump right back in, that same intensity, that same commitment, no questions asked. Even if he’s scared, or not ready. I just want to be sure that if we come back, we won’t—” she faltered. She was so worried about him, where his headspace was, if he was just doing this for her or to avoid a future with Kaitlyn or because he missed feeling like the king of the world. She was worried about what would happen to him if something went wrong. She was worried about what would happen to them if something went wrong. “I don’t know. We won’t repeat the mistakes of our past. So I’m here. For tea.” She raised her cup and took a sip.

Marie smiled gently. “Well, nobody can predict the future. And the field has changed, we would need to talk, make sure you are making an informed decision. But I do know you two are the hardest workers, that you have a dedication and commitment only rivaled by what the other brings. I know you are older, wiser, stronger; that from what I have seen, the time apart has been hard but ultimately rewarding. I know you two love each other deeply. And you remain the most important thing to one another, not skating. I think that is key, because this will be hard. What is your concern? Losing him, as a friend and partner?”

“I mean, yes, always. Losing myself, a little, too.” She had worked so hard.

Marie cocked her head. “After all you have been through, all you have achieved, do you really think that’s possible?”

“It’s a concern.” She lifted a shoulder. “Experience says to be wary.”

“Experience is sometimes full of shit,” Marie said mildly, and Tessa burst into laughter. “Tessa, only you can make the decision. I can tell you it will take some courage, and some grace—” grace, again, Tessa thought. “—but you are both older and wiser and hopefully a little less reckless with each other and yourselves. And if you truly feel you did not get your moment either time … what’s stopping you from being fearless? Take his hand, jump off the cliff, and see what happens. I’d guess none of the best times in your life ever been truly planned, but all started that way, jumping off a cliff with your hand in his. If this feels like it could be great, you should see where it takes you. And if you end up somewhere unexpected—well, when has your time with Scott been a waste?” Marie smiled. “We’re here, waiting with open arms to catch you, at any rate.” She swallowed the last of her pastry, started thumbing the leftover crumbs. “I suppose if you still need a pros-and-cons list, Tessa, Patrice might have some time for lunch—”

“No,” she interrupted. “This was …. Thank you.”
Marie grinned. “So we’ll see you at the boards?”

“Let me talk to Scott,” she promised. “We’ll be in touch.”

She had a whole afternoon to kill, so she wandered around Montreal, made a mental note to check out a few buildings, found a cafe Scott would like.

Hopped a flight home connecting through Toronto.

When she landed she didn’t go to her place, though; went straight to the tiny apartment he was currently using as a home base. She was pretty sure Kaitlyn was in Saskatoon, but she also didn’t care. She pounded on the door until Scott, clad just in Team Canada flannel PJ pants, came to the door, and then she grinned widely.

“Kiddo?” he asked, his voice a raspy growl. She checked, it was close to eleven.

“We’re going to PyeongChang,” she informed him. “And we’re going to win the gold medal.” Her voice was low and breathless and excited, a brilliant plan just beginning to form on her lips.

He launched forward, surrounding her with his immediateness: hands big on her back, mouth kissing everywhere but her lips, arms wrapped around her shoulders tightly, breath hot on her ear, smell all around her. “Are you sure?” he checked, pulling back. His eyes were anxious. She knew this would be tougher for him than her.

“Yes,” she said firmly. “Vancouver, I was in so much pain I could barely skate. I have pins for memories, literally. Sochi—we don’t even need to go there. And yes, it’ll be nice to say shove it to the ISU judges and Marina and Fedor and Meryl—but none of that matters, because we’ll be doing this for us. Our way. Better together. You owe me this, Scott. And I owe you this. We owe ourselves this. We deserve that perfect Olympic moment. And we’re going to come up with a plan, and we’re going to make it happen.”

“Two years, no distractions, gold medal,” he repeated. “But whatever this is, Tess—we’re doing this because it’s our choice. Not for revenge, or redemption—” he swallowed, searching her face for any impure motives, his eyes just a little haunted and scared “or because we think this is inevitable, or it’s easier than figuring shit out as adults. It's going to be hard. We don’t need to do this, we want to do this. Because we love skating together. If the ISU fucks with us, again, we need to be OK with that. We can’t …”

She smiled, deeply. “Yes,” she affirmed, clutching at his face. “The silver wasn’t our problem. If you were ... if I was someone else, we would be done. But our relationship has always been bigger than us, or even skating, and we’re going to work and we're going to get it right, OK? We're still here, Scott. Together, always. And this is going to be on our terms. Everything is on our terms.” It felt freeing, thrilling, to view competitive skating as on their terms. “I believe that now, finally.” She smiled, brilliantly. She was going to make a plan and they were going to follow it and they would have a shared purpose again and it was going to be great.

He stared at her, warm and fond, a little uncertain but entirely ready. “OK,” he said. “Let’s do this.” He picked her up, twirled her, set her down. “I’ve got about eight years of tape here. Want to start going through it, making a list of everything we’re going to do differently?”

She grinned. “That sounds perfect.”

They fell asleep on the couch somewhere around three AM, the short dance from 2013 Trophee Eric Bompard still playing on the TV.
A couple people noted astutely in the comments that the balance between the two volleys back and forth in the first couple chapters, with one being slightly heavier on Tessa-realizations and the next on Scott. It takes until twelve for them to fully come together, but the two most divergent ones are intentionally eight and nine, which are all about the post-Sochi years. And this one was all about Tessa.

Trying to figure out the individual character motivations and journeys was nearly as complicated as having the plots within and between chapters. Here I went back to the “they’re opposites in every way and don’t realize it” construction I’d had from the get-go, and realized that Tessa has a lot more trouble balancing extrinsic factors and letting them impact her intrinsic life, leading to control-freakishness and perfectionism; Scott has a lot more trouble balancing intrinsic factors and that manifests extrinsically, with his temper and treatment of others. So from there it was super natural that Tessa would struggle with happiness, and Scott would struggle with worthiness, and they would together struggle with being enough and finding balance. It was important that they feel very distinct to keep the characters and their own journeys separate. And those distinct challenges were why it was important for Tessa to learn she could stand on his own, while Scott needed to know he could be a good partner. She doesn’t fully delve into her relative happiness—or if she wants to prioritize it—but she starts to realize here that it’s lacking, it’s been compromised away, it was not something that she had ever learned how to be or even desire.

It’s a pretty adult realization, and the first step was putting her in the driver’s seat on her own life, and that’s what this chapter was about. This meant with her career, of course, but also about her time and coaching and everything. Plus, after everything with Marina, giving her back her choices, and making her a firm convert to the ‘choice’ side of the debate, made her feel a lot more mature and adult. Furious as she was after that conversation, I tried to have the questions it spurred for her—"What kind of person am I?" “What do I want to be true for my career?” “How do I care for myself?” “How do I care for my best friend, and show him that?”—at the forefront of every decision after. You really see it in the conversation with Scott after the interview, but throughout the chapter she’s measured, guarded, thoughtful, responsible, even as she acknowledges what’s missing in her life, and starts to set boundaries we see manifest later during the post-PC era. And I’m still not 100 percent confident I’ve totally nailed the golf scene—where Scott’s vagueness on the Kait question is totally a consequence of the fact that he’s arguing with K about moving to Ontario (unknown to us at the time), but Tessa misreads as him moving on with his life, which has consequences in Scotland—but that one was, to me, the crystallization of growing up. “Adulthood means having secrets.” She chooses self, and self-determination: her happiness, whatever shape it takes, will be found in herself.

Since so much of the angst had been front-loaded, I wanted to fling us forward in 2018+ as well. Most of that’s from Scott’s perspective so as to not detract from her journey, but to throw in relief its eventual rewards. From a construction standpoint, the puzzles were now ‘what exactly are they to each other?’ and ‘what does the life they’re building look like?’ rather than "what the fuck happened?" And I wanted to genuinely explore the distance in 2014/2015, after everything burned down, and across ch 5-8, there are multiple references to them genuinely not hanging out all that much. And it’s reflected in
the tone of the post-PC pieces. Manquebusiness will groan, but I’m a huge royal-watcher, so getting references into the Sussexes (connected via Jess Mulroney) was incredibly important to me.

The Marie conversation was meant to be the culmination of everything she realized in that chapter because it’s her choosing herself, and also what makes her happiest, the thing she loves no matter what, the thing that is most real and substantial to her: skating with Scott. It was possible because Marie knew her as a skater and as a person and as a partner, which was a lens that nobody else has. The balance of the four of them—Patch, Marie, Tessa, Scott—from a narrative perspective excites me as much as the fact that she stayed-short-and-he-grew!. Marie offers her the perspective “if you end up somewhere unexpected, when has that ever been a waste?” while a few chapters later, Patch asks Scott, “when has Tessa ever given up on you?” and setting that up was literal catnip to me. But by the end, we’ve suddenly got her positioned to dig deeeeeeep into the comeback, and she’s in a great place, and she’s succeeded at the thing she thought she couldn’t do: know herself.
there's a light but there's a tunnel to crawl through

Chapter Summary

Hello, gang, and welcome back! Thanks so much for the positive reception to the Tessa centric chapter. Now please sit back and enjoy Scott's take on those post-Sochi years, centered on themes of worthiness and effort and forgiveness. And now we've (finally reached Scotland, ya'll. *Scotland.*

A couple people have mentioned the confusing timeline, and I swear I'm trying to make it better with references! But in this one, if you haven't seen the post-2017 Worlds short dance press conference (on YouTube), I highly recommend watching. Working knowledge of The Hip and The Civil Wars discography also potentially helpful :) And as always, expect some light editing as I tighten up chapters.

When I started outlining this chapter I knew it would have a title from a Frightened Rabbit song, "The Oil Slick" and that listening to the band would get me in the right mindset for Scott this chapter; plus, they're a Scottish band. I identify them very very strongly with a particular period in my life. Tragically, the lead singer died this past week, so friendly call to be kind to yourselves and others, peeps.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

i. Four Years Before Today, Scott

As he blinked into consciousness, Scott catalogued the body parts that felt like they were filled with sand: head, check; eyes, check; face, check; throat, check; tongue, check.

Fuck, was he ever hungover.

The mattress beneath his body felt unfamiliar, so he shifted carefully, hoping that he hadn’t blacked out and fucked some girl at a bar in Ilderton. Kaitlyn and Tessa would kill him for that. Fuck, he would kill himself for that.

He unclenched his eyes and heaved a sigh of relief. Thank Christ. There was only one bedroom in the world decorated in ten shades of white and photos of him.

Somehow he’d ended up in Tessa’s guestroom.

He looked around: Boxers and the Frightened Rabbit concert tee he’d had on last night—still on. Jeans folded on the cream armchair, belt circled neatly on top, glass of water and ibuprofin on the nightstand. He put his hands in his head, trying to recall if he’d done something last night to earn Tessa’s wrath before facing her. Honestly, he didn’t even remember seeing her.

Dry-swallowing the pills and wandering downstairs, he spotted her immediately at her table. He’d barely seen her since golfing post-her breakup with Ryan a few weeks ago, and she looked wan even in her teal Adidas set. Several pieces of tissue paper—of all things—were spread out in front of her, coffee and a smoothie at her side, a yoga mat on the floor. “Hey kiddo,” he called, his voice
craggier than expected. He cleared his throat. “I mean. Hey.”

She looked up. She wasn’t mad, he didn’t think. “Oh good. You’re up.” She shifted. “Want coffee?”

“God. Yes, please,” he said. “I’ll get it. You want a refill? What are you working on?”

“I’m good. You’ll think it’s dumb.” Her tone said ask me again, though, so he did, and she relented. “I need to pick which tissue paper to use for the gift bags for the jewelry launch party.”

“Gotcha,” he replied. “If it’s important to you I would never think it was dumb.”

She smiled, and they stared at each other. “How’s your head feel?” she said as he said, “Want pancakes?”

“You first,” she said.

“It’s—I’m pretty hungover,” he admitted. His knew he’d been out with a guy named Cole, from Charlie’s class. They’d been at Joe’s and playing pool and … he woke up at Tessa’s.

“Not surprised,” she said, with a sympathetic smile.

“Are you going to tell me or—”

“You should get showered, and then we’ll go out and grab breakfast, then yeah, let’s talk,” she said, her voice brisk and evasive.

“I can just make pancakes here,” he offered. “Surely you have flour, T.”

“We should go out,” she said, eyes focused on two pieces of tissue paper, “since I want to be a good partner, but god, Scott, I’m worried I’m going to yell or cry and that’s not productive, and we have to be out in Ilderton for the rink carnival at two. And I don’t want to look awful, either.” She put one piece down and picked up another. “I swear I’m not mad, I’m just … I have questions. And first one, which color? I can’t fucking care anymore.” She sounded overwhelmed. He did that, he realized dully.

“The pinker one,” he said automatically. “OK, all that sounds good. What if … What if I made us pancakes, and then we get coffee and go to Stoney Creek to watch the dogs. You can’t cry or yell when there’s cute puppies around; it’s physically impossible.”

She smiled—Tessa loved the dog park. “That sounds good. Flour is where it always is.”

He made up a batch, adding chocolate chips to her half. They ate slowly, chatting about the carnival, about Jordan’s boyfriend, about Kaitlyn’s tournaments, about CSOI costumes, about the weather. He did the dishes and paid for Starbucks, and they meandered to a bench in the park. Tessa sipped her coffee slowly, her enormous Audrey Hepburn sunglasses masking her expression, her breathing deep and even.

“Alright kiddo. You’ve got a lot to say and I don’t remember last night so I think you need to go first.” He chewed at his cup’s green plastic stopper thingy.

“Well, that’s the first thing, isn’t it?” she said, watching the puppies. “Scott, by the time I tracked you down … I have seen you drunk so many times. Hell, I was eleven the first time—remember, Cara and Charlie and Jordan threw that party and you made them give you a wine cooler for silence?”

He laughed at the memory. “I drank maybe a third. I’m pretty sure I only thought I was drunk.”
She ignored him. “And you know, normally it’s like, singing, dancing, Life of the Party Scott … but last night it was almost scary, how drunk and sad you were. And … angry.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, automatically, trying to squint his hangover away. She handed him her shades and he put them on even though he realized he looked absurd. But her eyes were glistening with unshed tears. Fuck. Fuck-fuck-fuck. “Did I … call you?”

“No, Joe Taproom did. Your phone died and I was the only number you had memorized.” She inhaled deeply. “It was only eleven, so I called Charlie since I figured you were together. He said he’d been out last Saturday and then Monday with you, and had to get you home. Oh, and he knew you’d been out Tuesday with this Cole guy. I called Baker. He had last Thursday and then this Wednesday. Paul and Jake, Sunday. Chiddy last Tuesday and Wednesday. I called Kaitlyn and she said that you’d gotten pretty drunk when you were with her Friday to Monday before last and actually, yeah, it had been kind of a lot and she wasn’t sure what to say. I called your mom this morning and she mentioned you had been gloriously hungover when you took her to mass last week.” The tears started falling, a cry-pretty he recognized from years of Kiss and Crys. “She was worried. I didn’t tell her that by this point, according to your friends and brothers and girlfriend, you’ve been drunk—not drinking, Scott, drunk— the last thirteen nights. And we’re leaving on tour in two weeks and Kait is coming, too.”

“I’m not going to fuck up your tour, Tess,” he said, tiredly. “And Kait has nothing to do with this.”

“You go out on tour and you go out with Kait. And I don’t care about tour, I care about you, you idiot,” she took a deep breath. “You’re out every night but it’s never with the same people. It’s avoidant, like you’re purposefully sliding through the cracks. And, you know, you’re a little hungover a lot, and you’ve gained weight, which I wrote off because we’re not eating lettuce and boiled chicken exclusively. But that was the drunk you get to forget.” She started to cry, for real. “I’m … I’m just trying to be a good partner. But—it’s so hard not having that purpose anymore. I know that.” He felt immediately guilty—she hadn’t said anything, but he knew the signs it was a challenge for her, too. “It felt like Kait was providing that …. are you happy, Scott?”

“You seem to be doing alright,” he said gently. (Avoidantly.) “Fashion lines and school an appearance every night.”

“Please. It’s terrifying,” she said, voice still raspy. “You, skating … You made me something, and stronger. Without you I’m just a basic bitch drinking Starbucks in nice boots, four credits short of a psych degree and stressing about tissue paper colors. I sometimes wait for you to whisper I’m here before I do something scary and you’re not, and I have to remind myself that’s the way it is and should be. I can make my own structure, and I know I can do something … big, but I have no idea what it is.” She leaned her head against him. “But this isn’t about me. Scott. Talk to me.”

He sighed, wrapped his arm around her waist, pulled her in. Tessa’s simple, devastating summation was, he knew, a pretty accurate encapsulation of his last eight months. He could sense this was only the beginning of reckoning with the scope of his fuckery and turmoil, of the problems he’d created and the ones he’d avoided. He could retire, he could ignore Tess, he could throw himself into Kaitlin, he could drink in anger and joke in pain, but he couldn’t stop being him.

He felt equal parts embarrassed and relieved to finally be talking about this. Of course Tess put it together and was going to hold his ass accountable. She’d always believed in the best version of him, and held him to it.

Fuck, was he fucked. He’d messed up so much, again.

He took a deep, shuddering breath. “I mean, yeah, Tess, of course it’s weird to not be skating. And
yeah, Kait’s great — I love her — but, you know, she’s competing, she’s in Winnipeg, I don’t see her all the time.” There was, of course, their latest topic of conversation, but he wasn’t bringing that up to Tess. “And yeah otherwise … There’s a lot of stuff, but it doesn’t always add up to a full day, I guess? It’s sometimes not enough to tire me out.”

“You have an incredible amount of energy,” she observed, tone neutral. “So you’re like, too wound up at the end of the day? Because you didn’t do enough to keep your mind and body working? So you’re going out and like, tiring yourself out?”

“Sure,” he agreed. That sounded right.

She elbowed him. “Every night. To the point of blackout? Just to … sleep?”

“Not just to sleep.” To fill time, somehow. To fill something, somehow. And because.

Because the last Congrats Scott and Tessa sign had been taken down somewhere around the New Year—it had been in the window of the Methodist church—and he has been surprised by the intensity by which that just hurt. Because she was off being Tessa and Kaitlyn was off competing and his brothers were with their families and his mom had the rink and his friends were all perfectly happy in Ilderton—and he was too, usually, but sometimes because he missed Moscow and Colorado Springs and Paris and Helsinki and hell, even fucking Tallinn.

“Retiring at twenty-six isn’t exactly what it’s cracked up to be,” he finally said. Skating had been hard, damn hard at times, but he had never questioned his purpose or gift or skill or worth when they were skating competitively. Even their struggles, in retrospect, seemed laughable when compared to the slippery challenge of starting over and moving on: they were locked in a death match to be number one in the world in a niche, elite sport. They’d worked a ton and sacrificed and god knew they’d had tough times but they’d never questioned their destiny; by the time he was fourteen everyone involved knew they would be going to the Olympics. “I never really thought about what came next,” he admitted. “There was one shiny gold thing in front of me, now there are thousands of boring greyish things.” And he was lost among them.

She took a deep breath in. “After the surgeries, and then Vancouver—I felt such guilt for my legs, like I literally hadn’t carried my own weight. Just like everyone always whispered. I was so scared of disappointing you, and I didn’t know if my world was going to end the next day, or not. I couldn’t sleep, except for when I couldn’t get out of bed. At one point I think I was only eating almonds in groups of three and had to make every string cheese last at least forty peels. I … I don’t think it was healthy. I probably should have talked to someone.”

“I’m so sorry I made you feel that way, then,” he said, automatically. He felt dull inside. She’d had a fucking borderline eating disorder, and had been depressed, and he had known both those things—and done nothing. He couldn’t keep his shit together, and she dropped everything.

“Stop apologizing,” she said firmly. “Scott, we have to—we spent sixteen years growing up together; of course we hurt each other. You apologized, and I forgave you, and that’s what is great about forgiveness—once you’ve really got it you don’t need to ask for it again. It’s like herpes.” He laughed, and she tucked her head further onto his chest. He knew he should probably interrogate—every therapist’s favorite word—why after a year, it was still easier to be honest with Tessa than anyone else, and why any emotional conversation required a lot of physical proximity. “I’m not trying to make you feel guilty.” Her voice was gentle, though the issue with Tessa was never that she tried to make him feel guilty. “I’m trying to say I empathize. And I’m saying it’s not weak, to ask for help. I think the first step is always to say something, you know? I know I, and probably your family and your girlfriend, would very much appreciate it you do. You’re kind of scaring us. You can always talk to Kaitlyn, right?”
“Yeah, of course.” He could, that was true.

“Or Danny or Charlie, or your mom. And you know you can always talk to me, OK?”

“I do, T.” That one was a little more vehement. Not talking to T was basically the worst, life had taught him again and again.

“And, do you want to maybe talk to Marnie? Or Mike?”

“That sounds good.” He swallowed, hangover still beating.

“Great. I called them both this morning, too. You’re getting lunch with Mike in Toronto on Tuesday and Marnie’s going to be all yours at four on Thursday in Windsor.”

“What time did you get up this morning?”

“Seven,” she said with a shrug. God, Tessa up before ten on a Saturday—Christ. “Now, we’re going to make a plan, set our goals, and map out our steps.” Tessa and plans, always. “How are you spending your time, when you feel happiest?”

“I dunno.” He shrugged, trying not to sound annoyed. He’d spent sixty hours a week for the last decade only doing one thing with one person; he wasn’t sure when he was supposed to cultivate other interests. “Skating shows.”

“Obviously,” Tessa said, with a hand squeeze. “What else?”

“Work at the Skate Shop. And with kids, I guess.”

She brightened. “You would be a great coach. You could talk to Brian and David in Toronto. I bet Jeff would have lots to say. And Patch, obviously.”

“Tessa,” he groaned. “Not like, Brian Orser levels of coaching. Like, Ilderton levels. Jeez.”

“Why not Orser?” she said quizzically. “He doesn’t have a gold medal at the Games. You do.”

“Yeah, with you,” he said lightly. “Half of a team, there.”

“So? Hasn’t stopped people from giving me Adidas ads.”

“Yeah, but you’re …”

“Finish that sentence,” she demanded as he drifted off.

“Tessa.” It always boiled down to that. Since they were kids, she was Tessa, the well-behaved one, the smart one, the stunning one, the determined one. He loved her deeply; he supported her unequivocally; he would be her loudest cheerleader until the day he died. He knew how capable she was and how hard she worked. He knew she wanted something big, and she deserved everything.

Him, not so much. He knew his measure as a person, exactly. He was a cocky, charming asshole, good at exactly two things.

And he’d deeply fucked up one, which had fucked up the second.

“And you’re Scott, OK?” she sat up straighter, invaded his space. “Listen. You’re the most remarkable man I’ve ever met, and you’re worthy of so much. You’re driven, you’re bold and brave. You’re take care of the people you love and you make everyone laugh and feel so warm and safe
and at ease. You’re smart, even though you sell yourself short here, and intuitive. If you’re struggling … Fifteen years from now, this will be a blip on the record of your amazing life. You want to be a coach? You can be the best coach in Canada. You want to marry Kaitlyn and raise some blonde kids in Ilderton? If it makes you happy, I am there and will support you 100 percent. If you whittle from a cabin outside Calgary, great. As long as you’re doing something that makes you happy, I am supportive, because I’m your partner and that’s how that works. But don’t think you’re not worthy of great things, in and out of the sport. Because you are. Got it?” She was crying again, full-on ugly-crying this time, despite her determination not to.

He leaned forward, wrapping his arms around her in a hug. “Yeah.” His voice was husky. He wished it was as easy as Tessa said, as Tess acted, but he’d try, for Tess.

“You’ll stop this? Like, enjoy beers with Chiddy or Paul, but if you’re home alone and you feel the need to go out and drink and forget, just … call me and come over and watch some Ginger Rogers movies, OK? You’re way too important to your family and friends and Kaitlyn and me. I don’t want to lose my best partner.” She looked him straight in the eye, sharp and serious and seriously not fucking around. “My only partner. I couldn’t deal if … if something happened to you, or you stopped being Scott. You really scared me last night, Scott.”

The magic words, and they both knew it.

“Deal,” he smiled, his hangover finally abating. It felt like a relief, to talk to her again. “You’re a pretty great partner yourself, there, T.”

She smiled, and gave him a hug. “We need to get back, and get your car. We have to be at Ilderton in an hour. And, any interest in seeing Wild tonight? It’s at the dollar theatre, and it has Reese Witherspoon for you and the cute guy from The Newsroom for me.”

He smiled. “That sounds great, Tess.”

It was always a little embarrassing, walking into the rink when it was crawling with kids and parents and grannies, staring at the canvas banners of their faces that lined the cinderblock walls of the lobby, skating under the championship pennants that hung from literally every rafter above the rink. But the end-of-season carnival, with booths spilling out into the parking lot and kids running around in costumes and Moirs laughing everywhere, was simply too vibrant an event to pass up. He took her hand as they wove through the crowd, squeezing gently, so they wouldn’t be separated. People thronged them, clapping them on the back, asking for selfies, describing where they were during Vancouver.

“Hey,” she tugged his arm, then pointed at something, as soon as they got a moment. “Photobooth. Wanna take a few?”

“Sure,” he said, and they slipped inside, away from the crowd, took a round of goofy black and whites—tongues out, funny faces, bunny ears behind her, smiling stupidly at each other. They were mobbed before they even slipped their strips into their pockets, but as he hugged his family and watched her smile and greet a hockey mom, he felt more whole than he had in months.

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ii. Seven Years Before Today, Tessa

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“Kiddo, come on, you can’t get any power behind the ball when you’re shaking this much,” Scott
drawled from the bench. “You’ve hit like, nine pins. Everything OK?”

She slid next to him and crossed her arms. “No. I just hate bowling,” she muttered. It, along with the Detroit Tigers, were the two things Scott had unabashedly developed a love for in stupid Michigan. “It’s so American. We’re Canadians.”

“We didn’t have to do this on our day off,” he said. “You haven’t hated bowling before. What’s up?”

Tomorrow they were leaving for Nice; whenever a rare good mood coincided with an upcoming competition, Marina gave them the afternoon off. Tessa personally suspected that today’s reprieve also had something to do with the fact that she’d puked from nerves the last four mornings, and Marina found her tiresome and beyond hope at this point.

Charlie and Meryl had gotten the afternoon off as well—they always did before competitions lately—and while Meryl had chosen to go to a spa with her mom and Charlie was at a movie with Tanith, she and Scott were bowling together. Except Scott was right, and she was shaking too hard to throw the ball with any accuracy.

“Nothing’s up. Just, you know, visualizing. Hitting the lift entrance that I missed today. The choctaws in the step sequence in the short. I always miss the second one.”

“That’s it?” He was skeptical.

“Absolutely.”

“It’s just, you seem kind of nervous. I know you’ve called Jordan, like, four times today instead of your normal two. Can you tell me what you’re feeling so I can help?” His voice was devastatingly sensible, the way it got when she was really in deep: Oh, Tessa’s just throwing up, that’s a nice new leo Meryl and Oh, she ate a big breakfast I think and we’re just gonna practice the lift through lunch, no her mascara’s not running, how was the hockey game last week, Fedor?

She sighed. “It’s nothing I haven’t mentioned in mental prep,” she slouched forward and twisted rings on her still-shaking hands. “It’s just, the last couple of seasons we haven’t reached our full potential.” She tried to breathe evenly and stared ahead again.

“We won a gold medal, T. At the Olympics, not the Ontario Intermediate Sectionals.”

“And I was not at full potential then. I could barely walk.”

“Which shows your incredible strength.” He put an arm around her and she dropped her head onto his shoulder. It was easier to talk to him when she wasn’t staring at his stupid compassionate eyes. Otherwise she might cry. Scott was pretty good with tears for a boy, but he was still a boy and they made him twitchy, in general.

“And the season before, and last year, I wasn’t, and I’m just … if we don’t perform to our fullest potential, if we don’t win, it’s my legs. It’s me. It’s not anything else. Everything else, we’re so prepared. And I just …” The words tumbled out and she stared ahead, her face careful and blank. “It’s hard not to feel like I’m letting people down, if we don’t win. Specifically, you.” Worlds was always a high-pressure competition—obviously, it was in the name—but this time around it felt like a proof point. Either she was World Champion material or she wasn’t, either she had recovered or she had not, either Scott’s decision to stick by her was the right one or incredibly foolish.

Either she was good enough, or she was not.
(The self-doubt was always the most excruciating.)

“Tessa—”

“Please, Scott, I know, I know. But if we don’t win, I … I don’t have an excuse anymore.” Scott’s loyalty to her was profound, and deeply undeserved. The least she could do in return was skate a World Championship-caliber performance. She knew she was supposed to be concentrating on adding rice to their bucket, like Marnie said, focusing on the positive contributions they’d made to the team and simply not tallying the negatives. She’d been doing a pretty good job of that, but they were leaving tomorrow. “If we can’t win now, we’ve lost it for good and it’s—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. I think we’re officially spiraling,” he said gently.

“Ya think?” she retorted, but with a laugh.

“I feel you on feeling the pressure to carry your weight for the team,” he said seriously. “Like, kiddo, you may be worried about getting the power and the edges, but I’m always worried about getting the choreo right and not looking like an idiot dancing next to you. Gotta bring my A-game if I’m going to be mugging next to the best dancer in the sport.”

“You always do,” she insisted.

“Ah,” he said, pleased to have lured her into a logic trap. “And so do you. We’re a team, and we make each other better, and that’s it.” He smiled smugly. “I think I just out-lawyered the child of QC and QC Virtue.”

She laughed sheepishly. “You caught me,” she smiled. “Anyways. So that’s why I’m visualizing and freaking out instead of bowling.”

“Well, you should not be freaking out, as I just proved with logic. So let’s visualize things going well. You’ve got the opening cha-cha in the short, which you love, and you’ll do that, the confidence and energy from the crowd’ll seep in, you’ll hit those choctaws perfectly because you’ve trained them … Then the long, you’re putting on the costume, listening to your Audrey playlist, taking in that big crowd and realizing you’re in France and, I mean, how lucky are we that this is our life. And that every day, we get to put in the work together, spend time together, I get to workshop all my best jokes on you and hold the hand of the prettiest girl in the sport, you get endless entertainment and sports trivia. And I know it hasn’t been easy—but you’re the strongest girl in ice dance at this point, physically and mentally, because of everything we’ve been through. You’ve been through.”

“We,” she corrected immediately, because it was. “We’ve been through.”

“Sure. Makes us stronger.”

“Yeah,” she replied, because it did, when you looked at it like that, and she took a deep breath, then another. She could feel Scott’s much calmer heartbeat thudding through his ribcage, and hers slowed to match his. She inhaled again. Stretched her right hand out and flexed it.

No tremors.

She was ready.

His pep talk didn’t make everything automatically easier, or completely erase the stress and the questions—Scott was hot but not that hot; kind but not that kind; and honestly, she wouldn’t be an Olympic gold medalist if she was placated so easily—but it brought a warm wash of reassurance. She was cool, determined, steady as a rock. Eyes lightning on their goal and posture cackling with
ambition.

(She still threw up in the airport the next day, but she and Scott and Chiddy all laughed about it.)

“Ok,” she smiled. “Let’s reset the game. I’m ready to kick your ass.”

“Nooooo,” he groaned. “I’m leading by forty.”

“You’re really so competitive you’d use your partner’s fragile mental state to win a friendly bowling game?”

“**You’re really so competitive you’d use your fragile mental state to win a friendly bowling game?**”

He had her there, so after a twenty-second wordless argument, they both stuck out their fists for Rock Paper Scissors, best of three.

She won. (Scott always favored scissors.)

She won the bowling game too, 213-209.

Three hours later, as he pulled in front of her home in London, he asked, “So you sure you don’t need Alma to—”

“Nope, Kate’s got me,” she said.

“I thought she had that—”

“—They filed a motion and it got postponed for a week.”

“OK, and you’re going to bring—”

“Yup. You’ve got your—”

“Yup, and I’ll even have my mom double-check to make sure I’ve got everything. And we’ll meet at—”

“10:30 before security.”

“OK. Tell Kate—”

“—Joe and Alma too.”

“Sounds good.” He kissed her temple as she unbuckled. “I’m really feeling this, kiddo.”

“Yup,” she agreed. “Same. Really.”

“Get some sleep tonight. But call if you can’t.”

“Aye aye.” She saluted, and exited.

Her doorbell rang three hours later, as she lay curled in bed watching *Charade* instead of triple-checking her suitcase. She leaned out her window to see if she could see who it was, but nothing. Traipsing downstairs, she opened the door, expecting at least a face … and nothing.

She looked down. An enormous five-gallon bucket, filled to the brim with rice, a note stuck in the top. T. She opened it. *Look at how much rice we have, kiddo. We’re gonna be amazing.*
Scott Moir, you frustrating, cocky, hilarious, thoughtful, sweet, supportive, imperfect, kind man.

She didn’t deserve him, but she was sure as hell grateful that fate had brought him into her life, that they’d built this career together.

(And yeah, they totally won Worlds.)

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iii. Two Years Before Today, Scott

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“That was a funny joke, there, Moir,” she said, face straight as they wound through the bowels of the rink, still on the high of an amazing short dance and the feeling of being back, at a Worlds. “Hilarious, really.”

“Freudian slip,” he grinned. “But it’s true, isn’t it?” He had meant it on every level—the energy, the creativity, the synchronicity, the flow of the program and of the season, was unlike anything he’d ever felt in nineteen years of doing it with his partner. He was sure some was attributable to the regular sex and a steady personal connection, but most of it was their skating firing on all cylinders, the culmination of their hard work, careful decision-making, and a shit ton of sweat equity. So yeah, he’d been feeling a little cheeky.

“Eighteen years and I think I’ve got one or two of your tells down, Steve Carrell. ‘Doing it with your partner,’ really?” Her voice was amused, and then she finally broke and laughed. “Did you see Madi? Madi died.”

“It was a joke,” he admitted, leaning forward to kiss her. “One that has the added benefit of being true.”

She leaned back just slightly, looking around first to see who might be around. When she determined the coast was clear, she leaned back in, and kissed him softly. “Very,” she smiled, staying in his space. “But you’re playing with fire, you know.”

“By teasing you?” his hand drifted lower onto her backside.

She paused his hand with her own, but didn’t remove it from her hip. “By teasing everyone,” she dipped her chin but looked up at him. “And remember, I already think you’re cute.”

“Everyone doesn’t care,” he said, because the number one rule of the comeback was this is for us and that was for her, to make her laugh. He started walking, twisting their hands together and squeezing it gently. “Everyone thought the joke was just me being dumb.”

“Sure,” she said, in a tone that really said later. He pushed open the door to the Finnish twilight, the hotel shuttle’s headlights blinking twenty feet away, and she dropped his hand. “Alright, we’ve got next massages next. We didn’t come here to win the gold medal in jokes.” She rolled her neck and he saw her mentally catalogue the aches; he did the same—neck, right hip, left trap. The comeback might be wonderful, on many levels, but fuck it, aging sucked. They curled into the back seat, Tessa leaning her back against his chest, and he sloped an arm around her. She didn’t seem tense, just contemplative, and he figured a little patience was in order.

But the small voice in the back of his head reminded him that things had been going so well for so long, in a sort of charmed, he-couldn’t-believe-the-two-of-them-had-this-type-of-luck way, and he wondered if this was that luck had run out.
If so its timing, he reflected, could hardly be worse.

They’d promised JF a Skype session, and Chiddy his weekly extorted dinner, but once the massages were done, he said, “I’m feeling like my joke wasn’t all that funny, eh, and we should talk about it.” He got he and T were frequently at crossed perspective on this stuff—she was far more likely to take an interview or be on social media, but far less likely than he to give a particularly deep or revealing answer—and the argument at Nats hadn’t been great, but he was surprised an offhand joke was getting shut down.

“Honestly, I thought it was hilarious. I did!” she said when he looked dubious. “I just don’t know if it’s the best idea, professionally. And after what happened at Nats, I don’t think it is personally, either.”

“OK. Professionally first. Not a good idea because I was .... teasing everyone?”

“Yeah. I mean, the comeback and this, we know, is for us. Especially this. Just us.”

“Agreed,” he replied. He wanted to loop a finger around her hair, but this was a business meeting, so he folded his hands into his armpits instead.

“But we’re already going to get questions. We’ve been getting them for ten years. We got questions at Nats, and that turned into a fight.” Her voice was patient, open, as she explained her point.

“Right.”

“So comments like that just … encourage people a little. Our performances are built on our connection, showcasing that. And us being us is already going to give people even more clues. If they’re already primed from watching the ‘you’re so restless’ video, this joke is going to be a tick in the Oh They’re Sleeping Together column.”

“I’m sorry about that—” he started, again, and she reached out and put a hand on his wrist.

“I don’t care,” she reminded him gently, again, shifting her hand until her thumb touched his pulse point. “I thought it was funny, how flustered you got. I don’t want to let other people’s terms dictate our lives. And I want private, but I’m not suggesting we, like, never touch each other in a rink. That’s just unrealistic.” She smirked.

“OK, so now I’m genuinely confused why we’re even having this conversation if you don’t care, don’t think it’ll change ever, and thought the joke was funny.”

“Professionally still, yeah? Because I found it funny, but I don’t think you would,” she said, and god, women, even ones you had known since you were nine, were confusing. “Scott, that? Was fucking great PR. It’s funny, for one, and authentic and … on-brand. It’s a tease that’ll keep fans, media and the judges interested. Invested in our story on ice. So, especially after that argument in January, I’m … trying to understand your comfort level, I guess, in fanning speculation. This is for us, but the bubble’s only going to get more pressurized, the closer we get to the Games. And that kind of remark will lead to more questions, and speculation. I’m fine with that professionally, but puts me in a tight spot personally, because I want to keep my promise to you.”

Oh.

“Yeah, I thought of none of that, I just wanted to make you laugh,” he reiterated briskly but not unkindly, and she smiled, leaned her head against her knuckles as her other hand played with his fingers. “I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable, though. And I still don’t think—I mean, honestly, T, it’s a press conference at a figure skating competition. It’s not like we’re Drake.” She had what felt
like a hugely overblown sense of what the media interested in them was, but suddenly he wasn’t sure whether the damn joke was real or performance on his part—he’d always been good at doing exactly what he needed to do, in a rink. Christ, his head hurt.

“Sure. But we’re not completely anonymous, either. And it's naive to act that way.”

“But I mean … for me, it's lying. That’s the line. God, T, we can’t start actively lying, or ask other people to lie for us. Not …” after last time. “We don’t owe anyone anything, and I think it’s fine if we’re just authentic but don’t advertise it.” Besides their families—and Chiddy, and Charlie White, and Marie and Patch and JF—nobody really knew, or probably cared; they kept a very low profile and were able to live anonymously between Montreal and London. He could go to bars and she could go to Pilates and they could go to dinner, together, without anyone blinking. They'd drawn a bubble around themselves and weren't budging.

She was quiet. “I know this is literally your least-favorite word—”

“If you start talking about our narrative—”

“Narrative interest is good for our career,” she said bluntly. “We can’t pretend that there isn’t a story out there about us. Plus with social media … This stuff just spreads, Scott, especially now. And we should think about how that intersects with what is actually happening. Because I am happy to encourage, to control our narrative,” she cut in carefully. “But I’m also perfectly OK saying something that will be perceived as a lie for privacy.”

“Something that will be perceived as a lie?” he repeated, because that sounded like some bullshit. Again.

“I can’t control what people think. How do you want me to respond, if something like what happens at Nationals happens again, because you’ve been funny?”

“I mean …” he stopped, because he honestly didn’t know. “OK. Yeah.”

“To me, the line isn’t other people, it’s our privacy. And I think I get your line being honesty, but the more meat we throw, the more questions. You know I’m OK pushing people away if they get close. I said I would dodge and deflect, not lie. For you.”

“What a compliment?” he repeated drolly. She’d been saying it for years.

She made a face, because it was a dig, but—“Exactly. But since your line is honesty … it’s risky to throw that much out there. As my partner, I feel that’s unfair. It puts my boundary in a really tight spot.”

“Tess—I’m so sorry. That’s not what I intended to do, at all.”

“I know,” she reassured him. “I do. But then I also know we need to throw some, for judges and PR purposes. Sometimes I’m not sure you know that. So. Here we are.”

Here they were, indeed.

He was quiet. “I don’t want to play it up for PR, but I don’t want to try and play it down. I mean, you should trust that when I tap your ass on the ice, it’s because I think it’s a very nice ass.”

She giggled. “I do. I also know that it’s something that the judges notice, and fans, and media.”

“Yeah. OK, me too,” he admitted. He didn’t want to think about it.
“You can say stuff like ‘we want people to focus on the story,’” she suggested. “The stuff on the ice, I mean. Which is a story. Or ‘what a compliment’ or—”

“Yeah, OK. It’s not like we can delete all the clips of Carmen from the Internet,” he said finally, “People will talk, fine. So I’ll try and tone it down. But I don’t want to lie.” He wasn’t sure where that line was, but it was a moral thing—fuzzy until it wasn’t, and you knew it when you saw it. "Yeah. That's it for me. If I get asked, ever— " he honestly didn't know what he would say.

“I wouldn’t ask you to.” But he knew that, if push came to shove, he would protect her first, and she knew it too. She’d been trying to not lie outright, which wasn’t much but was a step, since the Nats argument. “And for what it’s worth, this? To me, it's so much bigger than romance. I think that's important. It’s not just romance.”

"But it also is romantic." The Olympics came first, but this was a fact. He wasn’t going to rationalize away from that.

She looked away. The conversation had gone better than January, but felt paused, not resolved. "Anyways. Maybe I’m overthinking—you’re right, we’re figure skaters. We both agree that this is for us. Let’s call JF, mention this to him, and then go meet Chiddy. And hey,” she squeezed his hand, “I love you. A lot. I’m here.”

He dipped his forehead against hers then, kissed her nose and then mouth. “Love you too, babe.” Curling against the couch, they open his laptop.

“Hey,” she repeated a day later, her hand reaching over to squeeze his shoulder in the dark. “I love you. A lot. I’m here.”

“I know,” he replied, shifting to face her.

“I can hear you not sleeping. It’s pretty loud, actually, the not sleeping.” She ran a thumb along his cheekbone. “So you wanna talk about it?”

“Not really,” he smiled, bringing a hand to her waist.

“I think we should.”

“Tess, I fell—”

“You slipped. You’ve been skating for twenty-seven years, Scott, you’ve done it once or twice.” They were always their own worst critics, but she seemed to know instinctively that this wasn’t his overly developed guilt complex chewing over a one-point deduction.

But it was a good deflection. “It could have cost us the gold. And the year.” He'd told her, he'd told JF—hell, most of the world seemed to know—that he couldn't handle losing for her, and that was apparently still true.

“We’ve literally never had an undefeated season so it wouldn’t be the first time,” she sifted her fingers through his hair.

It was basically impossible to out-silence her—he knew he would always be shit at it but he’d seen plenty of coaches and therapists cave under her watchful green eyes. So he started. “Things have been going so well,” he finally said. “The comeback, this, it’s been basically … charmed. Stuff has just fallen into place. I guess I’ve been waiting for the skate to slip for a while now.”

“We’ve been working hard, every single day, toward a vision,” she acknowledged. “We know that’s
“Yeah, but T, even you have to admit, there have been surprisingly few road bumps. Especially for us.” She didn’t say anything, but she did tilt her head in an OK point kind of way. “Chiddy once told me we took the gold in being the most fucked-up couple on tour, and that was the year of the Sexagon.”

“Well, we’re the only ones still standing, so joke’s on him,” she said lightly.

“My point,” he started, and then stopped. Thought back to what he’d told her after that disastrous Madi-and-Zach-and-all-their-issues dinner. “So, this being-your-partner thing? This—every level we’re talking about—this is it, for me. As a guy. The guy. You know, if I can tell Saint Peter that I was a good son, a good brother, a good uncle—that’s gonna count. Being a positive influence in the skating community—also big. But as a man, it’s whether I was the best partner I could be—not perfect, T—but the best I could be, every day, whether it’s just through tomorrow or through the Games or … longer, if we choose—” she smiled at her favorite word, “then I’ll think I did OK.”

“You’re doing OK,” she reassured him. “More than OK.”

“Still. Protecting you, supporting you, keeping up with you on the ice, making you laugh, being someone you trust and confide in … loving you, it’s a responsibility. I don’t take it lightly. And you’ve never brought anything but your A-game, never not made me want to step it up, but since the comeback … damn, kiddo. You’re extraordinary, in every level. You’re a whole new woman, with this vision and this compassion and this energy … I love it. Most days I’m just happy to make you look good.”

“This comeback is the happiest I’ve ever been,” she admitted quietly, the confession hitting him deep in the gut. “And that’s all because of you. Our partnership.”

“I know that here.” He tapped his head. “Sometimes hard here.” He pointed to his heart. “I know I still have some shit to work out from … before—”

“—Please don’t think you need to do that alone—”

“T.” He squeezed her hip gently. “I know you’re better with words, but I’m trying to say something, here.” She fell silent, started scratching the nape of his neck encouragingly. “When we were younger, during the Carmen fuckery, I spent … way too much time wondering when you were going to realize how much bigger you were than one freezing rink filled with screaming Russians in Michigan. And whether you would me, and we would implode. And then one day—” he shook his head, “—we did. And so it probably sounds dumb, but it’s hard—sometimes it’s hard to shake that mindset. To feel …” his voice cracked, he took a deep breath, “to feel like I’m good enough for you. So yeah, I got all the way there from tripping today on the ice.”

“Oh Scott,” she murmured, wrapping him in a hug. “I’m just … grateful you told me. And I get it, I do. Remember my legs, for all those years? Yeah. So … thank you.”

“Are we actually maturing?” he quipped. “Dare I tempt fate and say we might be handling an adult relationship, Ms. Virtue?”

“Only took us eighteen seasons, I’m not sure how cocky we should get,” she smiled. ”And, you know—we still haven't lost yet. You weren't kidding. This has been a pretty charmed season.” The real test—unspoken—would come next year.

Until then they were just keeping their head down and working and hoping that would be enough,
when the time came.

“Believe me, I’m not,” he took it back to serious. “You still can do a lot better than me, just so you know.”

“That is absolutely, unequivocally not true,” she said, her voice dusty. She thumbed his forehead, softening out the creases. Kissed every part of his face—eyelids, eyebrows, cheeks, nose—before pulling back. “You are an amazing man, Scott Moir, and I have been lucky enough to have you as a partner for eighteen years. When Saint Peter asks you that question, you’ve already got a yes, Scott.” She leaned forward and kissed him gently. “You always will, ok?”

For the first time in a long time—maybe ever—he believed her.

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iv. Four Years Before Today, Tessa

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“God.” Scott exhaled next to her. “This is beautiful.”

“Yeah.” She breathed, staring over the green-and-gray landscape, clouds and sun slanting toward them, ominous and hopeful at the same time. Scotland was not known as a figure-skating powerhouse, so neither of them had ever visited; looking over the starkly beautiful vista, Tessa was struck by the contrasts, the way the landscape seemed to radiate the tension between beauty and wildness, loneliness and oneness, barrenness and potential. She was reminded, for the first time in a long time, of how very vast the earth was, and how little of it she actually knew.

She wanted to articulate all this insight, but failed at coming up with the words. Besides her, though, Scott seemed to get it, like always; he slung an arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. She held his forearm around her neck and breathed in deeply, and he kissed her temple before muttering, “Glad you convinced me to come on this, kiddo.”

“Hey guys,” Kaitlyn smiled from the other side of Scott. “First time here for both of you, right? Isn’t it nice? I’m here like twice a year for cups, but it’s still so pretty.”

Scott slung his other arm around her—Tessa steadfastly swallowed the stab of emotion around her rib—and said, “Yeah. It’s pretty great. We’re gonna have an amazing week.”

(‘Amazing’ was one word for it. Life-altering ended up being another.)

She grabbed her bag—Scott took his and Kaitlyn’s—and headed into the castle, determinedly. She watched him walk in carefully, gauging the ease of his laugh and the looseness of his shoulders. Ryan, of all people, had introduced her to this organization, and the trip seemed like such an inane, insane idea when she’d first pitched it to Scott. But the cause was good and the money decent, and she wanted desperately for him to start feeling and acting more like himself again. When she’d finally opened her eyes this spring to where he was, she was horrified that she’d let him drift along like that, unmoored and angry and lost. And so since their conversation before the Ilderton Carnival she’d been doing more of this … just-checking. She knew he had Kaitlyn, but best friendship came with rights, too, surely.

She was the one who suggested Kaitlyn come too. She wasn’t meddling, she certainly wasn’t manipulating, she was just … being a good friend, Scott-and-Tessa Style.

(Her intentions were pure, she would insist to Scott years later. This wasn’t … a plot to either get
them to break up or to propose. It was a favor. He’d kissed her mouth, laughed, and said that next
time, favors should not include any other women.)

She watched as Kaitlyn laughed at something he said, and thought, with satisfaction, that he did
seem increasingly more like himself lately. Eyes lighter, posture less ragged. He looked like he was
drinking water and seeing the inside of the gym and reacquainting himself with vegetables. After tour
they had started carpooling up to Toronto once a week; he’d get frozen yogurt or fries with Mike
while she had meetings or whatever and then they’d wander around the city, anonymous ex-ice
dancers arguing whether the Jays or Tigers were better. He took her up on the movie offer weekly—
they made it through most of Astaire’s good collabs with both Ginger and Cyd, then Luhrmann’s
Red Curtain Trilogy; lately, it was just whatever Reese Witherspoon movie they could agree on.
She’d swing by the rink in Ilderton to ‘help’ him coach, causing the students to lose their collective
minds. They’d gone to the National Ballet, to hockey games, to museums, spent a weekend at her
mom’s place on Lake Huron, him sleeping in the same tiny bunk bed in the loft he’d crashed in as a
twelve-year-old. They maintained a heavy rotation of professional commitments, but were no longer
shy about also scheduling time to hang out just-because.

They were, finally and fully, friends.

She queued up to the front desk, where Scott was trying out a Scottish brogue as he checked in to his
and Kait’s room. Impulsively she looped an arm around Kaitlyn’s elbow. “I’m really excited to hang
out this week,” she said. And she was.

“Me too,” Kaitlyn said with a smile. “I’ve been meaning to get embarrassing kid-Scott stories out of
you for forever.”

“Oh man, where do we start? Well, in our very first competition, Scottie actually forgot the steps to
the dance—”

“—And that’s when I realized the Virtch was a keeper,” Scott interrupted with a grin. “Come on.
You’re supposed to be on my team here, T.”

“This is more fun, though.”

From the moment she checked in their time was spoken for, mingling with attendees over meals and
squinting through gin-and-tonic hangovers on day trips. She and Scott had a speech and an interview
—they always had a speech and an interview—but it was a relatively minimal commitment. The rest
of the gang was absolutely amazing and fun, particularly the girls, and she for once didn’t try and
duck out after an hour at a pub with a group of mostly strangers. But mostly she wanted to hang out
with Kaitlyn. Tessa was determined to finally get to know her. She liked her, she did; recognized
how well she matched and meshed with him.

She hadn’t been in love with him for more than eighteen months, and she had been the absolute
worst for him, manipulative and withholding and unworthy and incompatible. Scott wanted to be
wanted, needed to be needed—why else would a nine-year-old boy commit to an ice-dance
partnership?—and Kaitlyn made him steady, made him happy. Befriending Kait, she knew, was the
most selfless thing she could do. For his happiness.

As he dozed in front of them on the way back from a distillery, the two of them and a few others
laughed their way through Outlander. But eventually the rest of the group quieted, and Kait, next to
her, said, “So—whatever you said to him, before Stars, about drinking … thank you.”

“Of course,” she replied, squeezing Kaitlyn’s arm. “I think talking to Mike and Marnie has really
helped.”
“Mike and Marnie?” she asked.

“Babcock and McBean?”

“I know Marnie from Team Canada—wait. He’s talking to Mike Babcock?”

“Yeah? He’s been kind of a mentor to us for a while; he and Scott are especially close. He was really helpful around Sochi. And Marnie’s been one of our marriage counselors for years.” Fuck. Not the wording. “I mean, therapists, whatever. Since 2009.”

“Oh. I didn’t know you guys …”

“It’s for skating,” Tessa said, quickly and emphatically. “Mental prep for competition. We always joked that it was marriage counseling when we were kids.”

“He never mentioned therapy.”

“It’s more like mentoring. Mindset work.” She dialled back further. “Scott’s an open book. You can ask him anything.”

“He’s not an open book; you’ve just spent two decades learning to read him,” Kait said mildly. (It was so strange and humiliating, to be the insecure one needing approval, between her and Scott’s girlfriend.)

She took a deep breath. “Terrible poker face, though.”

Kait laughed. “That’s true. I just want to get to know more of him. That’s why I asked for the stories.”

“I get that. You’re so good for him, you know. Oh. He was a hot dog for Halloween the year he was eight, that was funny. And you need to ask Alma for the footage of his Austin Powers routine.”

They were insignificant but something, and Tessa wanted this conversation to end.

“You guys talking about me?” he mumbled from in front of them.

“I swear, it’s like you have a needy, narcissistic radar,” Kaitlyn teased good-naturedly.

“You two? Yeah, I know what trouble looks like.” He smirked. “Virtch, you wanna practice our speech?”

“Sure. After dinner.”

But dinner turned into drinks and songs by the piano led by Miku, and it was rounding eleven by the time they slunk into overstuffed red leather chairs in front of the fire in the lobby to get to work—it might be summer, but it was still quite chilly.

“And as athletes, we could not … We understand the value of—Tess, come on, the deal is you write the substance and I do the jokes. This has worked really well for the last seventeen years and I don’t see why it has to change.”

“You wanna go for a walk?” she asked abruptly.

“It’s like, midnight, T.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “You wanna go on a walk?”
“Sure,” he said, grabbing his jacket and handing it to her. “You’re gonna need that.”

“So I did something,” she confessed when they were traipsing down the cliff to the beach—why the fuck were they going to a beach at midnight? She had no idea. “I said something that I didn’t think would be a big deal since I assumed Kait knew but she didn’t.”

He stopped, and stiffened. “OK. What did you say?”

“I mentioned Mike, and then we pretty quickly got onto, you know, our history of marriage counseling.”

“Oh,” he said, deflating with relief. “That’s all?”

“Well, that just implies that some of the worse stuff she doesn’t know,” Tessa replied, annoyed. “Which as your friend I think maybe we should talk about. Scott,” she stopped, realizing something. “Oh my god. She knows we’ve slept together, right?”

“What? Yes. Of course. I wanted to be honest with Kait. You knew that.”

“Then why didn’t you mention Mike, or therapy?”

He shrugged. “It didn’t come up.”

“Well, yeah. You have to bring it up.”

“Gee, thank you, Tessa, that eighty-five percent of a psych degree and six years in marriage counseling has clearly given you a ton of insights.” He was joking, but the words still cut.

“I’m sorry, that’s just very unnecessary—” She stopped. “Is everything OK? I thought—”

“Yeah?” he asked, his voice considerably less tense. “I’m sorry, you’re right. Totally uncalled for.”

“I thought you were all-in on making it work, with Kait,” she said, her brain hurting as she tried to piece it—him—together. It was the only conclusion that made sense, the only thing that tied the last sixteen months together, the only explanation for his comments and tetchiness and distance: Scott wanted a fresh start, wanted honesty and simplicity and happiness. “I want you to be happy, Scott—really, I do. And I thought that meant Kaitlyn. But you’re not making any sense.” It hurt, to no longer understand him completely. But maybe she never had.

“I’m sorry, I’m—” he took a deep breath. “Kait and I. We’ve actually been talking about her moving to Ontario. Looking for a team in the area.”

“What? Scott—that’s awesome!” she wanted to say you did it but that sounded patronizing. But he had; through the shitty awful year, he had built the something he had wanted most.

She was so proud.

“Yeah. We’ve been talking about it for four months. Since February.”

“Is she—hesitating? How many teams are there? Not a ton, right?” She wasn’t joking when she said she didn’t get curling, at all. She seriously would prefer to watch chess. Or paint dry. But she could be helpful, in crafting his argument. She could speak both girl and Scott Moir.

“The curling season ends in April, and then there’s this frenzy, basically, to switch teams, through like early May.”
“OK?” It was June. April and May she’d been on tour with them a lot, so maybe she had missed a deadline or a registration or a … draft, maybe? “Scott, say what you’re saying.”

“We started talking about it in February, and if she was going to switch teams for next season, she would have had to already.”

“OK, so she didn’t want to move yet. You could—move to Winnipeg.”

He opened, then shut, his mouth. “She wasn’t the holdout,” he admitted.

It was fucking freezing, Tessa realized, and she was a dramatic idiot for trying to have this conversation on a beach at midnight. “Oh,” she finally said dumbly. That made zero sense. “Do you want to talk about it?”

He stared at the surf, glittery and barely visible in the darkness. The wind whipped through his hair. “You ever miss it?” he finally said.

She felt very, very small. “Of course,” she finally said. “Of course I do.” Every day. She missed him, yes, but she knew they could sustain a friendship outside the rink, now. Letting him go had hurt like hell, but accepting his life choices while knowing that loving him had made her who she was should be more than enough. This was entirely separate: A year down and she was perpetually restless and still determined, the hunger for competition coursing through her blood. Some days her feet ached from missing amateur ice. “But we … we can’t go back, Scott. That’s not how it works. You can only go forward.” It was a platitude on a poster in her PT’s office, and it felt like one on her tongue.

“What if we are going forward? I mean, if we aren’t done. If we can still do more. If that wasn’t the way our career was supposed to end.”

Her heart hardened. The prospect of doing it on their own terms, molding something from the lessons they’d learned, starting with fresh muscles and minds and hearts—it was tantalizing. But. “You can’t use me, and our skating career, to avoid committing to your girlfriend. That’s not … That’s not fair. And I still don’t get why you don’t want to.” If you don’t want to, she wanted to say, then was this all even worth it? “You can’t just suggest a comeback because you’re scared to move forward in your life.”

(Because that was the only rationale outcome to her. The others—that he wanted to come back for competition alone, even for her—did not even compute.)

Giving up their career—which at the time had equated to giving him up—had been the hardest thing she had ever done, harder than the surgeries, harder than watching him kiss Cassandra, harder than her parents’ divorce, harder than Marina’s betrayal. But she had done it so he—technically, so they, but she knew she wasn’t built for happiness, knew that the only way she felt normal was if she felt she lacked something, had something to strive for—so that he could be happy.

She wasn’t good for him, or good enough for him, and if he threw away someone who was—

“That’s not what I’m scared of,” he said, his voice gentle. “And it’s not an excuse. I’m trying to figure out what I want to run toward.”

Her brow creased and her blood boiled. After this entire year, after forcing her to account for consequences and abandoning her, after loving her and cutting out when things got hard, then noping out of everything and playing house with Kait and now throwing all that away—how dare he. “Our career isn’t a contestant on The Bachelor. I’m not waiting like one of the Laurens. I’m …” her voice cracked. She thought of how the fiery desire to kick ass hadn’t been completely diverted
with anything new, the drive for something greater hadn’t been filled by any collaborations or charity
or Yes. What had she said yes to, exactly? “I miss it, every day—” I miss you, every day, “—but
while I’m open to talking about returning to competition, this isn’t the appropriate mindset or
rationale. It’s not an either-or with Kait.” There. Composure, regained.

“I don’t think it is; fuck, T. Sorry, it’s late.” He took a deep breath. “I don’t feel ready to come back,
just like I wasn’t ready to leave.” That was true. It had been her decision, when things had
crumbled. “I know that it’s risky, I do. On every level. I just … I miss it, and I don’t think we were
done. Those were great performances but I refuse to believe that season was our last mark on ice
dance.”

She took a deep breath. “We’re tired. We should go in.”

“Yeah,” he said, deflating, taking off his jacket and throwing it over her shoulders.

They walked back silently, and she handed him his jacket back. “Scott,” she said, as he turned to go.
One last chance to convince him. “You should talk to Kaitlyn.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I know.”

“I just—she’s great, and she’s great for you, and if you’re scared you’re going to fuck this up down
the road so you’d rather fuck this up now … She makes you happy. It’s good to see you happy.” Her
voice got smaller as she rambled. “You deserve to be happy. And I don’t know what’s holding you
back, but if something scares you, it’s probably the right decision, you know? It means you’re
dreaming big enough.”

He startled, his face lightening in surprise. Then he smiled, just a little, and it made his eyes liquid.
“Thanks, T.”

That, she thought as she fell asleep with a tiredness deep in her bones, was what grace was.

They didn’t talk about their midnight discussion the next day, but after dinner and their speech—
which went perfectly—they all headed out to a bar, convinced MIku to sing. She messed around
with some Adele, some Alabama Shakes. Kait and Scott were half-off in their own world to her side,
Tessa was laughing in the middle of the group.

And then a new song started up. Slow, aching, new but familiar. She cocked her head.

Scott caught her eye. “This would be—” he started.

“A great exh.”

What’s love, but a sweet old-fashioned notion.

“Wanna give it a whirl?” He held out her hand and she took it, pinky slotting familiarly between his
fingers. She stared at him, feeling electric, alive, in her zone. Her world.

“Well, they’re not happy,” she mused, sliding into dance hold as they started to move. “So not a ton
close to each other, probably. Especially at first.”

“It’s an intense connection but she’s not sure—” his nose brushed hers.

“That love is enough.” She blinked, and could swear she felt his cheeks under her.

“It’s mature though. They’ve been here before—maybe together, maybe with others.” He gripped
the base of her ponytail.

“Yeah. So they know it’s not enough.” She ghosted her hands down his chest.

“So she wants to leave—”

“She has to leave. She’s not happy about it.” She rolled her hips against his.

“He doesn’t want her to.” He rolled his right back, pushed her across the floor.

“Obviously.”

“So they fight.” Keeping her hand in his, she turned experimentally, dramatically away. On cue, he pulled her back by her wrist, his body falling around her. His hands slid down her hips. She swayed before moving back into the dance.

“They probably sleep together again—”

“— We could use the lift—” he spun her out, then back in, foreheads touching. She raised an eyebrow; the Lift was tougher than an exh needed. He might goddamn be serious about the comeback.

“A back twist here,” she leaned back and swiveled.

And eventually no more words were needed as they felt their way familiarly toward a dance.

The music stopped.

They stared at each other.

Fuck.

She stepped away. Broke eye contact.

Just a dance, she reminded herself. Just a goodbye.

They meandered back to the table, space between them, carefully talking through the choreography, and Kaitlyn smiled. “It’s pretty cool to watch you guys through the process,” she said.


They watched him leave. “So, stories,” Tessa started shakily, trying to free herself of two decades' worth of intimacy. He wasn't hers, and he shouldn't be, and he should be Kait's. “When I was 18, he drove me up to London after practice so I could meet Eleanor, my niece, the day she was born. We didn’t get back till one AM and I slept the entire drive back, but he was still there with coffee to pick me up at five-thirty the next morning. My freshman year he egged my boyfriend’s house when he cheated on me. Every year when we finally finish our season and fly home from Worlds, he’s up the next day helping his mom teach. He always says hi to every old lady in the rink. There’s always a lot. When my grandmother was sick he took shifts at the hospital with her. When Charlie’s girlfriend broke up with him after Charlie had bought a ring, he used his Nationals money to fly them both to Denmark to visit Danny. I’m pretty sure they spent the rest of the money at breweries but Charlie finally smiled again. He pays for fans’ dinner, all the time, without telling them. He gave both my brothers dance lessons before their weddings and never mentioned it to me. He was like sixteen when Casey got married, and he was not the most considerate guy then.” She took a deep breath.

“He’s the most amazing person I know. Take care of him, OK?”
Kaitlin cocked her head, studying her, and finally smiled. “I will,” she promised.

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v. Five Years Before Today, Scott

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The best thing about Kait, he realized on Canada Day, was how she was so very *not* Tessa.

That sounded tremendously unfair to both of them, he understood. And especially since the one thing they both had in common was that they were fierce and badass—he had a type, apparently, and it wasn’t ‘petite brunette’—he knew he would never say out loud. But as he surveyed the annual Moir Family Barbecue that July 1, when Tessa showed up for barely forty-five minutes in a jersey dress and bright red lipstick before heading to Toronto to party with Jordan, and Kaitlyn wore cowboy boots and cutoffs and talked curling with his grandfather for four hours, he was struck their polarity, the way they appealed to different parts of him. He wondered if anyone else would notice how vastly different they were, and decided *nah*.

(It was *so* obvious, though. Even Adam Rippon caught onto his bullshit.)

But their differences went far beyond the physical resemblance and their names—after a decade of living in fear of saying Jess/Cass/Tess at the wrong time, fucking *Kaitlyn* was a cool drink of water, linguistically. No, it was *her*: Kait *aligned*, while Tessa had *complemented*. She was extraverted, like him; adventurous and open, like him; she was about as chill as a driven, competitive athlete could get, like him. She was friendly, fun-seeking, kind, gregarious, warm. She found joy in the quotidian, laughed often in a way that let you know she was delighted and surprised by the world, was prone to saying what she was feeling, all straightforward and no bullshit. She liked dogs and collected Starbucks mugs and called her mother every night at seven Winnipeg time and loved doing karaoke. She took him at face value, which both made him feel like *enough*, all on his own, and accepted his assertions that he was easy and uncomplicated. It felt like a relief after the last year, which was only complicated.

Despite all evidence he saw to the contrary, she saw him as fundamentally a good guy.

It was a nice thing to lose himself in, really.

Dating Kaitlyn required no strategy, there was nothing to conquer, there were no layers of guilt and history and certainly no career to balance. All relationships had hurdles of course—and there ended up being *plenty* of those—but at the beginning the biggest challenge was that it simply was like trying to learn French when you were already fluent in English: A completely different experience, a new challenge that required you to retrain your brain and your tongue and your heart to new rhythms, new priorities, new noises and laughs and likes and dislikes.

He wondered if it had been similar, for Tessa when she was relearning to skate.

He fell hard, and fast, running into her charm and laugh and smile (and fine, half running, he realized much later, from Tessa and adulthood and consequences). He knew immediately and intuitively that he couldn’t do much better than her, and he suddenly wanted to *try*. From the moment he woke up next to her and saw her in his flannel shirt, he poured himself into wooing her, determined to get this right: He was drowning, already (he didn’t know it), and she was his life preserver. She made him laugh, she made him forget, she made him something new.

He strove for honesty, just like he’d demanded from Tessa, even if he only got to truth.
He had always fallen easily into relationships, had always been an emotional, impulsive guy, and Kait was no different: After their first night together in Sochi, he brought her coffee and aspirin for her hangover, failed to wheedle her number out of her, found her the next night at Canada House to ask her to dance, took her home again, watched her final curling tournament with his brothers and pointed out the pretty one, kissed her in the shadows of the Rings before hopping his flight home with Tessa and the rest of the figure-skating team. He introduced her to Chiddy and Poje before they even left the Village: Gold medalist too; isn’t she something? he bragged, eyes starry and soft.

“You’re right, this is something,” Chiddy agreed, eyebrows high as Poje tried not to snicker. Her ticket to London was booked in bed their last morning in Sochi, him sitting behind her and kissing her shoulder as they talked through potential dates.

She arrived in Ilderton, snowflakes in her eyelashes from the early-March storm, just two weeks after the Olympics, with a piney candle from her favorite store in Winnipeg for his mother and a case of good beer for his dad. The next night, Charlie and Nic and their kids over came over, and the six adults stayed up so late talking that the children slumped over in their seats till Uncle Scott carried them downstairs to the couch. Her jokes straddled bawdy and witty, she helped his ma cook, she hadn’t flinched when Quinn asked if Aunt T was going to come play dolls now that the ‘Lympics were done. As he helped his mother clean up, eyes watching Kaitlyn and his dad debate the Jets’ playoff chances, Alma said, “She’s a very nice girl, Scottie.” She set the final dish in the rack. “You seem smitten.”

“She’s pretty special, eh,” he smiled, taking the plate to dry. “I could see this being … you know.” Everything seemed to line up; Kait literally fell into his lap the day after he retired. He felt sure, about this one thing, for the first time in literal months.

Alma smiled gently. “That’s wonderful, Scottie,” she said. “You know, if that’s the case, you should probably introduce her to Tessa soon. Kate said she’s back from Toronto.”

“Yes, eventually. Don’t think we’ll be hanging out a ton, though, outside of tour.” He’d always tried to keep girlfriends separate from Tess. He knew Tess liked that, viewed the detachment as a sign of her power and placement in his life. She’d always been perfectly nice, usually quite friendly, but everyone, from Meryl and Marina on down, knew not to mess (too much) with Tess.

And after the last year, he definitely would prefer to keep them separate.

“Still,” his mother said, “if Kaitlyn is important to you, that’s the right thing to do. Plus it shows her that she’s important to you. Women like that, Scottie.” He wasn’t sure which one was she and her in this situation.

He stiffened, ready to spill everything. “Ma, I know that you and Kate and Cara and everybody—”

―You don’t know, Scottie,” she interrupted gently. “Goodness, the two of you, you always assume. We love you both, we’re so proud of you—you did a hard thing, this last year, and you made it through. And you had a damn good career. You made your mark. But really the only thing—the only thing—we have ever wanted for either of you is that you’re happy.” She drained the water, scrubbed the film of food residue out of the sink efficiently. “And you seem happy, son.” She slicked her thumb with her tongue and smoothed down a cowlick, searching his face. “Almost at peace, finally. Almost.”

His parents put Kaitlyn in the basement guest bedroom—traditional treatment for any new girlfriend’s first visit—and he snuck down once they were asleep, swallowed her laughter with kisses, tangled his hands in her blonde hair, dozed next to her until she, with another laugh, pushed him out of her room before his parents woke up.
The next day he showed her around Ilderton proudly, pointing out his elementary school and the sledding hill where he’d split his lip the year he was eight and the baseball fields where he’d once gotten caught shoplifting a candy bar from the snack shed. He pointed out the rink as they left his house, the CONGRATS SCOTT AND TESSA!!! OLYMPIC SILVER MEDALISTS 2014 still on the marquee, but didn’t take her in. She’d tried skating a couple times as a kid, she said, had never really taken to it.

He found that, like most things, really refreshing.

Her straightforwardness was included in that list. At lunch at his favorite diner, she said, “So, everyone in Canada thinks you’re fucking your partner. Is that, you know, actually a thing?” he choked a little on his beer. “Because I don’t judge messy, at all, but I tend to go pretty all-in, and with my competitions and everything that and messy don’t mix well.”

He twirled a fry, and remembered his personal pledge for honesty. “I mean, people have been saying a lot of things about me and Tessa for forever. Like, there’s apparently a rumor online that we have a kid which—totally nuts. And yeah, it became clear to our coaches pretty young—I’m talking twelve and fourteen—that we were good with the more romantic stuff. We’ve had to milk it, too—Skate Canada had me hide my girlfriend during Vancouver so we could better sell it, you know? Then once it came out, people came for her on Facebook and everything. Tessa had a … thing when she was about nineteen that a lot of people worked to bury, because of the optics. And I haven’t see the TV show yet, but my guess is there was some creative editing there, too.”

“None of this is an answer,” Kait pointed out. She popped a fry into her mouth expectantly.

“Right. Anyways, a lot of it isn’t true, and we either can’t refute it or don’t pay attention to it. I’m happy to answer true/not true about anything, because I’m pretty sick of the whole narrative thing and definitely prefer honesty. And yeah, sixteen years of skating, pretending to be in love on ice, spending every single day together? Of course it’s gotten a little blurry at times. We’ve slept together. And,” he looked down, ran his thumb along a split in the wood table, “yeah, my last relationship, Tessa and I, that messiness … led to the end of that relationship.”

Kait stared at him. “So reading between that bullshit—”

“I was going for tactful and diplomatic, actually—” he interjected.

“You cheated on with your last girlfriend with Tessa.”

He took a deep breath. “Yeah. I did. Or there was … overlap.”

“Oh, that’s what the kids are calling it these days.”

He smiled, sadly and sheepishly. “I’m not proud of it, at all. We were in a pretty intense rivalry—”

“I’ve seen the CBC coverage.”

“Yes. Not proud. We weren’t getting the coaching support we needed, and we tried to handle it ourselves, and it completely backfired. In the end it was all kind of … devastating, I guess. We were disasters.”

“And you and … Cassandra … broke up over it?”

“You’ve seen the TV show too, I see,” he shifted.

“Doing my due diligence.”
“The show made it seem like we were a lot more serious than we were, but yeah,” he said, “Listen, Tessa and I know we don’t work together, at all, romantically—and we retired because, frankly, we both wanted a very different life than the one we were living, and very different things. We were tired. And ready to move on. Separately.”

“And so if this … is actually a thing—”

“I want it to be,” he cut in, with the most charm he could muster without looking like a complete asshole.

“I do too,” she smiled, tucking her hair behind her ear. “But you’re like, still touring with her? Working with her?”

He paused, trying to explain and not alienate her without doing exactly what he accused Tessa of doing, creating a narrative to hide from their problems. “We both love skating, still. And we’re each others’ careers, at the end of the day,” he said. He knew Kaitlyn, more than most, could understand that—Team Canada generally was a cesspool of hookups and ex-relationships, and everyone knew someone who stayed in a professional relationship with an ex. “It’s our income, so packing it up would be really douchey, and dumb. And the fed, the tour operators, have a stake, too. None of that is going to change, not for the near future.” He hoped. Anyways. “I know that all sounds shitty, and vague. But … I really like you. And the one thing I learned from that entire clusterfuck—besides, and I cannot stress this enough, that Tessa and I do not work romantically—” he said it lightly, self-effacingly, “is that honesty is important. And honestly, I like you. You’re funny, you’re sexy as hell, your recall of The Office is incredible. I like talking with you. I like hanging out with you. I like laughing with you. You can ask me anything, I swear, I’ve always gotten in trouble in interviews and with coaches for being a little too honest. But if you can trust me when I say Tess is an old friend and my teammate—and I can totally see how that’s a huge ask, right now—I’d like to keep hanging out with you. Either way, lunch is on me.”

She stared at him, arms folded. Finally, after thirty seconds, she said, “Next week I’m going to Saint John to watch the Women’s Curling Championships. Do you want to come with?”

He grinned.

(Before she left, three days later, he said, “No pressure, but I’m pretty sure I’m falling in love with you.” And he was. She told him he was insane, that they hadn’t even officially been dating for seventy-two hours, reminded him that they had only met three weeks earlier, but she laughed and kissed him with the same fire with which she fucked.)

(Jess once told him, sometime between breakups three and six, that the worst part of dating him was that you thought he was transparent, but what he really was was blind to his own bullshit. That, and his sense of humor and hands were damn irresistible. JF, Tess, and Cass all agreed.)

And thus began ten months of bopping around, physically and emotionally and mentally. He and Tessa traveled to Montreal to work with Marie-France and Patrice where the new normal set in; traveled to Japan where they made a truce; traveled to Halifax for tour where she started pestering him to meet Kait. The enthusiasm threw him, but he remembered his mom’s words of advice, remembered how deeply they both wanted things to be different, so he invited Kait backstage in Winnipeg and then along through Saskatoon and Calgary, ostensibly to meet Danny and his family.

The initial meeting went well, Tess leading with “Scott talks about you all the time,” which wasn’t true, but was kind. He and Kait and Patrick had plans, which Patrick reminded them of once the girls had been talking for twenty minutes and Kait said, “Oh you should totally come!”
“They’re really not my scene,” Tessa begged off with a smile. “I’ve got a vanilla candle and a bath and <i>Jane Eyre</i> waiting for me back at the hotel.”

“She’s <i>so</i> nice,” Kait sounded stunned, after.

“She’s aright,” he grinned, throwing an arm around Kaitlyn. “You guys’ll be friends.”

In Saskatoon it was drinks with a college friend and in Calgary dinner with a Flames second-stringer, though she wouldn’t give him a name when she mentioned it in front of Kait and Danny and his kids. “I don’t need you going big brother on me,” she said, faux-chastising, as she knelt to teach Charlotte their latest handshake. “Danny, remind Scottie that I’m twenty-four—almost twenty-five! —and he can’t beat up on people I date anymore.” The use of the nickname made him double-take, and he realized what she was doing, was a little grateful at the term for platonic-ifying them and a little wistful because it felt like Tessa was spinning further away from his fingers, to a space where she called him <i>Scottie</i> like everyone else in his family.

“I’m too old for your shit, you fuckers,” Danny groused, and Tessa Two said Language. Kaitlyn, holding Ava, laughed.

By the Vancouver stop, out with guy friends after their final TV interview, he managed to get drunk and disorderly enough at a hockey game to miss her birthday party. <i>Oh my god, it’s totally fine</i> she texted. <i>I hope you stayed safe!</i>

Brave new world.

Tour season was fast and furious and an energetic clusterfuck, a time to hang out with all their friends from across the globe, to ground himself in <i>why</i> skating with Tessa was fulfilling to him, to remind them both why they cared so damn much about each other in the first place. It was exactly his scene, and he hung out with Max and Luca and Javi and Daisuke and basically everyone he liked. But it inevitably wound down after a couple loops through Asia in May and June; with that, his days stretched unblinkingly in front of him. He had always said he would miss the structure of skating, but he thought it would be like the way his friends missed the structure of high school: as a regimented phase that they had endured before moving on to better things. But skating, to him, had been the better thing, and he honestly wasn’t sure if there was anything out there he could love as much as skating with Tess. Normal people, he realized, didn’t find their defining passion in life at age nine holding the hand of a pretty girl.

(And the worst part was, he wasn’t entirely sure if that defining passion was ice dance or the pretty girl whose hand he was holding.)

So he could get out of bed and dress himself and go through a daily routine perfectly fine, most days, but the postnuclear emotional hellscape called retirement now too massive to avoid. He’d had a dawning sense of doom, as the Olympics loomed, that the personal and professional consequences of his actions would be grave, but living them—feeling, every day, that he had let himself and his family and his country down, that he had torpedoed his career and most important relationship, that he’d hurt so many others in the process—was an entirely different experience. The bitter, brittle feelings ossified; the emptiness and loss gnawed at him. He mistook people’s compassion and love and concern for expectations and patronization and judgment. His family’s desire to help him find something new felt like an acknowledgement that he was a fuckup when left to his own devices, that he’d just permanently move in Joe’s and get into bar fights the entire time, like he was a twenty-year-old punkass again. His friends’ responsibilities—jobs and girlfriends and kids—felt like a rebuke of his life choices, after years of unflinching support.

Skating and Tessa had been two of the moral and physical centers of his universe for so long that
without them, he wasn’t sure what was up or down or real or not real. And if the center hadn’t held, what the fuck was supposed to be the new center? The answer, or the path to the answer, hadn’t been folded between the pages of the ISU’s Special Regulations and Technical Rules for Ice Dance, and so he’d missed that lesson on Finding Yourself. It was all up to him, he realized, to pick up the pieces and start over.

The thought was terrifying. He’d rather watch hockey with Baker and drink beers instead, so he did, grounding himself in the now as much as possible, burning as much energy as possible. If it wasn’t expended at the bars or hockey games, wasted energy turned to apathy to lethargy, and that felt more dangerous than drinking.

He and Tessa hung out more than he expected over the course of the late summer and the fall, always under a sheen of professionalism. She teased him when he finally caved and got reading glasses, watched videos of his nieces and nephews, asked diligently after Kaitlyn’s practice schedule and always made time for a drink if Kait was in town. It was a comparatively distant relationship but, like finding Kait, was a relief; the only part of retirement that felt normal-ish. But she studiously avoided talking about her own shit, the Yeses she was saying. He found out about school from Alma, who heard it from Kate. He found out about photo shoots from thumbing through magazine racks when picking up beer. He found out she was dating Ryan from Cara, who’d heard it from Jordan. He found out about new sponsors when he finally got Twitter and she was tweeting about them. Every new piece of information, somehow, felt like more proof for the conclusion he had come to long, long ago: Tessa was going to leave him one day, and she had.

(On some level, he knew that Yes’es, that overscheduling her days and breaking a thousand new paths were her own coping mechanisms, her way of pushing back fears of the future and of emotions. Of course he knew. But at the time it just felt like that as soon as the ties between them snapped, she started plotting her trajectory away from his as quickly as she could go.)

So he sunk into that screwing-around transitional phase his friends had all had in college, drinking more than his mom would like and helping around the rink and the Skate Shop and reminding everyone who tentatively asked about what he wanted to do with the rest of his life that he had a gold and two silvers at the Olympic Games, so maybe they could let him live, thanks.

Because in the back of his mind he knew that he might be an Olympic gold medalist, but he was also a straight-B graduate of online high school, and a shitty best friend and partner, and the haplessly wayward youngest son, and a cheating boyfriend. Someone with a temper problem and an arrest record and no skills besides excellent edges and once upon a time making Tessa Virtue laugh. He was back to being a You’re A Good Kid Scottie But, only without the affirmation of And A Great Skater. He made a few attempts to feel around the edges of a post-skating life, but kept returning to chasing the highs again, to finding new ways to avoid the big questions, to avoid the unresolved conflicts and the ruined relationships, to avoid the depressing realization that off the ice, there was very little to warrant his cockiness. The seeds of doubt and self-loathing planted by Cass and Marina and Charlie pre-Sochi took root and flourished.

Everyone had left him—Tessa, his friends, his family, Chiddy, they all had other things. Cassandra and Charlie and Marina and the ISU judges and the media and Skate Canada and plenty of other people had seen right through his bullshit and found him wanting, great Face and edges and an idiot with a temper.

And now, he knew exactly his measure as a man, outside of the rink.

So it was entirely unsurprising that, in this quiescent state, Kait became the biggest and heaviest and most cogent part of his life that summer and fall, once the tours dried up. It was a bright spot, the one
positive, sure outlet for his energy. He threw himself into the relationship with Kaitlyn, loving her, getting it right; the only thing that he has worked harder at, ever, was training—not a relationship with Jess or Cass or even Tess, certainly never school. He learned how to be a good boyfriend—to listen, to show up, to disagree without blowing up, to compromise, to cook. But while his feelings for her were separate from the rest of his post-competition life—and entirely, devastatingly genuine—they were still inextricably linked, just like the way his feelings for Tessa had been so linked to the fact that she was his career.

And at the end of the day he was still asking the same questions in November 2014 as he had in a bar in Paris exactly a year earlier, only now staring down the bottle instead of the end of his career: if he didn’t make it work, if it wasn’t enough, then what was it all for? A fat load of fucking nothing. What did he have left, after the world burned to the ground? A fat load of fucking nothing.

Which was why it was so good that Kaitlyn was nothing like Tessa. Because anything else would be a reminder of the things he’d screwed up, the best friend he didn’t deserve anyways, the void of a tractionless future staring him down. She didn’t know him before, and she found the Scott in front of her to be pretty great, found him funny and smart and more than satisfactory in bed. He responded to the attention like the needy chump he was, turning toward her light and love and laugh. In front of her, he was still felt like the Scott he had been for the last ten years.

(She and he were exactly Enough; he and Tessa, in contrast, were always either Too Much or Not Enough.)

Months and months later, after shutting down too many dance floors and playing too much online poker and avoiding too many of Tessa’s text messages and his dad’s gentle probes, he figured out where the end had begun: In August, six months into dating, when Kait had gotten some sort of summer cold, probably from all the airplanes. She had protested, said it wasn’t that bad; he had flown to Winnipeg anyways since it wasn’t like he had anywhere else to be. She had been surrounded by tissues in bed when he showed up with a bunch of drugs and fancy soup from the nice market she liked. He whipped up a plate of waffles—she liked waffles, not pancakes—and reheated the soup, brought them to her on a tray that her grandmother had left her.

“What did I do to deserve you?” she had asked, scooting up. The words knifed at him, because he knew he was the one dating up in this case, way way way up. And she deserved the honesty.

He took a deep breath. He knew his worth, and it wasn’t much.

And he wanted this to work.

So much.

“Please. The question is ‘what did I do to deserve you?’” he had kissed her forehead before leaning against her in bed the tiny double bed, where she was watching The Matrix.

“You ridiculous, perfect man,” she murmured, kissing him again, avoiding his lips so he wouldn’t get sick, and only then did he realize how much it sounded like a line, the teasing careless thing a smug boyfriend would say when he knew he was earning points by flying a thousand miles to tend to a sick girlfriend, not the half-assed confessions of an empty man trying to find enough of himself to pour back into something greater than. He wanted to tell her, badly, what was actually the case here, the many ways in which had had fallen short, disappointed himself, betrayed his best friend, failed to meet others' expectations. The rot and doubt hidden beneath the gregarious mask he’d perfected.

But he was terrified she’d see through it too eventually, and leave him too.
And then where would he be?

That thought was terrifying.

So he kept quiet, didn’t say anything, stayed three days until she wasn’t contagious so he could kiss her on the mouth as he left.

(They’d hang on another year, would have some pretty great times, would nearly move in together, but that conversation—that last almost-moment of confessing and confiding in a woman who wasn’t Tessa, of seeking help and admitting vulnerability—was a blinking sign saying Last Exit on the highway of life. He didn’t take it, and began to lie by omission to Kait, hiding the rawest and ugliest parts of himself from her, lying to himself again that it might just all work out OK if he just tried hard enough and did his best. Honesty, and trust, it turned out, were damn hard to cultivate between adults in a relationship—a lesson he had never learned, because he had always had Tessa, had never had to work at either of those, not really, with her. With Tessa, it had always been a matter of translation, and timing, and with anyone else, the brutal intimacy of everyday life required a confidence that he just did not have, much as he wanted to, much as he needed and love Kait. Not coincidentally, that August conversation with Kait was the last pause before the rest of the free fall into his wilderness months, only to be dragged out again by a furious, scared Tessa crying into her Starbucks in a dog park in London.)

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vi. Nine Years Before Today, Tessa

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“Hey, kiddo.” Scott’s voice reached her before she saw him, and she tried to twist gently on the massage table as Hank manipulated her calves to find him. He walked around the table, held out a Diet Coke and a straw. “Brought you something.”

“Thanks!” she smiled. “We’re almost done. Pull up a medicine ball.”

“How’d today go?”

“Your partner is freakishly strong-willed” Hank informed him.

He laughed. “Christ, we didn’t need a second leg surgery to tell us that. Could have just gone to a family dinner when she was fifteen and wanted to get her belly button pierced.”

She stuck her tongue out. She’d won that argument. “Good news! I get to go back on the ice next week.” They’d make the tail end of the season after all.

“For forty-five minutes,” Hank edited. “Hold her to that, Moir.”

“Gotcha,” he said solemnly. “Anything else?”

“Make sure she’s being honest about pain levels.”

“Hey! I always am.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly how chapter five of our book goes,” he teased with a smile. It had been released the week before her surgery, and even though they’d carefully planned what to say, neither of them could quite believe how saccharine it turned out. Though she wasn’t about to agree with him.
“She’s ready to go. I’ll see you back here Wednesday at ten AM, Tessa. Scott, are you driving her?”

“No, coaching at my mom’s rink Tuesday through Thursday. Kate’ll be here. Grab the crutches, will you, Hank?” He stood.

“I can use them,” she insisted, sitting up.

“This is more fun,” he said, boosting her into a piggyback ride. “Especially because it means I can do this.” He took off maniacally, treating the PT room like an obstacle course, making her shriek with laughter the entire time.

“You wanna get sandwiches?” he asked as they drove through dusty December clouds toward her mom’s.

She looked up from scrolling through the music on his iPod, plugged into the cigarette lighter—Scott was such an old man and still had a flip phone. “Huh? Yeah, that’d be great.” She settled on an older Hip song. “This would be a great exh,” she mused, excited to finally be thinking about music choices again. She loved the line *with will and determination, and grace, too.* It was how she thought of herself, and she was pretty sure it was one of Scott’s favorite songs.

“Wait, seriously? Tess, this is about a hooker, or a hired assassin, or something. Kate and Alma would freak, and your brothers would melt into the stands with embarrassment.”

“What?” she gasped. “No way. OK, no.” She continued to scroll, found a band whose name she recognized from her *Grey’s Anatomy* playlist.

“PT ok?”

“Yeah, I’m just really excited to get back on ice next week.” Scott had taken a break as well this time, partly to help her and partly to decompress after the Games, and she had been managing her recovery perfectly. “Still gotta work on the stroking, keep it in my quads. It’s more efficient.”

“More efficient stroking sounds like a really good thing actually.”

“Yeah.” Mostly it sounded like another opportunity or things to go wrong. She bit her lip and looked out the window. Scott had been so present and attentive and considerate—the perfect partner throughout the recovery, really, making her laugh and bringing her food and staying at her parents’ till eleven before coming back at seven—but she was still a little worried about saying too much, maybe making him think running for the hills was a better option.

(He knew he wouldn’t. It didn’t stop the feeling.)

He mistook her nerves for fear and said, “You know, you could give it another week. Really feel like you’ve got your strength back. You’ve been working really hard, kiddo, but this is a go-slow-and-get-it-right thing. We talked about it with Diana.”

“I’m ready to skate again. My legs feel good. They feel a lot better than last time.” She’d taken an extra month, and she knew they were ready. Now or never.

“OK. Something on your mind?”

“I mean, everything is …” she started. Letting him down, again; not being good enough, again; holding him back, again. Not to self-flagellate so much, but Scott was such a good skater and person and her sense of self-worth was … not the healthiest, she was realizing. Especially around him. But she finally felt brave enough to ask him something that had been working its way front from deep in
her brain stem for two years now. “Scott? Why didn’t you get a new partner?” She hated how small her voice sounded.

“Kiddo, you got through this once. You’re recovering faster than expected. And we’re a team, remember.”

“Not this time.”

“Oh,” he worked his jaw. “Well, unlike everyone else, I knew you. I knew how determined you were. I wasn’t worried.”

She stared at him, and he stared at the road. She didn’t believe him. “Is that it?” she asked. The song shifted, to one she recognized, sad pianos aching through a breakup.

“I …” he stopped. “I didn’t have a choice, T. I don’t know. That was it.”

“Of course you had a choice,” she said. “There were like, eighty girls lined up—”

“OK, I don’t know what shit Meryl fed you, but come on, it wasn’t like The Bachelor: Ice Dance Edition.” He shifted. “But … not a choice like that, like options. It just … It wasn’t a choice. I never made it, consciously. I just knew. I knew that you would come back, I knew I wouldn’t skate without you. And that’s still true, T, and I don’t know how else I can explain it.”

She stared at him. “OK,” she said. She believed him. She didn’t deserve the gift of her career, but she knew she didn’t deserve him as her partner, either, and some things couldn’t be explained. If she got to keep her career, to keep dancing with him, she could deal with the sleep lost due to self-doubt, she decided.

He flicked his eyes toward the console. “Now this would be a good exh,” he said.

I don’t love you but I always will. She shivered. “Marina would hate it,” she pointed out, which she would (and did; they weren’t allowed to do breakup songs). “It’s so sad.”

“Really? I think it’s kinda hopeful.”

Maybe it was that too, she decided.

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vii. Three Years Before Today, Scott

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He had to admit—to himself, because everyone except maaaaaaybe Patch would tell him he was fucking crazy for realizing he was in love with Tessa two months into their comeback, and Patch would definitely go very wide-eyed and quiet—that he hadn’t made a ton of progress on his two-year plan by May, three months into its existence. In fact, it still sort of went like this:

1. Don’t freak out
2. Tell her

And that only got him to the telling-her part. There was the whole part where she didn’t freak out either, and they still won the Olympics in twenty months, no biggie.

And knowing Tessa, knowing her grand plan about their comeback, her vision and intention, he knew that any half-thought-out confession, like the impulsive Christmas declaration a lifetime ago,
was going to lead to Conversations, a lot of them, probably a suggestion they move cots—separate, obviously—into JF’s office until they hashed this out.

He would like to avoid a drastic outcome, have her think Hey Maybe This Wouldn’t Be Awful, and so he needed to come up with something thought-out, mature, and, above all, maddeningly logical. And hopefully romantic. And big. And he needed to figure out what he actually wanted, how he saw this playing out against the backdrop of their comeback, now that he realized he was, you know, This Is It levels of In Love.

He knew he wanted skating, and Tessa, and skating-with-Tessa. It was simple, but the last eighteen years taught him it wasn’t nearly that straightforward.

So yeah, he had nothing—no plans, no clue, no girl, just a very big sense of the stakes, here. Hence he couldn’t talk to even his brothers.

As he tried to figure it out, he also tried to step it up, subtly, and be The Guy in every way for Tessa. He couldn’t wear suits or speak another language or call the Tokyo office, but he do the sort of shit-together things he figured Tessa would expect, whether it was changing his air filters every ninety days or seeking out master-class teaching opportunities or speaking up on ways that netted him informal-leader jokes on tours, and not just in the finding-the-bars-after sense: contributing to choreo, helping the newbies, petitioning for better sandwiches. Calling the shots for Team Canada and Team Tour the way he had always handled shit on-ice for Team Virtue/Moir. It wasn’t much but it felt like something.

And he could sort-of-date her, be present for her. He ended up making her dinner more often than not, even when their meal plans didn’t match up; he brought coffee and drove her to the rink every morning; he spent twenty minutes trying to fix the engine on her espresso machine and then two hours on hold with Italy to order a replacement part. They went out to dinner and had decaf coffee in her apartment after in Montreal, and ended up ‘crashing’ at each other’s places at least once a week. They inadvertently double-dated with Max and Tati and Marie and Patch and Midori and her fiancé and Joannie and her fiancé and Paul and his new girlfriend. He fixed her car and let her watch Pride and Prejudice from the vantage point of his chest after her dad called to let her know he was getting remarried, and he mocked Gabi and Gui under his breath every to make her laugh. In Japan he took her out for sushi and in Switzerland they wandered around Geneva for an entire day, his arm warm around her waist as he made her laugh. He helped her deal with her eighty bags in five airports across the globe and accompanied her to three engagement parties and a dozen dinner parties.

She was always near him physically—peeking over his shoulder as he cooked, rubbing her thumb along his pulse point when he was driving, shimmying just a touch too close in Sam’s studio. They were connected, and calm, synchronous in a peaceful way that he simply never remembered being. This was what it was like, he realized, to be adults in a committed relationship, even if it was not—quite yet, hopefully one day—romantic.

And there was the talking and the laughter.

Always the talking and the laughter.

(Concurrently and not-so-coincidentally that spring, once they got back from Japan, he realized the boulders of hatred and guilt and anger and remorse and burnout that he’d placed on himself, which had begun to shrink the previous year, were finally beginning to wash away fully with the river of time. Their absence left room for the craggy pieces of his soul to bind back together, the seams making him stronger but also allowing forgiveness and kindness and understanding to poke through. Centeredness and focus and drive soon followed.)
This happened, quite naturally, just because he woke up most days with the goal of being a good partner to Tess. He wasn’t perfect—especially as an athlete, where he had some serious ground to make up in terms of physical fitness—but it was a baptism by sweat, poured out into *Latch* choreography and his best jokes and silent conversations.)

The only issue was that all of this combined equated to, at most, a two-percent boost in effort, hardly noticeable to Tess.

Jordan was one of the recently betrothed, and her Toronto engagement party had been a bit of a fly-by—they landed an hour before it started, ducked out after Tessa’s speech, practiced for four hours at Jeff’s rink before meeting her family for brunch the next day, and headed to the airport from the meal—so Jordan and Ben came up for a weekend toward the end of May to properly celebrate. At Foxy’s Scott insisted on picking up the tab, rationalizing that, “When Charlie and Danny get their acts together to visit, you can take the check, Virtch. And you know it’ll be three steak dinners so really, I insist.”

“Yeah your roast chicken, root veggies, and quinoa really scream man-chow prices,” she laughed, taking his hand. “Thank you, Scott.”

He squeezed her fingers and looked at her sister, who raised an eyebrow. “Happy engagement, Danny Two.” She rolled her eyes, unimpressed.

“So you remain very not smooth,” Jordan said later, when T was in the ladies’ room.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he protested. Ben snickered.

Jordan rolled her eyes, unimpressed. “For your sake, and her sake, and your career’s sake—I hope to god you do.”

Three days later, Danny called him as he was heading home from the gym: “You and Tessa OK?”

“Yeah,” his forehead crinkled. “Why?”

“Got a weird call from Danny Two yesterday.”

“Don’t you guys have things to do? You have kids to raise, she has a wedding to plan, and, hilariously enough, T and I have an Olympics to win.” He paused. “What did she say?” Just, you know, for information-gathering purposes. Maybe she and Tessa had talked and Tessa had casually mentioned that after the Games, she thought getting married sounded like a good idea.

“She was asking me for information. Said that she got a vibe in Montreal and Tessa hadn’t said anything, so she wanted to know if you had told me anything. I reminded her who we were dealing with so I’m asking—you guys OK? Everything seemed good with the comeback.”

“Yeah,” he said immediately, but he sounded too earnest and high-pitched, he knew. “We’re good. Skating is better than ever,” he explained, and that was honest so sounded a little less like bullshit.

“Good, because you said that this comeback would be different, more intentional.”

“It is. She’s … she’s extraordinary; she’s Tess, of course she is.”

Danny was quiet. “Still, if you’re feeling like something’s off, like maybe you did something, those crazy flowers she likes are always a good start—”

“Ranunculus,” he corrected automatically.
“Yeah. You know, the rest of the women in the world like basic-ass flowers like roses. But anyways, those flowers or a little honest conversation will probably go a long way.”

It always came down to that.

He was so deep in thought when he got home that it didn’t register that she was distracted and distant as well. She’d let herself in, was working on some jewelry-line stuff on the couch, glossy photos in front of her and *The National* quietly on the TV. He started in on dinner, and she muted the TV; wordlessly, he turned on some Otis Redding for her.

He was so engrossed in spiralizing the zucchini that he was a little startled when she materialized, head ducked into the fridge for the bottle of Pinot Gris she’d stashed there. “Whoa,” he said. “On a school night?”

“You gonna tell?” she smirked, pouring herself barely half a glass.

“No, but I think I’ll have a beer, then. Can you—” a Molson Light appeared next to him, she cracked the top off with a quiet hiss. “Everything OK?” he checked as she moved to the table and stared out the window.

“Yeah,” she said, “Just thinking.”

“Penny for your thoughts?”

“You’d be overpaying,” she smiled. “What did you think of the new lift today?” They hadn’t really gotten too deep into the choreography for *Latch*, but he was liking the stuff they were messing around with.

“I’ll get the timing down, but I really like the contemporary vibe. It’s new for us. Will be a good reintroduction.” The whole idea was to try new things; while this felt weird at first, he was steadily gaining confidence with it, getting closer to right and real every day.

Metaphor for his life, he hoped.

“I was talking to Sam. He’s got a couple contemporary performances he wants us to check out. Look at their lines and movement. One of them is this weekend; you free Saturday night?”

Tessa basically *set* his schedule, and knew he was. “Yeah. It’s a date,” he said automatically. “I mean …”

She smiled softly. “I know what you mean.”

She remained quiet, but it was a soft, contented quiet, one that he honestly didn’t mind. After racking his brain to make sure nothing had been off at practice today, he decided to simply let it be. It worked well enough; once the food was ready she started filling him on the latest with the jewelry line and Kevin and Casey’s kids, and they lingered as long as their weak beverages would let them.

As she loaded the dishwasher and he scrubbed the pots, he said, “You wanna—” and he turned and was startled that she was *there*—though he really shouldn’t have been, because she was always right *there*—and her eyes were dark and questioning and then she was wrapping her hands around his neck and kissing him and *fuck* kissing her was like coming in from a storm, like a hot shower after a rough practice, like a cold drink on an August day.

Trust Tess, impatient as all *fuck*, to make the first move.
He wrapped his arms around her waist, then ran them up her spine, tangled one in her hair. Her mouth was warm, and pliant and urgent, her tongue chasing his. He nipped at her lower lip and she paused for a second, gave a little throaty sigh-laugh—fuck, Tess, way to lead him immediately to non-PG places—then nuzzled his nose a little before going in again. She pulled her arms around his neck, and they swayed slightly, Otis still crooning about cigarettes and coffee.

They stood there, for a minute or five or fifteen or fifty, not moving, no urgency, only thoroughness, only reacquaintance. Over the last eight years there has always been so much —need, passion, haste—that he had forgotten how damn nice kissing her could be. One of her hands wandered under his shirt, but almost experimentally; it eventually drifted around and rested on his ass. He trailed his mouth down to her collarbone, but abandoned it before it left something Marie would notice in the morning.

They had so much time.

Eventually he pulled back, breathing a bit elevated, like after a good warm-up skate. Brushed her mussed hair—*he did that he did that he did that*—behind her ear, kissed her cheeks and nose, tilted his forehead against her. “Hey, T,” he whispered.

It was the best third first kiss of his life, he decided.

“Hey,” she breathed out, mouth red and eyes wide, like she couldn’t actually believe they’d just done that. “Sorry, I just really felt like doing that.” She blinked rapidly, a little dumbly exhilarated, then smiled, reached up to kiss him again. It was clearly meant to be a nearly-chaste affair, a stolen kiss of reassurance that *no* she wasn’t freaking out, but he curled his hand around her cheek, bringing it deep for just a little longer. “Hi,” she pulled back, her eyes set with the same sureness he saw before her best skates. He knew what she was going to say before she said it: “I should go.”

“Yeah,” he said, kissing her knuckles. “Want me to walk you down?”

“Yeah, because *that* would end with me taking a bath, reading a book, and going to bed early,” she smirked. “You’re staying on this side of your door, mister.”

He helped her collect her things quietly, wrapped an arm around her waist as he walked her to door. He kissed her, one last time, knowing that would be it for at least the near future. “Don’t shut me out, ok?” he implored, trying for *Serious But Not Desperate*. “This is our career and our life, and I’m here. I’m ready when you are.”

“I know,” she exhaled, then ran a hand along his face. “We’ll talk. In a bit. When I’m ready.”

“OK. G’night.” With one last kiss, she left. Leaning his head against the door, he felt her waiting on the other side. After a minute or so, her footsteps started up.

They’d be ready for that honest conversation. Soon.

*Chapter End Notes*

I’m not really sure when I realized that the issue I would have “Mr. Two Condoms” (WHY? It’s so cocky yet humble and realistic) would be worthiness, but probably when
I was building out the plot around three or four. He’s someone that defines himself in what he offers to others—he’s a friend, a brother, a partner—and when that force is ripped away he gets really lost. So this chapter became all about Scott reckoning with this, evaluating his complicity, and beginning to understand his impact on others. And he needed to do all of that and make it to the first kiss at the end of the chapter.

I structured chapters so that the first vignette sets the tone, and then the last vignettes (from 3-14) are all a steady progression of their relationship maturing (with the exception of 12 and 13, the last vignettes are also all completely chronological.) This one needed to open in a really bleak place, and I’d had this image since the second chapter of them going into a photo booth at an Ilderton carnival as part of the friendship-rebuild, so I wanted to work toward that. This pubbed around the time of one of Scott’s podcast, which freaked me out that I’d get swept by a bunch of “Tess drags Scott out of a bar” stories (I did) but I stuck to it because one of my goals was to be a maximalist/completist when it came to messing around with tropes. (Also, there is just a TON of mind-meld/riffing around tropes in the fandom, from bellybutton-ring biting to Scott coaching a team to “Pride and Prejudice” to Scott covering her eyes in the sexy bits of Moulin Rouge—pretty sure I helped start that, which annoys Manquebusiness since there actually *aren’t* explicit sex scenes). Anyways, the podcast just made me more comfortable being explicit about digging into some of these challenges and themes—a contrast to some punches I feel I pulled earlier WRT Tessa’s anxiety.

This chapter came together really easily. I knew that I wanted to tackle Scotland from Tessa’s perspective (it felt less done) and it should continue on the golf scene from 8 and definitely end with her trying to force him and Kaitlyn. That just felt like the logical culmination of her “be better for him” mentality and the care and wariness with which she was handling the relationship in 2016 in earlier chapters. And I very much wanted to subvert The Scotland Narrative a bit —no big declaration or realizations and definitely no sex and making out. Worlds was also an easy vignette to pull into a meditation on worthiness; and the bucket of rice conversation—which I just straight up forgot to plot earlier—also really fit. That and the “Grace, Too” conversation were very much to kind of fill out the theme in a minor key, the illustrative role Scott had played in the previous chapter. I wanted to mention “Grace, Too” since I was already building to the name/theme. There’s also a small moment where they mention (in 2010) that Marina won’t let them do a breakup song; obviously that changes in 2014.

Based on where we left Scott in Paris, I knew that we needed to get into his focus on getting the relationship right (and not cheating with Tess), but really pull into why it wouldn’t work. We’d also need to see him putting his life back together, and stepping up to be The Guy for Tess. Just like with Tessa realizing she needed to choose in order to be happy, we weren’t going to get all the way with him here; he just really needed to learn what makes him worthy. He needed to start becoming un-blind to his own bullshit, and start doing the work to realize when he was lying to himself. (A pretty small moment that makes me smile—he and Kait watch The Matrix; in the next chapter, when he and Tessa are exploring the house, he admits it feels a little red pill/blue pill). MB pointed out earlier that he picked someone who would react “bloodlessly” to him—and-Tessa to date when he started a reactionary relationship; I didn’t exactly plan that, but the goal was a total foil to Tessa—and Tessa, for all her ice-princess rep, is a sensitive perfectionist people pleaser—hardly bloodless. But he very much needed to lose himself a bit to really understand himself, and that finally starts to come together in the last section.

"The Oil Slick" is one of my favorite songs. Scott goes through a whole journey related
to those emotions in this chapter, by the end, when Tessa kisses him, he’s at the point where he sees the hope in all of this, and he’s ready to dive in and commit and make it work, because he knows himself and what he wants. (And fun aside, Trust Tess to make the first move is repeated on each first kiss told from his perspective—Korea 2008, here, and London 2006.) I went back and forth on who initiated on this one—I thought she might be too gun-shy and protective and too concerned about instigating since the instigator gets blamed when things go south—but ended up going with her here as almost a reckless thing. Plus, she leads off-ice.
Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for the response to the last chapter! It was crazy-humbling. Up next we're focusing on choosing each other, in slightly healthier ways, as well as the realizations that they make each other better. Will warn that the last part of the chapter gets a little smutty, but also that, despite the smut and happiness, we're not all the way out of the woods yet.

Apologies for formatting issues too — I was on American Airline wifi for most of the evening and it was driving me nuts.

Title from Jason Isbell's "If We Were Vampires" which is a crazy-romantic song, highly recommend to everyone.

Also, this chapter is shorter than the last! Still insane, but BOOM go me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

i. Three Years Before Today, Tessa

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Tessa Jane McCormick Virtue had known Scott Moir for nearly twenty years, and she knew one thing: he was not subtle. At all.

It was one of the things she loved most about him as a dance partner, how expressive he was, how utterly performative he got during routines. Most straight male ice dancers were reserved; Scott was not. There was a reason they were the best storytellers in the game, and it was the fact that he was down to make out with her on ice if it helped the performance.

OK, he was probably down with that for other reasons too, but still. He was all-in, always.

But he had a terrible poker face: had ruined her surprise Sweet Sixteen, had spoiled Santa Claus for Graham, had told Tessa Two that Danny was going to propose, had blabbed to Tanith that Charlie had a crush the size of Pluto on her. Every Moir in Ilderton knew he was a weak link for family gossip; after the Graham fiasco, Leanne’s husband had literally told Tessa once that the only way to get Scott to keep a secret was if you could convince him that Tessa’s health or mental well-being depended on it, and she had to admit there was a lot of truth in that statement.

(Um, duh.)

The point was, he told her when he changed toothpastes. She could tell when something was up.

And something was up, something had been up since at least their trip in Japan and probably before. She could see it in his smirk, the electric line of his spine, his hooded and confident gaze, all making her feel the old black magic of more. The possessive expanse of his palm on the small of her back. The way he licked his lips and stared at her mouth for hours in Japan, and nearly made out with her when saying goodnight. The way he arranged a fucking cheese and chocolate tour in Switzerland, and kept his arm warm around her waist the entire time. The way hands gripped her hips to “fix” her
swing when they went golfing for her birthday in Vancouver, and let his hug linger after he led the
CSOI cast in a rendition of *Happy Birthday*. The depth in their edges and the energy in their
extensions and the clarity in their skating, that locked-in feeling that there was nobody else in the
world, that the crowds didn’t exist, that nerves could be hugged away.

If she didn’t know better she would say she was dating Scott Moir. She had done that in the past,
though, and she knew it was combustible, career threatening, emotionally draining. This was fun and
companionable and filled with a lot of talking and laughter and accompanied by some of their most
focused skating and … kind of just light and sexy, in general? He made her dinner and let her watch
him chop things; put on whatever suit she picked and selected a good bottle of wine to bring to her
book club’s dinner parties; set up playlists for her workouts that she liked despite their lack of oldies.
When she expressed regret that they couldn’t stay for more than sixteen hours in Toronto for
Jordan’s engagement party because of *Stars*, he immediately invited Jordan and Ben to Montreal;
pulled out his phone to pick dates at brunch and everything as her mother smiled behind him. He was
calmer, sturdier, somehow more grounded, since they started skating again. He was still fun on tour,
made everyone laugh and kept the mood high—but less in the class-clown way, more in a team-
captain way. He was determined, thoughtful, present. Off ice, he visited classrooms and helped out
literally any juniors coach who wanted a second opinion. On ice, he was incredible to watch;
sometimes Patch would catch her staring and cough quietly.

He was, in short, no longer the boy she'd grown up with and the man-boy she'd hopelessly loved.

(When he admitted months later that she wasn’t sure if he’d noticed these things, her jaw had actually
fucking dropped.)

When tours were finally over, Patch and Marie invited them over for Friday-night dinner, a
“welcome back/final hurrah” thing, complete with non-b2ten-approved duck ragu and maple pie.
Billie-Rose, her own pappardelle covered in tomato sauce, stuck it out valiantly, but when her
eyelashes began to droop into her ice cream, Patch scooped her up: “*Heure du coucher, ma petite
fleur.*”

“Want Scott story,” she mumbled, tiny hands stretching back from her father to Scott. Patch spun,
raised an eyebrow—really, the economy of his expressions was admirable—and Scott cocked his
head with a smile, and got up, squeezing her shoulders gently as he passed.

*Why don’t you just cut my ovaries out with a spoon, Billie,* Tessa thought, half-tipsy and very very
petulant. She didn’t even know if she *wanted* children. When she caught Marie staring at her staring
at Scott, she rose abruptly. “I’ll help with dishes.”

“While we’re happy to have you back, how were Japan and Switzerland and the rest of Canada?”
Marie-France asked, sliding plates into the dishwasher. “Did you two have fun?”

Tessa froze. She had been expecting this conversation since Joannie’s casual, drunken trip down
memory lane a few months ago—*wasn’t it hilarious when you two spent years sex twizzling?*—and
she was impressed that Marie, of all people, had shown restraint on the topic since then. “Uh, yeah,”
she said slowly. “Great energy, so fun to see everyone. In Geneva Scott found this cheese and
chocolate tour that we did our free afternoon, which was fun.” She laughed to try and make it sound
low-key. Casual.

“Sounds like a lovely date,” Marie-France said mildly, and Tessa dropped the forks she was
scrubbing with a loud clatter. Marie, who had apparently been taking Expressive Eyebrows 101 from
her husband, merely arched one up.

“It was a pretty great afternoon,” Tessa said, very genuinely and with a placid smile.
Marie’s face, though, seemed to say *I am onto your bullshit*. She grabbed a bottle and poured out two globes of very good Cab. “Billie always needs at least four stories, and Patch indulges her. The boys, they will be awhile.”

Patch and Marie’s house, in a particularly French section of Mont Royal, was stately and generous but warm, with a gas firepit in the well-appointed backyard. Marie handed her a glass, settled into a chaise lounge, and waited.

Tessa smirked. She always won the silent game.

Marie swirled her glass and smiled pleasantly.

Or not.

“So I feel like you have some questions, and I just want to assure you that Scott and I are one hundred percent committed to this comeback.” The words came out in a rush.

“Oh, I can tell,” Marie said. “You both have such a groundedness. You have a vision. I have no doubt you’re committed. To skating, and to each other.”

Tessa nodded, ignored the last comment. “It’s very nice to be able to focus. We’re training more productively than ever. You’ve created such a wonderful and nurturing atmosphere here, Marie. We’re loving it.” This was so true—the four of them were so consistently in sync that it was sort of scary. She’d never felt more confident, more centered, on ice.

“OK, so you very much do not want to talk about it, the fact that you have feelings for each other, the fact that you are in a relationship,” Marie smiled. “That’s fine! We can just enjoy this wonderful wine.”

“Oh my god, Marie, you know it’s not like that,” she scoffed.

Marie snorted, delighted. “You go on chocolate-and-cheese tours; he is helping host your sister this weekend; I know he is keeping you fed. How many nights a week does he end up in your bed?”

“It’s not like that,” she repeated. “I won’t pretend like our relationship is in the universe of normal, but we’re also not on track to replicate what you and Patch have. *We know* this.” She thought back to the desperate final conversation with Marina, thought of their stubbornness and selfishness, his callousness and her control, his impulsiveness and her implacability. The ways they had used and abused each other. When they were bad they were awful.

She couldn’t fuck up his life, his shot at an Olympic medal, again.

“Even before Joannie … *ma cherie*, I had assumed. We love you two, and the connection the two of you have is very apparent.”

“To you and everyone in Canada,” she said, not meanly, just matter-of-fact. She felt a little sleepy from the alcohol, and the mental image of Scott upstairs reading a book to Billie-Rose. “Everyone thinks they understand this. I don’t understand it, so how can anyone else?”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Marie asked. “Woman to woman.” It didn’t need to be said, really—Marie was their coach, of course, but they were equals, each with an invested role to play in Virtue-Moir’s success.

Tessa sighed. “He’s the most special thing in the world to me,” she said softly, picking at a thread in his cuff. “You know that. More than my career, even. And last time we were … involved, we nearly
destroyed everything. I’m grateful we were able to come back, to this point.” Everything without Scott, she had realized over the last two years, felt like less: less safe, less freeing, less intense, less satisfying. Everything relationship without him was lacking, but that didn’t mean she wanted the more that Scott Moir often brought. That they brought on themselves. “And I want him in my life. More than anything, on some level. It took nearly losing him to realize that.” To Cassandra, to her jealousy, to his anger, to Kaitlyn, to retirement. “He could very well be the love of my life; that doesn’t mean that I should be sleeping with him.” Best friends, skating team, business partners—that should be enough. More than enough.

“I cannot pretend to understand what you went through that last year with Marina—”

“Oh, it wasn’t just that last year; it wasn’t just Marina. It was us, and everything else is an excuse.”

“I think you are a little hard on yourself, Tessa.”

She shook her head, tapped fingers against her forehead. “I don’t remember my life without him, Marie. I met him when I was six. I decided to marry him when I was eight. I moved away from home with him when I was thirteen. I kissed him for the first time when I was sixteen. I slept with him for the first time when I was eighteen. I tried dating him for three months when I was twenty-three and we nearly brought down our careers. I bought the whole Canada’s Sweethearts thing … hell, I created it … but it took that last season to realize that we were toxic.”

“Whatever can you mean? That is such strong language for something with such good.”

“We treated each other terribly. We were so bad at communicating without jealousy or anger or spite. We brought out the worst in each other. And we had to balance all of that on top of our career.” She ticked these things off bloodlessly, ran her finger up and down the wine glass. It was exhausting, hard-earned knowledge. There was no other narrative for them.

“And the best,” Marie said gently. “I see that, every day.”

“And the best,” she agreed softly, staring at the fire.

That was the problem.

It had always been the problem.

“I can’t imagine the amount of hurt you felt after … what happened between the two of you,” Marie replied. “And knowing that, certainly, makes it harder. But that’s the risk you run, inevitably, with loving someone. You know what you are capable of doing to each other. And yet you trust and you try and you love and you fall short and you forgive anyways. That is the very definition of love. That faith.”

Her voice was grand and whimsical; Tessa laughed, just a little, into her own wine. “How many glasses have you had, Marie-France?” she asked.

“One too many,” Marie responded promptly, with a smirk. Then she sobered. “I do not pretend to know your struggles. The struggles between a couple can be vast, and only two people can truly understand them. And I am not saying that a partnership that is romantic—in addition to the many layers already there—would not be without challenges. But Tessa, you two are … rare. You make him more focused and thoughtful. He makes you braver and calmer. You bring discipline and vision, he brings tenacity and strength. As skaters, you have balance, almost preternaturally. I believe because you were so young when you paired off, you draw from each others’ strengths in a deep and … spiritual way.”
“You and our mothers and the CBC,” she snorted. Maybe she was tipsy too.

“Be nice,” Marie scolded. “But as people, you have tension.”

“You and our mothers and the CBC all agree,” she interrupted with another giggle, and she determined yes, she too was tipsy.

“Not negative tension. The necessary sort. It causes action, reaction, it ultimately stretches and strengthens you farther than you thought possible. That tension means you have to work at it. And every time you have been great, it has nothing to do with anything but work and will. When you are great together, it is a choice, it is intentionality.”

Tessa laughed. “We were hardly great together in Sochi and Vancouver, and we did OK anyways.” This version of them was so much better. Maybe that was what was different this time around—Scott had always brought out her best, but now he was also making her simply better.

“Then that is your baseline.” She shrugged. “It is a pretty good baseline. My point, Tessa—focus on the greatness, not the failure. Your old jar of rice, yes? When you choose to be great, together, magic, something unexpected, happens. But only when you choose. Choosing is so much scarier than letting something happen, isn’t it? Because it is your fault if you fail. You have to work, you have to try, it is all in your control and there is no guaranteed success.”

She smiled. “We did choose, we did try, we did fail. We want simple.” She thought back, briefly, to that fuzzy and frenetic year. Had they tried, really? Had they chosen? She was no longer sure. “And, I want to be my own person. I nearly lost myself in the partnership. I don’t want to be half of something.” That, especially, was critical. She’d lost ice dance once before, knew it would go away again. She refused to be left with nothing, and she’d always prioritize him, his happiness, which now meant avoiding heartbreak for both of them. “Nothing works when that happens. And eventually … I’ll want other things.”

Marie snorted, again. “Choose whatever definition you want, for yourself and for your partnership, but you cannot convince me that you have not grown since 2013. Variables change, non?” She had to admit Marie-France had a point, there. “I just would like to see you both as happy off-ice as you are on.”

It sounded nice, but. “We’re not ready,” she whispered. Besides, she wasn’t built for happy.

Marie smiled, sympathetically. “Just remember—you show that faith in him every day, already. He’s the man you trust to help you pursue your greatest dream, and to throw you around in the air every day. Maybe you talk to him about the rest.”

“There you girls are,” Scott said, a smile in his voice. “And there’s my jacket, Virtch.”

She turned to grin—she’d stolen it, rationalized it was warmer than her trench. “It looks cuter on me,” she informed him.

“Obviously, that’s what I’m around for—objectively, my job is to make you look cute,” he teased, taking the chair next to hers. "Though it's not hard," he said, in that casual way.

Marie leaned up for a kiss, and Patch obliged before settling next to her on the lounge. “Is she asleep?”

“Someone was a sucker and read all three Knuffle Bunny books,” Patch confirmed. “But yes, she’s out.”
Scott tapped her ankle with his foot. “There’s more pie, if you want. Cheat night, and all.”

She shook her head. “I actually think we should get going. Jordan and Ben land at, like, nine-thirty.”

“Right,” he said. “I can drive to Trudeau, tomorrow. Circle around so you don’t have to pay for parking.”

She smiled, “That’d be great,” and she knew he’d be letting himself in at eight forty-five with a coffee in hand. “Alright, good night—no, don’t get up, Patch. Thank you, both, for a lovely last meal.”

“We’ll do it again in twenty-one months, when the Games are done,” Marie assured them. “All the maple pie you want, Scottie.”

They climbed into his car, tired from the wine and heavy food and conversation. Johnny Cash came on, explaining how he kept the ends out for the ties that bind and she smiled, thinking of their last movie night. “I was thinking we take Jordan and Ben to Foxy’s tomorrow.”

She smiled, then realized something—she had just assumed he would want to hang out with her and Jordan and Ben, instead of sleeping in or running errands or doing literally anything else. “You don’t have to hang out with us the entire weekend, you know.” He gripped the steering wheel tighter, eyes on the road. Fuck. She reached out and touched his bicep. “I mean, I would love for you to. But if you’ve got errands or … other plans, or just don’t want to, I get that. Jordan won’t be mad.”

“T, I suggested this weekend,” he pointed out. “I figure I’ve got twenty years of advice to impart to Ben on how to deal with Virtue women.” He smiled, then lowered one hand to take hers. He gently swooped her fingers up for a light kiss.

She thought of variables, like Marie said. So much had changed. Wounds faded to scars. She was still not ready, though, she knew that—too many questions, too many coin-flips, too many ways this would end Very Very Badly, too many ways this would be It, Forever. No, she wasn’t ready.

But she was beginning to think Scott, improbably, might be.

Which was indeed a new variable.

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ii. Four Years Before Today, Scott

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Charlie was the one who found the house, after the calendar’s flip from 2014 to 2015 also turned the buzz of his family’s suggestions that he Find Something To Do to something much, much louder. But Scott called the realtor as they peeked in the windows that dreary February day and firmly requested she come meet them now, please. He had been thinking about buying something for a while, and knew the area pretty well—it was right on the lake where he and Tessa had swum post-practice as kids, when Sheri and Danny would rather flirt with lifeguards than babysit preteens. It was a great property, so in traditional Good-Old-Scottie fashion, he was at the bank four hours later putting three competitions’ worth of winnings behind it. The house was such a fixer-upper, far enough from London, that he didn’t need a loan.

“It has good bones” was his dad’s generous way of describing it, and it did—but the two-story Craftsman also had original wiring and heavy wood paneling, shag carpeting and cracked linoleum, water damage and brass fixtures mottled with corrosion. The owner—“Mr. Carmichael, you
remember, his nephews were in skating camp summer of ‘95” his mother had explained, in a tone that implied he should know all of this—had passed away months earlier, and his son, in Victoria, simply wanted to offload it. “It’ll be gorgeous.”

Scott was so happy with himself he moved a mattress into one of the bedrooms, just so he could stay there. He couldn’t wait till he and T had practice and he could share his own thing. Gotta keep up with her, he thought.

“I did a thing,” he said, four days later when picking up Kaitlyn at the airport. He kissed her. “Well. I’m in the middle of a thing. Paperwork takes time.”

“Donating a kidney?” she teased. “Also, hi.”

“Hi,” he smiled, and grabbed her carry-on. “Here. I’ll show you.” He practically propelled her to his car.

“This is great,” she enthused forty-five minutes later, running a hand on the cracked Formica in the kitchen. “Well. It has good bones. It’s gonna be gorgeous.”

“I’m thinking Charlie and I’ll tear down this wall, create something really open plan, put in a big island that everyone can gather around, you know, a lot of room for chips and guac and stuff, and, obviously, a huge TV for watching games—the flag, you know, from Vancouver, that they gave us? I kept that, Mom knows someone who’ll frame that and I’ll hang that behind the sofa. And like we’ll combine these rooms, maybe some sort of big dining room so I can have all the Moirs over, pull my weight there.” He took her hand, led her outside. “I’m going to get a dock—you have to get a permit but you can have speedboats on the lake, so I’m gonna get one. And a grill, maybe a couple of different burners so we can do burgers and chicken at the same time.” Virtue women professed to hate burgers, so they would need a second, healthier option.

“Let’s do picnic tables under that tree. And maybe a tire swing.” Kait pointed toward the big oak tree, and he had to admit, those were both great ideas. “Actually, this is kind of perfect because I wanted to talk to you about something.” She took a deep breath and smiled, running her hands through his hair nervously.

He grasped them, pulled them to his shoulders, folded his hands over hers. It was weird for Kaitlyn to be nervous. “What’s up, sweetie?”

“Sooooo we’ve only got a couple of tourneys left this season, and I was talking to Jennifer … about maybe not coming back next year.”

“Retirement? It’s really not all it’s cracked up to be.”


“Move here? All the time. Wow. Yeah, that’d be great.”

“I just think, you know, it’s pretty wild, right? You buy a house the day that I fly out to see about moving in together. Like talk about timing.”

Oh. “You would live here.” He got the words out mostly-smoothly, trying to make it not sound like a question.

“I mean, yeah.” She cocked her head, eyes flickering. “Sorry, maybe that wasn’t the best way to raise the whole ‘honey let’s move in together’ conversation. But—if I would be switching teams to live here, it’s not just because I think London’s a great city. I love you and it’s been a year—or I
guess a year since we met, a year dating next month—and I’m so proud of how we’ve made the long distance thing work, but I want to … you know, come home and watch Netflix, trade off doing the dishes and making dinner, buy a king-sized bed. Build a home, and you just … bought one.” She grinned, with a little I-can’t-believe-it laugh. “Like that’s a sign, right? Like, fate.”

“It’s pretty remarkable,” he agreed.

She tilted her head. “What are you thinking?”

“It’s a lot,” he said. “But the whole Netflix, dinner, king-sized bed thing … I like it,” he grinned, though it felt a little maniacal, to him. Shit, was he supposed to be there?

She stared at him, open and a little taken aback. “So me, here, us building this house together, designing a kitchen and everything, is what you want? When you bought this house, who did you see living in it in five years?”

He opened, then closed, his mouth. “I just liked the idea of a project,” he admitted. “Something to start working on, in addition to the Skate Shop and tours with T and stuff.”

“And hockey games, and drinking with your bros.” She stepped back and walked in a circle. He got the feeling that she was maybe not as cool with the ‘drinking with the bros’ as she claimed, and made a mental note to call Charlie next time he needed a ride. “OK. I get it. I … had a different picture.”

“Not different, just clearer,” he said, scrambling. “It was, like, Charlie found it on Tuesday. It’s Friday. I didn’t make a five-year plan in between. It’s not like that isn’t my picture, it’s just … Like, I don’t know, maybe I thought I’d flip it?”

“You want to have all the Moirs over for dinner; you’re not going to flip it,” she pointed out, then sighed and took a seat on the steps. “OK, so. Pause. Step back. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“So, you just bought a house … where do you see yourself in five years? It’s 2020. Scott Moir, aged thirty-two or thirty-three, what’s he doing? He’s throwing a barbecue for Canada Day; who else is here?”

“I mean, still skating, if I can,” he said, slowly, though circling the drain on tours, beer belly growing larger, didn’t sound that appealing. “Maybe some coaching. Grilling out, sure. And yeah, maybe, really settling down. Maybe a kid. You like kids?” he smiled.

(Scott Moir did close out 2020 telling his family his wife was pregnant, so he wasn’t too far off.)

“I like kids,” she assured him, and he sat down next to her. “When I … when I look five years down, I see a lot of those things, too. But I see you. Clearly. Do you see me?”

He was quiet, for too long, and she stood, finally fully pissed. He groaned, then stood to chase her. “C’mon, Kait, I spent twenty years staring down to the pinprick of an Olympic Games. I love this, I love you, I’m definitely open to really thinking about those things. But I … I need time, to decompress a little more. I don’t see us ending, I just … hadn’t mentally gotten there yet.”

Honestly, when he scanned the backyard and visualized the Moir barbecues he’d hold, he saw his family, his Ilderton friends, and Tessa, probably her mom and whatever Virtues were around. The constants.

There were some faceless toddlers, of course, among that group, and he figured his wife—Kaitlyn,
sure—was in the kitchen grabbing the potato salad, or something. Probably being helped by whatever doucheface Tessa was inevitably dating, since he couldn’t see that guy but he was obviously there, too.

She huffed, blowing strands of blonde hair around. “More time to process, or more time, period?”

“Process,” he clarified. “I want to want this.”

She was momentarily stricken, then nodded. “I … get that. And I appreciate you being honest. I still need to look at teams, and it’ll be hard because Jennifer’s team is so highly ranked, so it might not be this year, anyways. I just … you invited me to meet your parents on our, like, third date? Told me you loved me first. Gave me a key to your place, introduced me to Tessa and your nieces and nephews within a month. I felt like you were moving so fast. Hell, I’m surprised—relieved-surprised, I’m not ready yet—that you didn’t like surprise-propose over the holidays.”

(Not coincidentally, the assumption that he would accidentally propose or knock a girl up was a deeply ingrained Moir Family Fact, dating back to the You’re A Good Kid Scottie era. It took him so long to understand why everyone made the assumption.)

The thing was, he did see a future with Kait, just … abstractly. He definitely thought she could be The One, probably. It had felt like fate from the get-go. He knew how great she was, how well she fit with his family and friends, how she made him feel, adult and important and loved and just very different than with any other girlfriend. And he had acted with the assumption, at some point, he would shift gears. The commitment itself—showing up, being a good boyfriend, being a not-shit human to someone who loved and trusted him—had been kind of all consuming.

But if pressed for details on how he got from the here to the there, he had no idea. It again felt like a lesson that he’d missed when learning the Killian hold with Tess. Right now, he could only see today, and the day after, and maybe a week down the line. He was intensely present, and he felt that was important, too. Wasn’t it?

“I’m getting there,” he promised. He probably should stop hanging out at Joe’s and figure it out. “I mean—I’m not like, proposing, tomorrow. I need to finish the house; it probably won’t even be ready to be a good base for next season. But yeah, let’s keep talking. I want your help with the house, for sure. Do you have opinions on curtains?” The year Tessa had purchased her home, he’d had to listen to mini-lectures on blinds on every drive to Canton. Girls had opinions on curtains.

“Um, no, not like independent from a specific project, because that’s lame, but yeah, let’s go to Home Depot. Because like I said last year … I tend to go all-in. I’m in this Scott. I wanna commit. But it takes two to tango, you know? So the question is, what do you want?”

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iii. Five Years Before Today, Tessa

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She stood on the porch, resolutely not shivering in the October air and her miniskirt and second-favorite leather jacket. The party—her first and, she had decided, only real college party—had been exceptionally lame, and after two hours she had been more than done. But she’d had enough Jungle Juice and that meant—

“Hey kiddo, beep beep,” Scott rolled down his passenger-side window of Danny’s old truck. The Acuras had gone back to David Cranbrook in July. “How’s that Year of Yes going?” He was trying
not to smirk.

“Fabulously,” she slid into the seat and tried to surreptitiously blast the broken heater. “Thanks for picking me up.”

He laughed, merrily, and she liked the sight despite her best instincts. “T, remember how much you hated Canton parties? College parties are like Canton parties, except fewer actual six-packs.”

“I gave it—and Jungle Juice—a gander.”

“And, verdict?”

“TIFF, Fashion Week, Canada House and even galas in Lithuania are all better,” she declared primly—this didn’t make her a snob, just someone with taste—and he burst out laughing. “Anyways, thanks for picking me up. I know Kaitlyn’s in Norway but—thanks.”

“The Netherlands, and she actually got back today. But, you know, jet lag. She’s asleep.”

“Oh,” she said, not sure how to process it. “Sorry.” She hadn’t known, but even if she did—if she didn’t call Scott, the next-trustiest ride was actually Charlie Moir, and that would get back to Scott anyways and Charlie would be mad at Scott and Scott would get disappointed at her, so.

“Don’t be,” he said.

“I could have called a cab—” As she said it out loud she realized that duh, she should have called a cab.

“Don’t do that, either,” he said, and she fell quiet. “If it's almost midnight, and you're at a party, or anywhere, and you need a ride home? No matter what, call me, T. It's the partner code of conduct.”

It had been nearly eight months since the Olympics, and while superficially everything was normal and they were moving on, it was often another form of pretending. This time, instead of a couple in love or a temptress and her mark, they were Normal People, Former Coworkers. She hadn't actually been sure if he would pick up his phone, or pick her up. But of course he did. He was her partner.

And one day, she knew, it would cease to matter—he would quit choosing her—but tonight she just nodded, grateful for the ride.

It was a silent fifteen minutes till he rolled into her driveway, and she started to unbuckle her seatbelt and say thank-you when he turned the key in the ignition. “How else are you gonna get your car in the morning?” he asked, at her flabbergasted look.

A cab, was the obvious answer, and what about Kaitlyn the more-obvious follow up, but instead she just said, “Thanks. Guest room’s where it’s always been.” He hadn’t been there in months, but he’d installed the blinds and the lighting fixture and banged her on the counter and watched playoff games in the rec room; he could find it. She left him in the kitchen and stumbled upstairs, changing into the old Eminem shirt and shorts, willing herself to go to sleep.

Twenty minutes later, though, she still couldn’t sleep, and a quiet slap of the back door had her curious. She peeked outside, saw Scott’s dark shadow crouched on her back steps, a pinprick of a flame waving next to him. She yanked on an old Leafs sweater and rolled downstairs, furious.

“The hell, Scott Moir,” she said as she opened the door with a bang. “Just because we’re not competing anymore doesn’t mean you should destroy your lungs—did you help yourself to some whisky?”
“Relax, T,” he drawled, holding out the cigarette. “I’ll share.” He did a double take. “Did you help yourself to my sweatshirt?”

“What? Yeah.” She decided not to tell him she still had his shirt too, instead giving him a look, settling next to him, and taking the proffered drag. She’d never really smoked but—god, sometimes competitions or Marina were stressful. Cigarettes were a low-calorie dinner. “This isn’t a regular thing, is it?” she checked, passing it back after a second hit.

“Not really,” he assured her. “Mostly cigars with the guys.”

“Also not great but—I won’t tell Alma,” she decided to show him mercy. For the ride, and all. He held it back out and she took a final drag before signaling enough.

“How’s school?” he asked.

“Good. How’s the rink?”

“Good.”

“Kaitlyn?”

“Good. Ryan?”

“Good.”

“Good.”

“Gold medal small talk there, Scottie,” she said, breaking the awkwardness that separated them like glass, and he smirked. She wasn’t sure, how they’d gotten here.

“More your domain, Tutu,” he smiled.

Only Danny and Charlie still called her that, these days. “Thanks for coming for me tonight.”

“Of course,” he said automatically, taking a swig of his drink.

“I don’t get why, though,” she confessed, the Jungle Juice still pumping in her veins. “Why you came, I mean.”

He appraised her drolly and she sank, a little, under his knowing gaze. “Yes you do. Same reason you called me in the first place.”

He was right. This was the first time they’d hung out without an excuse like a show or master class or appearance since the Olympics, she realized with a start, and he was still right—which she hated, how he forced her to be so honest with herself, so she just raised her eyebrow and said, “Old habits die hard.”

She reached for his glass, and he shared, after a second.

“They don’t have to die, T,” he said, mildly.

“Yeah. They do.” She wiped some ash from her shorts, businesslike.

“OK, probably.” He took another sip. “Not tonight, though. And if you ever…”

“I know,” she said. "You too, you know? I ... miss you." It was the first time she admitted that—she
could admit to her mom that she missed the structure of skating; could fret to Jordan that she would lose muscle tone, but admitting that she missed Scott, and the person she was around him—braver, more adventurous, more driven, more, not less, and certainly not ordinary—was a new one. He brought out her worst, but he also held her accountable, knew her in a way that nobody else could, could pin her slipperiness to the wall. Made her think, made her try to be a little bit better. He certainly wasn't a perfect person, hadn't been a perfect partner, yet somehow ...

She used to worry that, once the tie of skating was cut, they wouldn't hang out. That the expanse between them would prove too vast.

Now, though, she realized there was one impenetrable tie, that would never snap, as long as she lived: ex-partner.

It was like they were seven and nine again, still terrified and grasping toward the future together.

They sat out there until the cigarette had burned out and the last drop of the whisky had been tongued. He talked about Kait and the rink, she talked about school and TIFF. But mostly they were quiet. She thought of buckets of rice and binary stars and the sweat of a little boy’s palm in hers sixteen years ago and unmerited favor and a Leafs bear upstairs on her dresser and a ballerina one that was probably stashed in Alma’s attic. The black bleak world spun down to him and her and the porch and the drink and the cigarette.

She didn’t know where they’d be in five days or months or years, but she was suddenly grateful they were here now, broken and halting and yearning.

“We should go in,” she finally said, when his yawns became obnoxious. She debated telling him that he could crash in her room—her mattress was comfier, and they’d shared beds when he was with Jess and she was with David—but before she could say anything, he simply said, “I know where the guest room is, T.”

He was trying, she knew. For himself and for Kait. For her, maybe, even.

And yet he’d still picked her up when she’d called from a party, because she needed him.

(They both left their doors open, but didn’t move, that night.)

The next morning, she woke to his voice telling Kaitlyn that he’d gone to rescue Tess last night and crashed there—for all his talk about honesty, he gave Kaitlyn the impression that she had been a lot drunker than she was, but she of all people appreciated a good white lie—and that he was coming home, soon, did she want brunch? Tessa slid into her en suite and showered for twenty minutes, took her sweet time changing. Scott was in her kitchen, still in his shorts, coffee in hand. He slid a cup over to her as she sat.

“We should get going,” he said, semi-apologetically. “Sorry, I’ve just got …”

“Yeah. Thanks again for the rescue.” She stood. “Next time I’m taking a cab, though.”

“You don’t have to,” he said. They both knew she probably would, though. “I have a hockey game, that I’m doing for the Boys and Girls Club,” he said as he dropped her off at her car. “Tomorrow. You should come. It’s like an appearance.” The last line sounded like a justification. “Kaitlyn’ll be there. You can sit with her.”

She squinted through her light hangover. She had a meeting in Toronto, and was supposed to drive up to Ottawa to see Ryan after, for the weekend, but— “Yeah. That sounds fun.”
She’d stop prioritizing him, too, one day—hopefully soon, for her own sanity, and because they weren’t friends, just co-ex-partners—but until then she’d enjoy herself at an Ilderton hockey game, she decided.

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iv. Two Years Before Today, Scott

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“Fuck,” he muttered to himself, hanging up the phone as he walked into Tessa’s kitchen.

Tessa raised her eyebrow behind her glasses. “Everything OK?” She chewed on her highlighter cap.

“That was Charlie,” he explained. “My basement flooded.”

She blinked owlishly, removing the highlighter cap from her mouth. “Your … parents’ basement flooded?”

Fuck.

“No,” he admitted. “My basement. I bought a house—by that lake we swam in as kids, you remember?—a couple years ago. Like, in 2015.”

“You bought a house,” she repeated.

“It’s like a fixer-upper. And it’s not, like, fixed.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

“It didn’t come up.” He knew it was a shitty excuse.

“Well, yeah. You have to bring it up,” she didn’t sound mad, exactly, just … bemused, maybe?

“I’m sorry. It was … 2015, you know? Not my best year, and it just … didn’t come up. I’m sorry.” He didn’t remember why he hadn’t mentioned it—oh, yeah. The first time he saw her after closing the deal, she kicked off their practice by announcing Adidas had signed her as an ambassador, and suddenly the fact that he’d just purchased a ramshackle money pit because his parents were worried he was spiraling seemed less impressive. And, oh yeah, he and Kaitlyn had gotten into it about her moving to London.

Yup, that was pretty much why.

“Well, what do you need to do?” He rubbed his eye. The past season had simply been a lot, only highs and lows; after his grandfather’s funeral, they’d packed off to the lake for several days. His Ilderton friends had come too, and it had been nice, to see Tessa finally interacting with them. He’d kept them separate for so long; predictably but to everyone’s surprise, they had gotten along pretty well. The fact that they all cared to get along—for his sake—was enough, and that was somehow humbling. He and Tessa had jumped from that respite into a couple guest spots on CSOI; with everything, they couldn’t handle a full tour. Now, they were supposed to be focusing, finally, and picking music and beginning choreography with Marie and Sam. Nine months until the Olympics. They’d met with Dom and JF and Patch and the rest of the team earlier in the week to plot the season, and literally every day was scheduled out till February 20th.

He pulled a hand through his hair. “Dad’s getting some guys to come pump the water out. But I
should probably go down this weekend.” Grabbing his damn glasses, he flipped through the slim black binder on his island, finding to the proper tab for the week’s nutrition, training, and skating workouts. “Three hours on ice with Patch Saturday morning, then an hour strength training, an hour cardio, yoga warm down.” He slid his laptop over to search for flights.

“I have ice, a Pilates class, cardio, then yoga,” Tessa said, and he looked up to see her thumbing through her own mauve binder. “I can call the gym in London and get us the time. And then will call the yoga studio to arrange a private class.”

“Tess, you shouldn’t come. It’ll just mess up your training, too.” He was disappointed—he could count on a hand the number of nights they’d spent together since the cabin, between sponsor travel and hockey playoffs and a concert he’d gone to—but he wasn’t about to have both of them wrecked the entire next week.

“Please. I wanna see Moir Manor. And besides,” she smirked, “I can be handy. You need something nailed? I can do it.”

“Was that an attempt at dirty talk because I do have to say … not your best effort.”

“No!” she laughed. “I genuinely can be Ms. Fix-It around the house.”

He pulled her into his lap as he started scanning Air Canada prices. “Lies. You once called me to change a lightbulb,” he pointed out, kissing the dip in her neck. “But your sandwich-buying skills will be much appreciated.”

“It was out of my reach,” she giggled.

“You wanted to ogle my ass,” he retorted, which was true.

Patch agreed to move up practice from seven to six, raising an eyebrow at their decision to disrupt the schedule, but this allowed them to catch a 10:30 flight connecting through Ottawa that got them into London by one-thirty. Tessa arranged their workouts from two to five, getting them to the house to meet his family by five-thirty. He could spend Sunday—their rest day—finishing up stuff at the house. He was worried about it being enough time, but Charlie and his dad both yelled at him about an overdeveloped sense of guilt and told him he should just stay in Montreal to train, so. He figured they would handle the rest of it.

(Tessa, of course, got told she was a supportive saint for coming, thus confirming his longstanding suspicion she was their favorite, anyways. She smirked.)

She was quiet on the flights, flipping through The Marriage Plot—he wasn’t sure why she’d bought it; she had read Eugenides when they lived in Michigan and declared him pretentious—before settling down somewhat with Fates and Furies.

“Did you really bring two books on a thirty-six-hour trip?” He asked when he noticed she still was fidgety.

“Three actually. I grabbed Pride and Prejudice too.”

“Nerd,” he snorted, trying not to read too much into the fact that, based on what he could tell from the titles and cover art, all clearly had a theme. He turned back to his episode of Brooklyn Nine-Nine.

“Oh this is nice,” she cooed when they finally drove up to the house, Charlie and Shea and his dad sitting on the front steps, her hand visored against her forehead to block the late-afternoon sun as they exited. “I can see why you bought it. Hey guys!” she ran over and hugged Shea, then Charlie and
Joe. He stood back, smiled.

The damage wasn’t too bad, though they would need to tear up and replace some carpet; the leak had originated upstairs, so there was some repair to do in the kitchen in the morning as well. After the survey, they found Tess and Shea outside, playing on the tire swing. “Wanna tour?” he asked, hands in his pockets, a little sheepish. He spun them both around and Tessa smiled wide as the lake itself.

He showed her around the first floor, highlighting where he thought about putting an island, the walls he’d intended on tearing down, where he had wanted to hang the flag from Vancouver before she moved it to Montreal.

“So yeah, I didn’t get very far.” He gestured to the salmon-pink wallpaper as they as they wound up the stairs. “We moved like nine months later.”

“I get why you didn’t tell me, you know,” she informed him. “I’m not mad.”

“Oh?”

“You were with Kaitlyn, you were planning a life. I get it. It was an important relationship.”

“Ohhhhh no. I actually just kinda … bought the house. And then the fact that I hadn’t bought it for us … That actually became a thing, kind of.” His tone was conversational; Tess was behind him, but he rolled his eyes anyways.

“It did?” He heard her stop.

“Yeah,” he turned to see a curious, inscrutable look on her face.

“Why’d you buy it then?”

“Seemed like a good project. I liked the idea of grilling out in the backyard.” His world, at the time, had been Ilderton and the Moirs.

“So you wanted to build a future here?” she was beginning to look like her head hurt. “Just … not with Kaitlyn?”

“I … It wasn’t … not with her, at least for a while. I was … trying to figure out everything, and you know how it shook down,” he sighed, still unsure how to explain the house. It was just a project, but now, two years later, showing everything to Tessa, it did feel a bit like what had happened if he had swallowed Morpheus’s blue pill. “I mean, yeah, she knew about it, she came here, we talked about the reno. And I mean … I did see you at those barbecues. I just figured with a douchebag boyfriend.” He moved some of her hair out of her face.

She smiled, and then looked down, chewed her lip in that nervous way he hated. “So why didn’t you tell me, then?”

He ran a hand against the wall, feeling the bubbling wallpaper. “I don’t know, T. I’m sorry I didn’t,” he finally said. “We’ve talked about that time. I … don’t know what else to say.”

“Ok. Let’s finish up and get to Charlie’s.” She nodded and squeezed his bicep, her face press conferencing up.

Why did he feel like he’d just fucked up?
The next day she went for breakfast with Kate and Alma as he, Charlie, and Joe headed to the house; when she and his mom showed up four hours later, sandwiches as well as tiny cans of paint in hand, the damage in the kitchen was fixed. “I just figured…” she said apologetically, setting down the tins and handing him a turkey club. “I know you can’t do anything really before the Games, but in case…”

He kissed her temple. “No, paint samples are a good idea. Only nine months till the Games. It’s gonna be over before we know it.”

She blinked rapidly, and he realized that statement skirted dangerously with their agreement. “Yeah. True.”

“Are they all white?” he chirped. “Eggshell and ecru and linen?”

“C’mon, Scottie,” his dad called from the basement. “If you’re going to fly down here and screw up your training by working on a rest day, you’ll make yourself useful.”

“Some blues too,” she promised before he went off.

Some time later, he went upstairs for a drink when he heard— “No, we’re just very focused on the comeback,” in Tessa’s gentlest tone. “We’re being present. One day at a time.”

“Tessie,” his mother responded, soft but amused. “You’re seriously going to try and say you’ve given zero thought to what you’ll be doing in ten months?” Tessa had once, at eleven, led Cara through a workshop on vision boarding.

“Well, no…” she said, “We’ll skate. Do tours.”

“What about school?”

“I … ok, yes. Sure, eventually. Finish my degree. I’d like to get an MBA, I think.” This all made sense; he had never known Tessa Virtue to not finish anything, and the fact that she hadn’t somehow, like, finished her degree from a fashion shoot or a tour still mystified him. It was the one sign that maybe she wasn’t a superhuman. The MBA surprised him, but it certainly fit better than her old law-school dream, these days. ”I actually toured McGill last week. And Toronto, last month.”

Oh. That was news. “And Scott?”

“I mean, if he doesn’t coach figure skating will be the worse for it … And he does have the house, here. And I could see missing Sunday dinners forever being hard. So … maybe here. I don’t know.”

“And you two?”

“Oh, touring, like I said. But we’re so focused on the comeback. Savoring it. It’s so hard, but it’s so special.” Her voice was soft, genuine, distressed.

“I meant, have you two talked about what comes next for the two of you?” He admired that his mother didn’t mention grandbabies.

“Alma …” she sighed. “We’re still—eight, ten, twelve hours a day, we’re a skating team. We want to win the Olympics.”

“Tessa, your lawyer DNA is showing.”

Tessa laughed. “It’s the press training, too, I think. But yes, that’s the thing—that’s what we’re
carrying forward, working on, together. Everything we do builds to that. We’re focused on that.”

“Tessie.”

“I mean, I can’t imagine not being there to support whatever comes next for him, in some way—I’m just so proud of him, every day, the man that he’s become, Alma, he’s so wonderful. You did such a good job. He's just the most ... generous, kind gift to the world.”

"Wasn't all me," his mother's laugh was soft, but pointed.

"I don't know about that.”

“So you’ve planned out your school and Scott’s coaching, and your career together, and zero thought to your relationship?”

“I mean…” he could practically hear Tess flailing under his mom’s gentle pushes. “Yes. I mean, no. But I mean. … Any plans beyond Korea, they’re just irresponsible. We’re in a nice little bubble, and we’re happy, and somehow everything, together, is working. And so much will change after, when that’s not there anymore, there’s no use in speculating.” She sounded, he realized, more like she was convincing herself rather than his mother. “We need time.” She finally said.

Suddenly aware he was eavesdropping on the two women most important to him, he quietly walked down a few steps before clomping up again, making his presence known. “Heya,” he entered. “Just grabbing some water. But we should be done soon, Ma, you can have your Sunday back.”

“Getting to see you and hang out with Tessie? Hardly a chore,” she smiled, wrapping her arms around Tessa with a squeeze. “You should see her ideas for this floor, Scottie.”

“I’m sure they’re amazing.”

She blushed a little at his smile. “You need any help down there?”

“Why, you gonna hammer something?”

“Or spackle. I can probably spackle,” she smiled. “I’m gonna … test out some of these paint samples then, upstairs. If that’s OK.”

“Yeah, that sounds great,” he said. “Flight’s at six, right?”

“Yup. I talked to Patch. He gave us eight AM tomorrow, so we can sleep. Had to move the nutrition meeting to Wednesday though.” She gathered the tins. “Alma, want to join me?”

“I do need to get going, unfortunately.” She kissed them both. “Tell your dad to make it back by dinner. And we’ll still plan on coming up in June, OK?”

It didn’t take too long to wrap up downstairs, finally, and he went off in search of Tess as his dad and Charlie cleaned up. She was in the corner bedroom, one that he’d mentally thought he’d take, one day.

That they would take? Would Tessa want to live here permanently? Did he?

Christ, he had no idea.

But nor did he particularly care. Home was Tess. Other decisions—truly, he was fine waiting to figure that shit out.
She had her iPhone blaring one of the playlists he didn’t love, a lot of Lorde and the Arkells and Tegan and Sara and it was just screamy. “Hey,” she startled, as she heard him enter. “You guys done downstairs?”

“Almost. They’re cleaning, so we should hide.” He looked at the discs of the paint lids, each gleaming with a different blue-grey, a cousin to the watery slate she’d painted his bedroom in Montreal. “These are pretty,” he said. “I really like that one.” He pointed at the third. “What do you think?”

She raised an eyebrow. “I’m … not sure. I don’t know how much of an opinion I should have,” she admitted, matter-of-fact. She closed her eyes. “Sorry. That sounded really salty. But your mom was asking me about the future and I don’t want to think about it, really, but then we’re in this house, and I thought even though we weren’t thinking about it, because we shouldn’t think about it, and we’re not there yet, god, Scott, we are firmly in the bubble—but. I thought had a good sense of what you wanted, after, for yourself, and that was OK, but now you have a future here—”

“Whoa,” he said, quickly moving to her phone and switching it from Max Kerman shrieking to something that the two of them could dance to, and slipped her into a waltz hold. She settled easily against him, let him lead, which was always nice. Her spring Jo Malone scent—she switched them seasonally, he had finally figured out; the things she found to spend money on truly astounded him sometimes—drifted over him, and his heart rate slowed. “Still just you and me dancing, T.” It was easier, still, to have conversations while dancing.

“Yeah. And I firmly recognize the irony that I’m the one freaking out right now,” she took a deep breath, resting her head against his chest, and he felt her heartbeat slow too. “What is this song anyways? Why is he talking about vampires?”

“It’s about not taking the love of your life for granted b’cause neither of you will be around forever.” He raised his eyebrows pointedly.

She was quiet for a while, before finally starting up again. “So you bought this house. Visions of big Moir dinners here.”

“Yes,” he said, “that was the dream. In 2015.”

“And now … What’s the dream?” she took a deep breath. “And am I overstepping by bringing in a bunch of paint colors?” He realized suddenly, and with a rush of gratitude, that if he did want to move back here, have his permanent base in Ilderton on the lake, she might actually goddamn give it a try. Even as a vast world waited for her.

“God, T, no. Of course not. Partners.” It was ironic, but unsurprising, that she was the one who struggled more with her self-imposed 'no definition' definition. He dipped her, softly. “Ok. Let’s start with where we are now.” Even after a year, directly addressing their future made her skittish. He got the fears, intellectually, given their career—wearying and demoralizing as it could be—but mostly, he understood how she needed him to react when she spooked herself, in order to carry them forward.

He still didn't think he was good at relationships, but he was good at Tessa.

“Ok. One season of the comeback down, one to go.” She smiled. “We did great. We had a vision, trusted the process, developed a clear and purposeful plan of action. We locked in on our performances, communicated well, worked together.”

“We surprised ourselves a little, there.”
“And we had a lot of fun.”

“Yes. What hurdles do you see next year?”

“I mean, it’s an Olympic year. Handling that pressure without taking it out on each other, supporting each other but staying focused on the goal. Not letting the personal distract or detract. We’re here to win.”

“Step one, no reality shows or cheating,” he said, and she laughed. “We can only do our best, and trust the process, the team. We’re going to be as prepared as possible. Complete commitment.” He meant it in more than one way, and she knew that.

“And then like you said, it’s over in less than a year.”

“Unless—unless you want to try for Beijing?” They’d be competing against kids who barely remembered Vancouver but they could try. He could try, for her.

She considered for a moment but shook her head. “No. I want Korea but—I want other things too. I always have. This time, I’ll be ready.” Her voice was almost shy.

“Same,” he said, and she smiled under his gaze. “You want to keep doing to design collaborations, sponsorships, the photo shoots?” She’d always loved a good photo shoot, for the same reasons she’d loved skating—the performance, the attention, the feedback—he got that now. And she used social media frequently, but he’d noticed that while she was always pretty curated, with the focus on promotions and collaborations. The facets she shared were becoming less interesting, the many facets of them slivered down to shards of training and competitions. The selfie series of them with Billie at ArtZone wasn’t making it into the public domain, nor was the candid of her dozing on him as he kissed her temple on a tour bus in Hamilton, courtesy of Chiddy, which was her phone’s background.

“For a while.” She ran a hand along his bicep as Rob Thomas started singing about a girl who didn’t know if she would ever be good enough, which—relatable, Rob. “I mean, one thing at a time, right?”

"Yes. But we also want to be intentional. And communicate."

She made a good point face. "Well. If we win we’re going to have opportunities that don’t last forever, we both know that. I want to ... I want them. It’s good money, good introductions, and I won’t have these abs forever, so I’d like the photographic evidence when I’m sixty."

“Still gonna be beautiful then, T,” he reminded her, spinning her slowly so her back was against his front. “But ok. That for a while.”

“Yeah. And I don’t want to … I want to do shows for a while, it’s not like I want Korea to be our last time skating forever …”

“But you don’t want it to be your priority,” he finished. He kissed her neck lightly, splayed his hand against her taut abdomen, and she leaned back to give him access. “I ... god, I don’t want to be fifty and still riding it out on tours and dancing to Stay or Sorry. We’re on the same page there.”

“OK, good,” she turned to face him, and chewed her lip. “Because. Yeah … I want … more. For both of us. Professionally. Is that OK?”

She absolutely didn’t need his permission but—“I didn’t think Tessa Virtue peaked at twenty and I don’t think you’ll peak at twenty-eight,” he reassured her. Once upon a time, the size of her dreams
would make him proud but uncomfortable; worried that they might make her lose interest in skating, in him, faster. These days, he knew his plans weren’t quite as big enough or as well-formed enough as hers—but he knew they were getting there. And he liked them plenty.

Standing next to her, he’d always stood taller. Once upon a time it might have meant looking at the Olympics as the end goal—now it meant looking at his entire future with fearlessness, ambition, worthiness.

(It had never been about finding skating, it had always been about finding Tessa.)

“Same for Scott Moir.”

He nodded. “So you want an MBA. And you toured some places.”

Her face was unsurprised that he knew. “I wasn’t sure what I wanted … I wanted to … see.” Her eyes dropped. "This wasn’t meant to be like, a secrets-revealed weekend. Are you mad?”

“No, I think you’d be great at it. Like, run a fashion company or something?”

“Eventually,” she stressed. “I could see that year or two being like … a pivot. I don’t want to be like those female gymnasts from the US who are like pimping out their relationships and offering makeup tips and having a YouTube channel. We did that and … it sucked. And it's not like I could ever be, you know, a Serena Williams or Emma Watson. Not that I'd want that level of interest. But ... Maybe I’d like to have endorsements for a couple years, skating, maybe we do some commentating together, then business school … and then yeah, run the damn company. Take everything I know about fashion and athletics and marketing and business and … do that.”

And it fit, perfectly. She seemed sure and confident, not casting about like in 2014. The threads of her interests and ambitions were sewed together perfectly. For a self-professed hater of destiny, she was sure of her own. She wanted the world, and he knew she could take it, and he couldn’t wait.

“So like, be president of Adidas?”

“Maybe. I could finally redesign the Team Canada uniforms,” she smiled. “Or I don’t know, start a company. And some philanthropy. What do you think about starting a foundation?”

“I love it.” He wanted to run a tour with her, too. Whatever they dreamed up, he was confident it would be better than *Supertramp*.

She smiled. “So yeah. That’s the big next thing, I think. Or things. It’s fuzzy but …”

“It’s really not that fuzzy,” he responded, pushing a strand of hair back gently. “And you’ll rock it.”

“You make me brave, you know that, right?” She said, and he kissed her lightly, ran a thumb along his cheekbone. “You see anything?” she asked. “Post Korea.”

“Coaching and mentoring,” he said, firmly, “if only because it is literally the only thing I am remotely qualified for.” That, and the care and keeping of Tessa Virtue.

But. He’d talked to Patch.

She looked up, wounded. “Please don’t even joke about that,” she said.

“Shhh it’s fine,” he said. “I’m teasing myself. But yeah, like I said, if I can try and be a positive influence, I’d be good. It kind of bugs too that skating is so inaccessible unless you have money, so maybe try to fix that a bit. But I'll have time, after the Games.” He spun her out again.
"You're going to be amazing, you know that, right? Like, the best coach Canada has seen." Her voice was serious, her eyes certain. "You just … you will be."

“Thanks. And I … I don’t want to get ahead of ourselves, but … I’m looking forward to seeing what life is like outside the bubble.” Which she knew, but still. “I think a lot of opportunities could open up there, too. Opportunities we might not even know about yet.”

She smiled—not saying anything for a while, studying him closely, considering, but her eyes didn’t shut up. He knew she didn’t trust him fully, yet—knew that was more than deserved—but he had a year, to show her. “Yeah. I’m looking forward to that too,” she finally decided, her voice surprisingly emotional. “So this house …”

“Is just a house, T,” he assured her. “Not a plan.” Not a metaphor, not his future, not a home. “Whatever future I see, you’re in it. We’re skating, we’re performing, we’re laughing, we’re creating, we’re traveling, we’re supporting each other doing their own thing. We’re doing our own thing. We’re dancing in kitchens and unpainted bedrooms. I don’t care where we live or what happens to this house.” He chose her, again and again.

He needed her to know that.

She leaned up to kiss him, wrapping her arms around his neck and effectively stopping their dancing. “It’s a pretty nice future,” she murmured. He knew, before the Olympics, it was the closest he could get for a promise. He knew they would move on her timeline, that they always would. They stood there for a while, until Charlie found them and yelled, “Yeah, Dad, I found ‘em, you were right, they’re totally making out to avoid cleaning up.”

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v. Three Years Before Today, Tessa

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“Uh-huh, yeah!” Tessa said, her voice going unnaturally high and strangled. God, she should be better at deflecting Madison Freaking Hubbell. “Yeah, that sounds great.”

Behind Madi, Scott shot her a Look, half-exasperated, half-irritated, half-fond. It was with good reason: Madison had said *you guys should totally come out to dinner with me and Adri and Olivia and Zach!* and she couldn’t think fast enough to say *really you’re lovely, but no never not ever, please and thank you*. They’d been at Gadbois for several months now and while they liked the other skaters just fine, they’d made an agreement that they weren’t going to be unfocused and make friends, joke around on the ice. If they needed a buddy, they would be each other’s buddy. So beyond some dinners at Marie’s and a few joint classes at Sam’s and some hockey viewings at Donahue’s, they didn’t hang out too much.

Plus, ever since the Sexagon—she’d initially been mortified by Chiddy’s devastating, perfect nickname of the summer of Jamie and David and Bryce and Jess and Tess and Scott, but it definitely stuck—they had avoided other skaters’ romantic entanglements like the plague, preferring instead to focus on screwing each other, in every sense of the word. So hanging out with the hormonal polygon of Americans and Spaniards was *definitely* not their scene. Hence Scott’s distinctly put-upon look.

“Great!” Madi said, smiling at Olivia, who was next to her. “I’ll make a resy. Saturday night OK?”

“Yeah, that sounds great,” Tess smiled. Scott pulled her by the hips and started scooting her away before she promised brunch too. “Text me details!”
“What happened to our ‘be each other’s buddies’ rule?” he muttered, sliding his fingers between hers as they picked up speed. “You’re the devil. I can’t leave you alone.”

“I couldn’t think fast enough,” she whisper-protested. “I was cornered!”

“You will regret this, Virtue,” he said.

“Please don’t desert me,” she begged.

“Hey. I could never,” he said, throwing a look that made her toes curl.

Ever since their kiss a few weeks earlier—she had stopped before they got too far, because she wasn’t ready, which meant they weren’t ready, so it had been the right move, unfortunately—she hadn’t been able to stop thinking about him. Or his lips. Or his hands. It actually made her life really fucking hard, given that one of her job requirements was to hold his hand. He had been perfect, though, patient and funny and totally OK to lay everything out for JF, their new therapist, after she abruptly announced at dinner one night that they should mention the sex twizzling to him and get his perspective.

He was ready, she knew. She was not, she knew.

“Well then it won’t be a waste of an evening,” she said, squeezing his fingers.

Still, four nights later, wedged into a tiny bar-booth between Olivia and Madi as Scott shot her told you so looks from across the table and Zach morosely drank a beer, she could only respond sheepishly with a silent Yeah I know; it’s just dinner.

“Sorry I forgot the reservation!” Madi chirped over the noise of the restaurant’s bar. “But a forty-five-minute wait isn’t that bad.”

“Not for a Saturday,” Adri said warmly, squeezing her shoulder. He was clearly head-over-heels for her, and she seemed pretty smitten. Zach downed the rest of his drink, earning a tiny eyebrow arch from Scott to her: This won’t end well.

Give it a chance and also I’m very very sorry, she looked back.

“I’m gonna get another round,” Scott announced, unimpressed with her argument. “Zach, buddy, come with me. Tess, another?”

“I’m good,” she smiled. A drink at dinner was the only way she would survive. Her eyes followed them though, watched as they slunk over the bar, Scott saying something to Zach, clapping a hand on his shoulder. Some girl next to Scott turned to him and struck up a conversation. Whatever. Getting Scott to talk was hardly difficult. Keeping him laughing for two decades? Come back later when you’ve done that, sweetie, she thought contemptuously.

Whoa, what the fuck, Tessa? She shook her head, surprised at the vehemence. Outright jealousy had never been her thing. (Subtle power plays against his exes—different story.)

And then she saw the girl scribble something on a cocktail napkin, tuck it into his shirt’s front pocket. He looked surprised, took a step back.

Suddenly she needed wine. “I changed my mind,” she told Olivia urgently, downing the rest of her pinot. “Let me out.” She pushed the teenager’s shoulder until Olivia fell out of the booth, a teeny bit startled.
“Kiddo!” Scott called as she approached. She really wished he had a different nickname, like *babe*. Babe or baby would work, she decided. Normally she’d go all feminist on nicknames that were patriarchal and possessive but it would be OK from Scott. “You change your mind?” He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, the girl on his other side completely in the cold.

“Yeah,” she smiled crookedly, resisting the urge to run her fingers through his hair. “Sorry, you’ve seen the situation—” she gestured in a circle “—we’re eating with.” Zach shot her a wounded look. She didn’t care, but she did pat his shoulder awkwardly. It was nice, to not be the rink’s source of gossip.

“I’ll get it,” Scott smiled, planting a quick kiss on her temple before flagging down the bartender with his free hand.

“Hi.” She smiled mildly at the other girl from the other side of Scott, with a finger-wiggle wave. “I’m Tessa.”

The girl melted away, annoyed, and they grabbed their drinks and Zach before heading back to the table, his fingers firm at her waist. She studied him carefully but he didn’t seem to change at all; when the hostess finally called for Madi, she saw him surreptitiously shove the napkin into an abandoned water glass. The ice dribbled over the ink, melting the numbers away.

She didn’t feel as much satisfaction as she might have a year or even a month ago. Mostly, she felt kind of sad.

The proximal polygon was exactly as miserable as Scott had predicted—Zach was alternately broody over Madi or feeling up Olivia, which seemed fine with her, as that relationship seemed to be 90 percent sex and Olivia was actually a child; Adri was Real Deal levels of loved up with Madi, who occasionally sent Zach sympathetic lip-bites from under Adri’s shoulder. It might be the alcohol, but she picked up on something poignant and final in whatever had gone down between Zach and Madi; whatever had happened between them, Donahue wasn’t going to recover from his—assumed—fuckup, and Madison had made up her mind, and they would probably keep skating together through Madison’s engagement and marriage to Adri, even if it killed Zach. Watching them made her want to split a cigarette with Scott again.

She quelled the thought, because it wasn’t the unhealthy coping mechanism she really wanted, either.

And she didn’t really think the one she did would be all that unhealthy, these days.

She didn’t know if Madi and Zach had been in love, if it was simply a fling based on access or if there was some tragic Romeo-and-Juliet shit happening—hell, she didn’t believe in true love or soulmates—but after eighteen years next to Scott she was pretty good at recognizing commitment, healthy or no. And between their polygonal drama and the girl at the bar, Scott’s hand on her knee wasn’t enough to keep her calm and centered. Without really realizing it she had three additional glasses of wine, and got full-on drunk by the end of the night. Scott had been over this dinner for four days and had definitely been tracking her wine consumption, so when Olivia proposed dancing, Scott quickly excused them with “Unfortunately, guys, we are way too old for that and I need beauty sleep,” before swiftly hailing an Uber and shoving her into the car before she could make any more promises to Madison regarding any future socialization opportunities.

“You know, people gossip about us, but we’re Patch and Marie next to those guys, eh? That was just weird T, you know? It was basically one of those old French farces you used to watch. It was like if Meryl and Charlie were sleeping together, and then we all had a swingers’ club back at Arctic Edge,” he said, his voice jocular, as he unlocked her door and stepped aside for her to walk in.
“Yeah,” she said, distracted, because really, once you threw Fedor and Tanith into the mix the analogy wasn’t that far off. They could mock but they really were throwing stones at glass houses, here. “But with more medals,” she added.

He snickered, then looked at her. “Everything OK? You were kinda quiet. I’m mocking them, but that was awful but not unbearable. I’m not mad about going.”

“No, I’m just tired,” she set her purse down, slid onto a bar stool. She felt much more sober now than she had at the restaurant. “It’s stupid.”

He filled a glass at the tap, then handed it to her. “Tess?”

She downed the water in two gulps then repeated, “It’s stupid.” He took her glass, refilled it, and she downed it again. “Just … have you been seeing anyone else? Since Montreal? Since Kaitlyn?” It was a stupid question, and she knew the answer: he was in the middle of his longest dry spell since he was fifteen and lost his virginity to Olivia from French class during a ‘study session’ at his host parents’ house in Kitchener.

(He had thought, for years, that she hadn’t known. Please. His hands were on her body daily and his loud Scott voice carried across change rooms; of course she knew within twelve hours.)

“Nope. Don’t plan to either.” The popped his cheeks out, and voice was casual, like he was telling her he thought sushi would be acceptable for dinner.

“Well, that’s …” She wanted to say don’t, because she did not want him too, but she should say dumb, because he should date and sleep with people if he wanted to date and sleep with people. Instead of either she said, “I just … I saw that girl give you her number. At the bar.”

He squinted. “Babe”— he started.

While it made her want to smile, because finally, she had to finish. “—And I also saw you throw it away. Which, I mean, if you didn’t like her that’s fine, but I don’t have a claim or anything over you —” Fuck, why was she getting so upset? This was supposed to be a rational check-in, given that she had kissed him three weeks ago. Why did she feel like everything—him, her career, her life—suddenly hung in the balance? They had worked too hard. “I mean, I know I kissed you but …”

“Tess, are you serious?” His laugh edged up against incredulous, but he didn’t seem offended—if anything, he was genuinely amused. He put his hands in his pockets, rocked back on his heels a little. “No claim? Kiddo. You’ve had one since you were seven.” His eyes were warm.

“That’s skating, though—“

“It’s not just skating, though, is it? We’ve agreed. Everything was real. We agreed when we were golfing after you broke up with Ryan. We agreed in Japan.” He stared at her, sure and serious. “You know that, I know that. Let’s not kid ourselves.”

Goddamnit, this argument again. “You know, I really don’t like it when you start up with this lying thing from 2014, whether it’s now or about the Joannie thing, I was doing my best for our career and I thought we were past—”

“Hey, hey, hey,” he said, cupping her face with both hands to get her to calm down. Pulled her up so they were both standing. “If anyone was doing more of the lying-to-themselves, it was totally me. For like ten years, T. And I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, for the stress and the tears I caused with my bullshit, OK? But you do realize … I’m yours, right? We eat dinner together every night, we drive to work together every morning, you crash at my place a couple of times a week, I sat through all of
The Crown with you, we hosted Jordan together."

"Scott—"

"Hey. You made out with me while doing dishes three weeks ago, we’re in couples’ counseling … There’s no way I’m dating or sleeping with anyone else, alright? You … I know you. You know me. And there’s nobody else that I want to know or … love or fuck, you got it?"

She leaned forward, and kissed him, hard, wrapping her arms around his neck, because that was true, so true—there was nobody else she wanted to know or love or fuck, probably for forever, and that was beautiful and terrifying, there was sky above them and an abyss right below them. And even as she was kissing him, pushing his ass hard into the counter, grinding her hips against his just to see if he had the same groan as three years ago—she started to cry.

“Hey, baby, whoa,” he said, pulling back before kissing the tears off softly. She wasn’t crying-crying, yet—just overwhelmed. She had only cried once, not even at the Olympics, since Marina cornered her in Canton. So this was more than a little embarrassing. He smoothed his thumbs over her cheekbones and smiled, brilliantly, so sure of himself and their destiny. “What are you thinking?”

She took a deep breath, hers hands talons gripping his wrists. She realized Marie was right, that this wasn’t a retread of the conversations they’d had three and eight years ago. She searched for the right words, careful and cognizant of everything at stake, as the best friend and best man she’d ever known stood in front of her like he was fucking Julia Roberts with a Chagall painting. “This … I love you, Scott. I always will. I want you, always—” as if that wasn’t obvious from the last twenty years— “—and I love you, and I want … but I can’t … we can’t … We’re going to win the Olympics in twenty months.”

“Yeah. We really goddamn are.”

“So no matter what … This can’t be because it’s easy, because it’s inevitable or … because or we’re too fucked up for anyone else.” She ran her fingers down his cheekbones, his hair, the nape of his neck. They’d always been everything to each other, and it had been their downfall, and now they were attempting this comeback—this redemption—together, and … they couldn’t end up again, back where they were.

He laughed, raw, his hands big around her hips, forehead hot against hers. He was almost … delighted, maybe? Delirious, definitely. He looked like all his dreams were coming true, and it gave her hope and terrified her more. “I don’t want to be with you because it’s inevitable. Jesus, Tess. You know how not-easy this is. And I think trying to date you would be incredibly stupid. I’m saying no matter how not-easy, you make it worth it. I … I just don’t want to kiss, or hold hands, or fuck, anyone else. I tried, I just … never really want to, again.”

“Then what the fuck do you want, Scott?” Because she had never been fully able to tell, to trust, to accept, what Scott Moir, the man, wanted with Tessa Virtue, the woman. Skating partnership aside, what they felt for each other had always been too big and too shambolic and too vast and too heavy to put into words, and putting it into action had been a disaster.

His face flexed through a thousand emotions before finally settling on resolute. His eyes were clear, and it was unfair, how passionate and sure he was. “I … I want all of it, honestly, Virtch. I want to skate with you, laugh with you, win an Olympics with you, be with you, in this insane bubble for two years, then see you do amazing things after we retire. Do amazing things of my own. Do some amazing things together. Whether you decide our partnership ends after the Olympics and we never see each other again, or if we’re teaching ballroom dance together in the nursing home, this is it, for me. I’ve done a shitty job of showing it to you—though a pretty damn good job of showing it to
every other girl I’ve tried to date in the past—but you’re first. Always. You’re it. And I guess … I
guess, now, I’m asking you to choose me, too. As your best friend, I know that’s probably a lot to
ask, that you go back to the guy who’s hurt you again and again—but as the guy who has been
stupid in love with you for six or eight or hell, probably twenty years and only realized it in February
—I’m asking that you maybe you choose me, too.”

She’d known he was paying attention all those years she had Grey’s Anatomy on. She pounded her
tiny, ineffectual fists against him, before pressing them against her eyes, trying to quell the impending
freakout. He had fucking done it—he’d put everything into words, and it was nothing they would
either be able to walk back from. “The hell, Scott Moir. We agreed, we’re focusing on the Olympics.
Why now?”

He took a deep breath, and she admired the sureness that he had about this, about them. He kissed
her forehead, her cheeks, before continuing, and she realized he sounded sure because he was. To
him, it all made sense, and because it made sense it would be easy even when it was hard. He was
ready, for once and for all and possibly for forever.

And his argument was perfect, she had to concede: “Because I like being around you, and I like
skating with you, and I like kissing you, and god, you’re great in bed. You make me smile, and I
want to make you laugh every day. Because you make me a better and stronger person. I don’t
exactly enjoy arguing with you, but I care a lot a lot less about being right and a lot more honestly
fixing a problem when I’m arguing with you than anyone else. I want a life, a full life, next to you
living a full life, with you leading a full life. Since I was fifteen you’ve been my home, and I want to
build a real one with you, that you can fill with flowers and candles and god, I don’t even care if all
of the furniture is white even though I will spill beer on the couch. But it really is that simple … God,
we have some shit to work through, but we’re better together, and you make me happy. I mean, god,
T, I want to buy a tasteful SUV that fits car seats with you, and go to peewee hockey and dance
practice with you on Saturdays and eat your poached eggs and host family dinners on Sundays and
dance with you instead of doing dishes afterwards. Oh, and sex, obviously, on several days of the
week. Several.” The look in his eyes made heat pool in her stomach, and she kept crying, as he
nuzzled her nose, ran his hands over every part of her body, his mouth and voice hot and everywhere
it needed to be, his own laugh-cry giving her fucking life. She reached up and started to kiss him—
seriously, she’d been powerless in front of him since she was sixteen and this wasn’t going to stop
now—but he broke it off, on a roll, eyes serious. He was a man on a mission. “And we might not get
it all, but I just want to try.”

“Scott—”

“Tess. Baby. I’ve been trying to figure out, for weeks… What I have to offer you. Because you’re
Tessa Jane McCormick Freaking Virtue, you get that right? Anyways, what I’ve got, I’m going to
work really hard, every day, to try and make you happy and have a good life. On ice, off ice. And at
the end of it, I think you’ll have adventure, and some tears and tough times, but a lot of laughter and
a lot of happiness and a lot of skating, which you love, and dancing, which you also love, and … I
think it could be pretty good.” He shrugged, before kissing her nose and cheeks and forehead. “And
that’s all I got. That’s my proposition, here: A good life, adventure, skating, sex, dancing.” He
paused his ramble. “Oh, and I really think we should get a dog. Probably after the Olympics.”

She finally broke fully, into that laugh-cry he professed to love so much, before kissing him deeply,
running her hands down his chest and then sneaking them under his shirt. God, his abs were nice.
“I’d really like a dog with you too,” she blurted out, finally, pulling her head back and her hands into
the relative safety of his hair. How the fuck was that the first thing she thought of? Deep breath.
“You make me happy, Scott. You actually make me feel a lot of things, all of the time, often all at
once …” Wipe away tears. “God that was … that was a really good speech, you know that, right?
Like, TV-movie good. When did you … that was a really good speech.” She wrote all their damn speeches. When did he get good at speeches?

“I’ve been trying to make my own Two-Year Plan, for a while now. Don’t have much else, though.”

“And I don’t either, not really.” She’d been avoiding it but … she took a deep breath, and tried for the honesty, clear and deep, that he had just given to her. She owed this to him. She stepped back, because she was pretty sure she was going to jump him—soon—if she didn’t give herself physical distance. “But. I know you make the hard things worth it. You have made … you’ve made the best things in my life possible, and then you’ve made them worth it, despite … sometimes, despite a lot. You make me laugh. You make me think crazy things are achievable, and you make me feel safe. And loved,” her voice trailed off, the decades of their relationship—so much bigger than either of them in the singular—reverberating through her mind as she worked through what he meant to her, as she tried to quantify it. “You make me feel so loved. I don’t know … I don’t know what I want, or what comes next, especially after the Olympics. I want that, first. And I want you. Just I don’t see how this works, practically. Especially after last time … I can’t go through that again. I just … I can’t lose you, this, me, us. We’ve got an ability to be great or terrible together, and I think those things coexist for a reason. So before you start convincing me that it’s perfectly reasonable for our three children to start skating at two—” And suddenly she knew in her bones it would be three children, if they avoided the icy obstacles on their path, knew it even though she had zero maternal instincts or otherwise wanted kids— “or arguing why I should change my name—which I won’t, Scott Moir, not ever, not at all—”

“I’ve never wanted you to be anything other than yourself, Tess.” That was true. His arms were

“I know,” she took a deep, shaky breath. “So I guess my question is—what the fuck happens next, Scott?”

vi. Still Three Years Before Today (Just About Thirty Seconds Later), Scott

The nice thing about confessing to your skating partner-slash-best friend of twenty years that you’re in love with her, Scott decided, is that it lifted a goddamn weight off his chest. Seriously, he felt about ten pounds lighter.

The not-great thing was that, when Tessa very reasonably asked what the fuck came next after his excellent—seriously, that was a damn good rom-com speech, she had laugh-cried and everything—he wasn’t quite sure. Tessa had always provided the planning mettle, whether it was her vision boards when she was twelve or putting in the work for her recovery from surgery or the entire damn comeback. He might push her into rockers and spot for her on ice, but she’d led off-ice since the age of seven.

Because he didn’t know, what happened next. He’d been plenty impulsive in the past, and Tessa had trusted him—despite years and years of evidence why she should not, she did, had since she was seven and took his hand for the first time, and it was humbling, still, always. So he was determined not to fuck this up, this time.

(Of course, basically proposing as he was crying and she had like a bottle of wine when the plan that night was to watch Coyote Ugly was Vintage Impulsive Scott Moir.)

“Comeback rules,” he blurted out. It worked, perfectly. “We extend comeback rules to cover every
aspect of our partnership. That’s what happens next.”

“What?” her jaw dropped, confused.

“What are the rules of the comeback?”

“This is for us, above all.” They’d said it more times than he could possibly count. “No distractions. Be present. Be intentional. We’ve got time to get it right.” She flicked her hair behind her shoulder and he could see the pieces begin to melt into clarity, the rules they’d come up with on a dusty mountainside in China somehow doing the work for the rest of their life.

“So, that’s what comes next.” He was proud of himself, for how utterly logical the plan was. And everyone always said Tessa was the fucking brains of the team.

“What?”

“You want this, us?” he checked.

“I—I don’t know what ‘this, us’ is.” She took a step back, hopped onto the island to give them space, tucked some hair behind her ear. “But, generally—Scott, I didn’t just start crying and telling you I love you and making out when I’m just completely uninterested.”

She smirked, and he was momentarily sidetracked by how smudged her lipstick was, how swollen her lips were.

Focus, Moir. A plan, more than flowers or really good oral sex, was how to woo Tessa Virtue.

“Skating together, every day,” he ticked off using his fingers. “Business partners—we have a career to protect. Work is work and that’s not changing. Being best friends, truly. All of those are most important. Except maybe the business partnership but it’s part of skating, so.”

“OK, yes, obviously. That’s nothing new.”

“And then, in the, you know, three—tops—hours a day that we’re awake, and not any of those things, we’re whatever we want, because this is for us. No distractions, so if it’s not helping the skating plan, it goes back off the table—whether you’re not getting enough sleep so we don’t spend the night together, or I need a weekend with the guys so I don’t go insane, or whatever. No distractions from skating. If we need to dial stuff back for the sake of skating, we do, no questions asked. But we’re present, every day, we’re intentional—we’re in it, together, we define it, together. We’re partners, so we just … commit to figuring it out together. Treat each other well, keep talking … We don’t need to involve anyone else, or labels, if we don’t want to. We’re doing this for us. Nothing particularly different, just adding some commitment and—god, please—sex.”

“Obviously,” she rolled her eyes, staring at him with what amounted to wanton interest, before snapping back into business mode with a nod. “You’ve really thought about it.” Her voice was wondrous.

“A little bit, yeah, T,” he said, running his hand through his hair. God, if she didn’t go for this … “I know what we’re up against, here. I’m not not scared, Tess.”

“Good, cause this is terrifying to me.” She took a deep breath, then leaned up to kiss him, mostly out of reassurance, but he deepened it, because he could. After a few minutes—where her hand went to some very impure places—she pulled away, brushed his hair out of his face and said, “I know you’re like, picking out engagement rings and carseat-safe SUVs, apparently—”

“Oh god, T. Not even on the table now.” One day, he could hope, but not today. He probably shouldn’t have run his mouth. He kissed her knuckles, her wrist. God, she was magnificent.
“OK. I just—first, we can’t go into this, with that as the goal. It’s way too much, Scott. Day at a time, be intentional. We can’t … take advantage of this or start forcing this, not with … everything. This needs to be a choice, and I don’t have enough information to make a call on … that yet. Off the table.”

“Deal.” He had time, to convince her. There were hurdles—god, obviously—but he was in it.

“Ok. Second, I think we would kill each other if we spent twenty-four hours a day. So we don’t do that. Separate interests, separate friends, still; we try actively not to be attached at the hip. Time apart if we need it, no questions.”

“Actually I think you would kill me, so perfectly OK to go out to watch the game or hang out with Chiddy on tour.” Over the years they had come up with increasingly elaborate ways to not kill each other while traveling—banned songs and movies, a system of consequences around quiet hours, limits on the numbers of times Scott could ask her to come out post-performance or she could ask to stop for coffee—and none of that would change.

“I was being kind.” The corner of her mouth twitched up. “But … yeah. And also, finally, I don’t think I ever actually have said sorry, specifically. For breaking us up in London without talking to you, and then the Cassandra thing. I … it was wrong, and I was angry and …”

“Hey. It’s OK. I love you,” he said. “And I’m sorry too.”

“It needed to be said,” she sighed, “So, OK. Third. We have a skating partnership. We came back for each other, and if we went into this and then I screwed up your chances at another gold medal? Forgiving myself … would be very hard. I know we’re different than we were in 2013—”

“—A lot different,” he emphasized.

“Agreed. But we know the stakes are a lot higher now, too. So, ease into this. I think we take a couple of months and kind of … see.”

“When we were … God, can we call it dating? We were so bad at it.”

“Well, I think we agreed that we’re *not* dating now, so for purposes of distinction, we were dating, then. If you’re talking 2013. But we were also not dating in 2008, not even a little.”

“Yeah.” That had been on him, so he added a, “Sorry.”

“You were twenty-one. I was nineteen. We were a disaster on every level.”

"So, we're not dating, but we're also not not dating?" he clarified.

"Yes." She smiled. "It also means we don't have to lie. If anyone asks."

"It's not exactly being truthful, either."

"It's honest. Also, cover. Hypothetically."

“Anyways. So, in 2013—I asked Max for any advice that he had. And he said we had to be prepared to lose together, and still be able to pull each other through if we lost.”

“That’s good advice. We were terrible at that.”

“Yeah. I’m just saying—losing the gold again would be tough, more because, same, I’d be devastated for you. Less me. But, god, T, losing in London was shitty on a lot of levels, but losing
you that night hurt way, way more than losing the gold at home. So yeah, I don’t plan on losing the
gold, at all … but I also don’t plan on losing you, either.”

She stared at him, quiet. “You know … It’s not conditional, right? I feel the same way about you,
gold or silver or pewter.”

“Yeah,” he cracked his neck. “Head, yeah; heart, sometimes. It probably wouldn’t hurt to talk that
one through with JF.” Hell, they probably should have talked that one through with the shrink
Marina set them up with in 2009.

“Yeah. There’s probably a lot of stuff we should mention to JF,” she agreed. Poor guy had barely
survived their relationship history over the last four sessions, he thought. “So, slow. And … I don’t
think we should tell anyone. I mean, right now, probably not even our families. God, Jordan might
kill me …”

“I’m not exactly looking forward to hearing fifty-two Moirs say ‘I told you so’ either. Though I don’t
think they would be exactly surprised.” Jordan and Danny especially.

“Right. But then even if … if this is for us, it’s not for the media or Skate Canada. So I don’t want to
tell them or answer questions or have this be a thing. Especially since, with points one and three,
skating comes first and we need to protect that relationship. If we say we’re dating, then we would
have to say if we weren’t dating and—” His jaw twitched, and she rushed “—This isn’t—I’m not
ashamed, but I don’t think this is for anyone else.”

“That’s a comeback rule.”

“Right. I don’t want a … complicated narrative.” He knew she picked those words deliberately.
“We’re just here to skate.” Her eyes were deep and liquid. “I don’t want to detract from skating, and I
can’t …” Her voice trailed off, and he thought of the David blowback, the TV show, the skating
gossip. The parts of Tessa she shared shrewdly and those she held back, now locked under armor
even he had trouble seeing. He wanted—craved—that private side of her, would trade organs, Leafs
tickets, medals, for that. She might give so few fucks, about what people thought of her weight or
hair or nose or costumes, but it meant something that she wasn’t willing to play games with this. He
was working through that, in his head, but she mistook his silence for hesitance and added, “And
you hated questions about training with Charlie and Meryl; do you really think David Lease would
ask about skating if they knew about this?”

Yeah, OK. “In the bubble,” he swore.

“Ok,” she said, “and it’s not like … We don’t change anything. We just don’t … share anything.”

“It’d be a pretty crazy announcement, eh: still a skating team, still best friends, definitely not dating.
Skate Canada would love writing that press release.”

She smiled, relieved at his understanding. “Exactly.”

“So,” he said, sliding his hands around her waist, because he realized they had been doing an
incredible amount of talking and so little touching, for them. “If we’re taking it slow, should I head
home?” He wouldn’t like it but he was perfectly happy to be a good boy if the situation warranted,
bring her coffee and flowers in the morning, even.

Luckily Tessa looked so deeply offended that he had to kiss the disgust off her face, laughing into
her mouth as he snaked his hand up her shirt, running his thumb along the lace of her bra cup. “It has
been—” she muttered, pushing him against her counter again as her own hands found his ass and
gripped “—seven months, Scott Moir, since I got laid. And … two and a half years? Since we last had sex? No, this is happening.”

“I have missed you”—he started but then she bit his lower lip, eliciting a gasp, “—so much.”

She unbuckled his belt and pulled back as she snaked it through his jeans. “If you make a joke as you’re going down on me and like, double-check to make sure I don’t want to be watching Coyote Ugly instead”—Her eyes were ninety-eight percent deadly serious.

“I would say that you could feel free to blue-ball me then, but—” he lifted her shirt over her head “—it’s been a while. No jokes.” She smirked, hair swinging over her shoulders to her bra. “Also, I’m gonna need a bed, if you don’t want to be dropped Monday.”

She laughed, eyes dark. “Please. Eighteen years and hasn’t happened yet.” But she started pulling him toward the bedroom and fuck if he didn’t hit every piece of furniture possible on his way there. “Lose your shirt,” she insisted, more of a whine than an order, pushing his hands away from her until she could unbutton it, but she gave up after three buttons and just yanked it over his head, then grunted when it got caught on his watch.

Laughing, he twisted his arms behind him, kissing her and moving her toward her bed as he did. “Impatient much, Virtch?” he muttered, finally freeing himself, tipping them onto the bed and bracketing his hips around hers. Her hair fanned out, and she looked like one of those goddamned Renaissance angels in an Italian museum, all creamy skin and dark curls and knowing eyes.

“Very,” she said, mouth damp on his throat and tongue teasing and hands on his zipper and fingers searching greedily as he ran his hands over the flimsy bra, feeling her skin come alive under his thumbs. She groaned, pressed her chest against his in the hunt for more sensation, trapping his hands.

“Jesus, baby, I need those,” he pulled back, brushing her hair back for a second, locking eyes, again. He started to kiss his way down her sternum, somehow getting his hands behind her to get rid of the damn bra, saying hello to each nipple with a pert bite, continuing down, a quick suck of the old bellybutton ring—she laughed a little, it was an old move; he was struck by how familiar and how new everything felt—before making quick work of her jeans. “Thank you for not wearing one of those jumpsuit things you like tonight; I never know where you keep the zippers on those,” he said, very seriously.

She sat up on her elbows with a laugh. “Will keep that in mind for future reference.” She lifted her hips just a millisecond for him to get the damn jeans off and he was struck by how slick and how perfect she was, visible even through her berry lace boyshorts; what a goddamned lucky bastard he was that this was exactly the place he meandered back to on the road of life, and just whoa. “Scott, please, you said no teasing,” she half-whimpered, nudging him with a knee, and he realized he’d been frozen for a little too long, thumbs running along her the crease of thighs. He reached a hand up to thumb around her breast in an apology, and one of her hands ended up on it and the other tangled in his hair—Marie-France yelled at him to get a haircut last week—as he ran a thumb around her clit before nudging her open with his nose. Her foot ended up on his back, giving him better access, and her back arched up as he remembered what worked for her. Her body began to quake, and he thought erratically of how extraordinary it was that this was where he ended up, eighteen years after a casual come dance with Tess, Scottie from Carol; of decisions about dance and hockey and Kitchener and normal high school and coming back after Vancouver and quitting after Sochi and yet; of the performances that weren’t, not entirely, in front of judges and crowds and the ISU and Marina; of saying we’re just friends in interviews and her old insistence that I’m not your sister; of TV shows and photo shoots and sponsorships and speeches; of skiers and curlers; of cigarettes and surgeries; of the warmth of her palm and the feel of her heartbeat; of tours and competitions; of
hooking up while Carmen played and as her parents divorced; of kisses under Christmas trees and in Leafs jerseys; of choreographing in kitchens and laughing in rinks; of the reckless highs she sent him on and the depth and the work and the sweat of twenty years; of gold and silver and everything that had gone wrong, balanced but tipped just so slightly in favor of everything that had gone right.

She might not believe in destiny, but she—it, they; whatever, he didn’t do poetry—was breathtaking.

She cracked with a cry, hand twisting in his hair, and she pulled him up for a sleepy kiss and to catch their breaths before shucking him of his—very tight—jeans and giving him a few pumps. “In case you couldn’t tell, I really like your hair this length,” she informed him as she sank down onto him.

Fuck getting a haircut.

He wasn’t sure how long he lasted, but she snapped her hips around his, sexy as only she could be, he fucking saw stars.

Later on—much, much later, after raiding her kitchen for sustenance and another go-round that reminded him how great she was with her tongue—he got dressed and kissed her temple and tried to leave, because slow, but she grabbed his wrist and reminded him, “Slow for us isn’t gonna look like normal slow.”

“You sure, T?” he checked. He’d take what he could get.

“Take your pants off and get in bed, Scott,” was her sleepy reply.

She woke up before him the next morning, which he realized with a start. “I get why you used to complain it was creepy,” he said, his voice sleep-dry. He thumbed her cheek in greeting.

“Shut up,” she said, leaning forward so the sheet dropped, and kissing him. “Morning, partner.”

(It was the closest thing to a definition that they would get, until February of 2019.)

He smiled back. “Morning, partner.”

Chapter End Notes

I said repeatedly in comments that I hope none of what I wrote is true. I tried to separate “using this as a good template for a wholly fictional story” from “I find these skaters/people delightful”—I get very very strict about boundary crossing to the real people involved, and my expectations/hopes/projections for them (of course, I wrote this, so smdh). I mostly think that very little of this resembles reality—I allow for basically every actual scenario, good and bad and ugly, know that I have zero clue. They seem happy, it’s their lives (life?) and all I can ask from them is damn good skating. Keeping it as focused on fiction is the only way I can really navigate this. But the one thing that I’m like hard nope on? The dialogue, hands-down. I absolutely do not think that’s true to life.

Which is cool! It’s where the fiction comes in. But I’m pretty sure they haven’t spoken a complete sentence to each other for like fifteen years. They’re also dancers, attuned to music and movement. I just don’t think they use this many words. It’s why they’re so
bad in interviews; they’re just not used to having to explain themselves (I kid. Mostly.).

At first I tried to play it off—this is what happens when nobody else is there, she said! This is supposed to just add to everything that’s publicly available, she said!—because I don’t like being wrong. Then it was just like, whatever. I am verbal, I write long, I’m interested in the spaces between what people tell others and themselves, and I fucking watched a ton of West Wing, dammit. But structurally, I think it’s a little to the story’s detriment. In particular I wish I had put a bit more effort into making them each sound different from each other.

In terms of coming up with dialogue and phrasing, my recommendations are always to read and listen and write as much as possible, to engage critically and curiously with words. Ignore Jonathan Franzen. I started reading what I had written out loud—especially dialogue—and it shortened some conversations considerably, like in the Scott’s-house section, which got edited. I don’t believe in repeating what’s said in narrative with what’s in the dialogue, unless it’s done for emphasis or to reveal something new or for a funny beat. I think people talk a lot (like, count how many words a friend says when talking about a date), and I take as a given that often, people bullshit. So I’m interested in hearing their bullshit out and going from there. I also think people often don’t fully know what they think on a subject until they say it out loud, then go what did I just do? So I’m always interested in having them do that, wander down wormholes. I like action tags (“I have to do this.” She put the phone down), MB hated them. If something should be obvious to the reader and the other characters, don’t have the character state it (“I am sad right now.”) This one was a game-changer for me.

And finally, think about how the character would say it, not how you would say it. This one is obviously the hardest for me.

I’d been building to this chapter for a while, and I knew that I wanted the final get-together to be the only scene told from their perspectives simultaneously. In my head it was sort of like the wedding in The Last Five Years, the only time we get to see the characters from each other’s perspectives at the exact same time (that musical is also one of the big influences on this). Scott’s speech I got started on pretty early (like, before I posted the first chapter); I think that’s why it sprawled so much. I knew I needed good old RomCom Moir to speech it up here, so there’s definitely some Grey’s Anatomy influence, which I eventually just lampshaded. I’m not sure when I decided to bring in Madi/Zach/Olivia/Adri and get Tessa drunk and teary—I think probably around the time I learned about that situation, so probably around the time that the hookup chart re: Gadbois started circulating on Tumblr.

The speech itself is so cheesy (but I love “you’re the only one I want to know or love or fuck”) and Tessa definitely sets him up with some softballs to slam it home. I wanted a ton of callbacks to his earlier realization (in … chapter two?) so that’s where the spilled-beer and dog things come in. He also accidentally trips into what Jeff and Tessa discussed as not being enough for a relationship—sex, laughter, and dancing—but this time, it is exactly enough. There’s a lot to unpack in the conversation they have, since they’re in different places about lying vs. not lying and whether they are fully different-enough from 2013 for this to be successful and how this is going to work, but I also really needed it to land in a super hopeful place, for the first time the entire story. This is the time they finally commit to getting it right—not getting it right, but committing.
some of it's just transcendental, some of it's just really dumb

Chapter Notes

I’m ba-ack! So this chapter is a little rough around the edges, but I’m getting on a transatlantic for like three weeks in 12 hours, and I really wanted to get this out the door before vacation. The two long sections especially might be trimmed, since I got super indulgent with words in them and I like words. They're pretty (I am sooooo tired). But this is all about the slow of getting together, growing together, and coming together.

I'm hopeful to write at least one chapter on vacation — insert blatant grab for reviews here (no seriously; I have an incredible guilt complex, so polite nudging via review will definitely help) — but it might be a little bit of time. Until then, enjoy ;)

Chap title is obviously from "The Book of Love." Listen to the Magnetic Fields, not the Peter Gabriel version, please kids.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

i. Five Years Before Today, Tessa

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“I don’t know,” Scott said, rolling his neck. “It’s just not really speaking to me.” He started texting again. Kaitlyn, the new girlfriend, probably.

Tessa took a deep breath in, and nodded, quelling the urge to stomp on his phone with her skate. So far, nothing—not the Beach Boys, not Lady Gaga, not the Lumineers, not Hozier, not the Rolling Stones, not Fred Astaire—had spoken to Scott. They were leaving for their first tour as Olympic Silver Medalists in a matter of days—well, she was leaving to go spend a week in a Japanese spa and exfoliate the memories of Russia before he met up with her for JSOI—and all they had was fucking Stay. Oh, and Jeff had sent over Try, for the group number. Scott had taken one listen and kicked the boards.

He had sworn up and down that he still wanted to skate with her, through their breakup (break down?) at the coffeehouse and then through the Olympics. They’d done a media blitz a week later, and he’d said the same thing, and they’d gotten ragingly drunk in his hotel room that night, and he’d said the same thing. When she texted last week to make sure he booked tickets to Montreal, he’d said the same thing. But she was pretty sure that if he listened to one more song, he’d be on the phone with Stars canceling every tour through the end of the decade.

Marie and Sam, her effusive dancer friend who couldn’t skate to save his life, exchanged looks. “I think you should reconsider Top Hat,” Marie-France said gently. “You love Rogers-Astaire.” It was a safe choice, and Marie knew it, and Tessa knew it, and Scott knew it.

“Oh, or maybe there is a song you have danced to in the past, that you’d like to repeat?” Sam asked. “I have seen videos of I Want to Hold Your Hand—beautiful.”

The only problem was that Scott very much did not want to hold her hand, anymore, probably ever again. So she just smiled and said, “Marie’s first piece! But it feels very young for us, now.”
“Anything you two have played around with, just for fun?” Marie suggested. “Patch and I used to make up choreography to pass the time.”

“We didn’t really—”

“Into the Mystic,” popped right out of Scott’s mouth.

She gasped, involuntarily. “No,” she said sharply. Because that wasn’t choreography, that was sex: Her in his shirt, laughing into the crook of his neck; him in boxers, fingerprints marking her ribs; burned eggs on the stove and a half-empty bottle of wine on the counter. It was a slow-burn orgasm and him slick in her hand and them both lying sticky and spent on her kitchen floor.

That was theirs.

“Ah, a classic, tres bien,” Sam said, shuffle-skating toward the speakers.

The music filled the mostly-empty rink, and she had to admit that she liked the song. “How much did you guys work out?” Marie asked.

“We didn’t really get that far,” Scott said. “Anyways. Tess doesn’t like it.” He turned back to his phone.

“I don’t not like it, Scott—”

“—Why don’t we give you a moment?” Marie said. She tugged at Sam’s sleeve, barely catching him before he tripped.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have—”

“It’s fine,” she said, pushing thoughts of his thumb on her clit away and instead filling her mind with Kate’s words—treat each other kindly. Scott liked the song. She could engage in professional conversation about it, like a proper adult addressing her business partner. “We need a song. And you’re right, it’s great. I more remember other stuff, but it was good choreo. I think.”

He inhaled. “Wanna try? Just … see what we come up with?”

“Yeah,” she strode to the boards and hit the iPhone, slapped her guards down. “I think we only had the first dance sequence worked out. Sixteen bars in.”

“What if we started on our knees?” Scott suggested, chomping gum. “Kind of sway our way up and circle each other?” She was surprised. He’d always been hesitant to contribute to choreo around the professionals—he'd wanted the best, most challenging routines, was a deeply intuitive dancer, and yet choreo was the closest she ever really saw him to shy, on the ice. But it was nice, working together again, taking control of their career, being reminded that yes, they actually still had one.

And as they sculpted the dance into existence, she noticed the song wasn’t about sex, or even romance.

It was about a goodbye.

When she looked up hours later, she realized that the rink was empty, and a ring of keys sat by her cell. A text beeped. From Marie: Etiendre les lumieres, s’il vous plait! xx.

“That felt good,” Scott said, coming up next to her and folding his arms on the board. “It felt … balanced.”
“Yeah,” she echoed slowly, hands at her hips. “Easier.” She paused. “Remember when we were kids, and it was all about how we complemented each other? It was so fun.” How lucky were they, Scott used to say, that their strengths slotted together so tightly and naturally. It had contributed to her perpetually bubbly feel of specialness, hardened her narrative of destiny, had pushed them to greatness. “It felt like that.”

But somewhere along the way, she realized—sometime between Seoul and her surgery and Sochi and the show—their gifts had twisted into burdens. She owed him deeper edges; he beat himself up when his movements didn’t match hers precisely. Oversensitized, guilt had grown like a tumor into every aspect of their career—she wasn’t sure, honestly, if it started personally or professionally or neither. They became tunnel-visioned perfectionists, willing to tear a program apart mid-season just to maybe make it better, willing to shred themselves with doubt and guilt just to make themselves feel better.

They needed to stop, somehow. They needed to talk, somehow.

She opened her mouth to mention grace, but he said, “Yeah. It hasn’t felt like that in a while. Guess it’s good we’re stepping back.”

“Yeah,” she repeated, her thoughts dying on the vine. “Wanna go again?”

They skated for hours, like they were seven and nine, no thoughts of Sochi or Marina or reality TV or Kaitlyn. It was glorious.

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ii. Four Years Before Today, Scott

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“How many books did you bring?” he asked, stretching out his legs. On long hauls, they usually sprung for extra legroom—unless one of them had enough points to fly business; you couldn’t begrudge business class—but they’d agreed an evening YYZ-PEK direct was better than a six-hour layover in SFO, so seats 24B and 24C it was. For thirteen hours.

She laughed, pulling four out of her Goyard tote, permanently borrowed from Kate around 2011: *All The Light We Cannot See*, *The Time Traveler's Wife*, *The Royal We*, *The Lover's Dictionary*. “I wanted to bring *Go Set a Watchman*, but I was worried about room in my bag.”

“Gee, if only someone had invented a sort of tablet that could hold, like a bunch of books and games and—oh wait, what’s this?” He flipped his Kindle out of his backpack and made an aha! face. Mike had suggested he read *Thinking, Fast and Slow* and *Unbeatable Mind* on the trip. “Magic, Virtch.”

She laughed. “I like turning the pages,” she protested, opening *The Lover’s Dictionary* and pulling out her bookmark. “You know … If we … You’re probably gonna have to move these books to Montreal.”

He nodded. “Well, you’re a terrible box-packer, so happy to help.” She really couldn’t pack a box to save her life, which was weird because she could literally pack for a month in one suitcase, if she so chose to (though she never chose to.)

Since Tessa all but physically pulled his head out of his ass in early April, insisted that he stop treating his liver like a suggestion and start dreaming big again, they’d been edging back into familiarity. He’d been speaking to Mike too, slowly thinking through what the next shiny big thing in front of him was. And he was pretty sure he had it: another gold medal. Another Games.
The answer had sort-of exasperated Babsy: Scott was supposed to be cultivating new goals, be future-focused and ambitious and intentional and assertive, less boxed-in about what he wanted in life. Be more confident in the fact that he could have it all, as long as he was willing to be fearless about his own power. This looked like fear, or a regression: He had a gold medal, and a damn good skating career. Achievement, unlocked.

But he was an elite athlete, which meant he was nothing if not a perfectionist—though Tessa’s latest thing was all about excellence not perfection—and he refused to believe that burned-out, reactive death rattle to Sochi was the way that their journey as competitive skaters ended. It wasn’t about the color of the medal, and it wasn’t about the performance. It was about the process. He knew what they could be, and that wasn’t it. The answer would annoy—and scare—their families and everyone else in skating, but he was quietly becoming more confident in it.

He probably, of course, should have found a better way to broach it with T than on a fucking freezing Scottish beach at midnight as she spiralled about the status of his relationship. He got she was trying to be a good friend, but he was pretty sure that if she and Kait continued on their trajectory of selfie-snapping and Outlander watching and secret-sharing, like they were friends, someone would end up dead. Probably Kait, but he just might have a heart attack.

(Tessa obviously would live. She might never survive a zombie apocalypse, but girl was ruthless.)

But timing had never been his and Tess’s thing, which was one reason why he itched for another chance. Dancing with her in that bar, Miku’s voice golden and the glow of brass around them and gin just a spark in his veins, he’d also been reminded that dancing with Tessa was a feeling unlike anything else in the fucking world. And together—electric to one another—they were extraordinary. Like everything with Tessa, it was simply more. He’d spent the year accepting less from life.

(It was also key, he realized in retrospect—after they fucking won—that this wasn’t his only plan. He was coming around to the idea that he had slightly more to offer the sport than the generational Feet and Face that had always made Marina soak herself. He still wasn’t sure he could do it at that level, but Mike had pointed out that Scott thought Tessa was the smartest person he knew, and the person he trusted most—and if she thought he could do it, either he was wrong about Tessa or wrong about himself.)

(But he could exist, separate from Tessa. He had his own thing. That was important.)

(This was also the first time he realized he was just as much a workaholic as Tessa.)

Since that dramatic Heathcliff-and-Cathy conversation (Tessa had made him read the book, once. Whatever.) they had discussed a comeback a few more times. Always casually, elliptically, pragmatically, jokingly. Just whenever they were making dinner or driving to Toronto or honing What’s Love in Ilderton or the only ones awake in the back of a tour bus somewhere between Calgary and Saskatoon. If we came back, then we’d need to master this new contemporary vibe. If we came back, then we should call Marie and Patch. If we came back, then Tessa would put her degree on hold—again—and Paul would run the Skate Shop alone. If we came back, then we would never hear the end of it from our families. If we moved to Montreal, then Scott would have to help Tessa pack.

“I just might have to take you up on that,” Tessa said, jolting him back to reality with a toss of her book. “I’m actually thinking movie. You liked Guardians of the Galaxy, right?”

“Yeah, but you would hate it. Watch The Grand Budapest Hotel instead.”

“You saw that?”
“I took Kait, yeah.” She liked British humor, and Wes Anderson was weird enough to qualify. “Actually, I’ll watch too.”

“Didn’t Mike tell you to read a book?”

“I’ll have time in Beijing,” he insisted. She raised an eyebrow—shows and tours were not exactly a time when he went “Gee, a quiet night in reading sounds nice”—but didn’t say anything. Instead she simply lifted the arm rest separating them and curled into his side wordlessly, hooking the right headphone jack into her ear.

She did like the movie, so much so that she agreed to watch Guardians next, though she fell asleep a third of the way through—which was fine, she didn’t think Groot was funny. Her head slipped down from his shoulder to his chest, and he wrapped an arm around her to keep her from sliding further. When the flight attendants came around for the last service, he got a decaf tea, shifted quietly so she wouldn’t wake up.

“Anything for your girlfriend?” the flight attendant asked.

He looked at Tessa, sprawled across him like a koala. “Not—no,” he finally said.

They’d been mistaken for a couple more times than he could count, by border patrol officers and waitresses and fans, but this was the first time that had happened in a while.

His grip around her bicep tightened.

Beijing was always a dusty, loud, crowded explosion of sound and sensation, literally gritty and endlessly busy. It inevitably took his brain a little bit extra time to sort the signal from the noise, to spot the tiny parks and bright temples amid the crush of signage and shops and haze and humidity. Tessa loved the anonymity of it; in Japan and Korea eagle-eyed fans usually spotted them and asked for selfies, but once out of the airport they could float through the city invisible and unmoored.

“It sounds like a great place,” Kaitlyn’s voice said on the phone the first night—it was early morning in Manitoba, but she felt even farther than the six thousand miles and half-day separating them. “I wanna come next time, OK? Scope out the sights before 2022.”

“Not sure when we’ll be back here—” he started, because the comeback would mean fewer international shows, then remembered he and Kait hadn’t talked about that. They would, he just wanted to work out his shit first. They had both insisted, in a politely Canadian way, that they were good with her staying with Jenn next season, and with him in Ilderton, that they weren’t ready to move in together, though she—and he—didn’t seem as cool with the outcome as she—like he—kept insisting, politely. But the four months of conversations had been exhausting, had skirted the edges of actual fights, had glanced off defining-the-relationship discussions. And after all that, they were in the same spot as they were prior to the conversations, just more tired. And drained. It felt like by trying to move forward and then agreeing to stand still they’d actually moved backwards, a little.

He loved Kait, was warming into the idea of spending a life with her, was making lists of pros and cons and finding only things like she roots for the Jets and leaves dishes in the sink for two days for the ‘no’ column. Could picture some sort of outdoor wedding in Winnipeg where he could get away with wearing a nice suit and she wore cowboy boots (he actually goddamned thought through where Tessa would be—a bridesmaid, he finally decided, in some flowy mauve gown Kait picked, gamely wearing a flower crown but drawing the line at the boots. She’d wear some stupid-expensive wedges instead). He wasn’t sure what to do next—being with Kait was easy, a dance that came naturally, that required no binders of steps and lifts to explain the choreography. But he and Kait felt fragile in a way that made him think they wouldn’t survive starting another conversation about their future.
“Are you thinking 2022?” he asked, clearing his throat.

“I mean, why not?” she asked breezily. “Jenn’s got fifteen years on me and still competing, it’s not like—” she stopped.

“Figure skating,” he finished.

“A lot of sports, Scott.” Her tone was thick, and overly insistent. “Anyways. When do you come back?”

“Uh, home on the fourth.” He squinted, trying to remember if that was when the plane took off, or landed, or both. “I think. Last show the thirty-first.”

He could hear her brow crinkle. “Cast sightseeing tour after?”

“T and I didn’t want to fuck ourselves up by only spending four days here,” he explained, which was true. But she’d floated the idea of going to the Great Wall. They’d never been. So some sightseeing.

“Gotcha,” she replied, but her voice broke funnily. “Anyways, it’s almost nine here, so I should get going. Is Wednesday going to be a good day?” she teased, since his Wednesday was ending.

“It’s pretty great, yeah,” he said. “Love you, talk soon.”

He hung up, he realized a half-second too late, before she could repeat it.

(Was it easier to focus on figuring out his career rather than the rest of his life? Obviously.)

After they had landed, Tessa had unpeeled from him—it wasn’t unusual for them to hang out with separate friends on tours, but felt jarring after the last few months, in an acute way that surprised him. After the final show, the cast hit a rooftop bar for an impromptu after-party; he figured they could talk then but she disappeared after a few hours. Suddenly he was irrationally worried he wouldn’t see her until they flew back. But the next morning she was knocking on his door at eight, clad in workout clothes and with a coffee for him.

“I thought we could go to the Great Wall today,” she said, licking her lips. “We should talk, too.” Her eyes were calm.

He took the coffee and nodded. “Yeah,” he agreed.

Her eyes flicked down to his boxers, and he self-consciously sucked in his stomach. “OK, so you need to put on some clothes, first. Give me your passport and license and I’ll go talk to the concierge about renting a car.”

He tilted his head to invite her in, then dug through his bag for both. “You mean you don’t want to try and get out of speeding tickets in China too? See if you have the same luck smiling at a Chinese police officer as you do with the mounties?”

“It’s these funny funny jokes that I’ve missed over the last two years,” she teased back, fingers closing with a snap over the documents.

He showered quickly and threw on a grey T-shirt and black shorts; by the time he made it downstairs, Tessa had rented a car, gotten directions, and picked up snacks, including the weird licorice he loved and she despised. “I’m excited,” he said, one hand pressing to the small of her back as they walked the two blocks to get the car and the other feeding himself licorice for breakfast.
She shimmied her shoulders, then laughed. “It’s going to be a great day,” she agreed. They start-stopped through heavy city traffic, Tessa navigating, and they were soon zipping along the highway under the grey-gold morning light. “Even now, sometimes I forget how big the world is.” T’s voice was wistful.

“We’ve gotten to see a lot of it,” he said. “That’s definitely a perk to skating.”

She nodded, still staring out the window. “So. You miss competitive skating.”

“Yeah. Don’t you?”

“Okay. You first.” Convince me you’re not doing this for dick reasons was pretty loudly unspoken.

“Alright. So.” He let out an exhale, trying to figure out his best argument. “Whether the goal was excellence or perfection—you can’t say that final season was either. I think we had two of the greatest skates of our lives at Sochi, really I do, a fantastic time at the Games, but that was not the prep, or the season, that we know we’re capable of. We’ve never settled as athletes; why would we start now?”

She nodded, basically brushing past his case. “And you miss it.”

“Of course, T. Every day.” He paused. “I miss the routine, and winning, and the structure, and there’s no feeling like hearing Representing Canada … over the loudspeaker. But I also miss working with you.”

And that was the crux of it: he knew Tessa—competitive, driven, ambitious Tessa—could get behind two more years of competitions and another Olympics and an overarching goal. And yeah, he missed everything he said he did—and he genuinely thought they had more to give; medals had never been their end goal anyways, and in no other career was success as clearly demarcated as being an athlete—but he missed the Tessa of it all. Her pinched pre-coffee face, her lucky safety pin, her jokes, her drive. Her hand in his.

He wasn’t sure if they could win gold again—correction, Tessa could, he wasn’t sure if he could—but he wanted to try.

He needed to try.

“That’s … I mean … ” she said, her eyes big and her tone careful. “I think it’s telling that we never really stopped. But with everything—”

“I know,” he rushed in. “I just … I want to enjoy it again, T. That’s it. Get that right.” He thought about saying I can’t live with the way we ended that season but that would be a dick reason, so he didn’t. Instead he said, “There’s nothing like it in the world, and we’re young——” she laughed, almost a moan at the thought of how not-young they were—“well, young enough! And young at heart. And still goddamned good enough.” He shifted. “So. What about you?”

“I mean, yeah, of course I miss competition. The …”

“The winning?” he filled in, amused.

“Of course. Performing, everything. And part of me would love to return, to tell Meryl and Marina and the judges to shove it. Be better, dare everyone to give us bad marks.”

“That’s not …” Plus, Meryl and Charlie wouldn’t be coming back—their goal had been the gold, and they won, and that was that. Charlie had proposed immediately to Tanith, finally freed from a
maybe-narrative with Meryl; Meryl had won a fucking TV dance competition by stringing America along with another maybe-relationship (not that he and T could judge either of them). They had both moved on.

(He’d been invited to the Belbin-White wedding, the thick white paper reactive in his fingers one snowy November day. Kaitlyn had assumed they were going, her voice a coo of how cute are they echoing in his ear. He’d smiled but then called Tessa, panicking, and she equivocated: “I mean … you were friends for ten years. You go to those people’s weddings, generally.” But he’d groaned, “Tess…” because he was shit, and she’d helped him pick out a set of crystal tumblers from the registry to send instead.)

“I know,” she grumbled, before muttering, like she couldn’t help it, “It would just be a nice side benefit.” He snickered, because he would always have a soft spot for petty teenaged Tess. But she sighed, refocused them. “But. Think of everything we’ve sacrificed, Scott. That we would sacrifice again.”

“Think of everything we’d gain,” he countered. The air was thick and gritty between them.

After a long searching second she nodded. “OK. We would do it differently. I would want to be better, as a skater, as a competitor, and as a person. As a … partner.”

“I get why you did the things you did now, you know.” He was worried, that she might not get that. But with time, distance, a little bit of conversation—things seemed clearer. “I’m sorry for how I responded. What I said.”

“Same,” she said, taking his hand with a squeeze. Then she blinked, surprised, licked her lips. “So. If we did this, we need to come up with a plan. A vision. Montreal, obviously. We run the show.”

“Absolutely.” In Sochi they had no ownership, had reacted to try and wrest control back, had done so in crazy juvenile insane ways. Like hanging an entirely fucked-up personal relationship on the fragile exoskeleton of a skating career. This time, it would be their show to run. “Mike was telling me about an org that helps athletes with nutrition, mental prep, physio, the whole thing. If they sponsor us, we can be completely free to focus on training. We build a team, we call the shots, we’re the final say on choreo, music, training, interviews—”

“We control the narrative,” she added. He inhaled. “I mean, we don’t put it in anyone else’s hands. No TV producers, or Skate Canada, or coaches. We get final say on what we put out. We have to play the game, if we want to win, Scott. Just … on our own terms.” She looked vaguely exhausted at this argument.

He exhaled, pushing aside visions of TV cameras scoping out the hugs and ISU officials who left his mic on for ten seconds too long. (The knowledge that he knew all those things, all along, played into it because it was fun, got a rise, got him what he wanted no matter what the cost.) They wanted to win, their way. “Our own terms,” he repeated.

“We could get apartments in the same building, since we won’t know anyone,” she mused. “There’s a lot new on social media we can do, a new hashtag and website, some new sponsors and maybe a morning-show announcement once we have something to announce. I can handle all of that.”

“Obviously,” he said. They had always made the best team. “OK—you’re Tessa. Ground rules?”

She tilted her head, considering, unsurprised at his question. “No distractions,” she said firmly.

“Say more about that,” he therapized.
“I mean—” she blushed. “I’m not saying break up with Kaitlyn. Honestly I think you should marry her.” Whoa. Tessa looked down, taken aback at the forcefulness. “I’m saying no distractions between us.”

He thought back over the last year, the times that he felt sane, together, connected. Kaitlyn had kept him afloat, for sure, and he loved her, but she hadn’t been the one keeping him focused, steady. That was Tess.

He should probably tell her that. Like, now. But—“OK, no distractions. One hundred percent committed to getting this right.” He realized, as he said it out loud—actually, he did have to break up with Kaitlyn. He couldn’t do both.

He loved her too much for that.

(It was the most honest thing he would do as her boyfriend.)

He made his choice.

(It wasn't a choice.)

(It was always a choice.)

He swallowed. “And, I’m adding, be present. We stay centered in the moment. We’re going to leave it all on the ice every day, and not worry about the extra shit.”

She pursed her lips, but knew he was right, and added—“Be intentional. Our actions have consequences, including to each other. So we’re going to invest smartly in our training, be strategic, be kind and communicate with each other.” He thought he heard her mutter grace, the way she sometimes murmured keywords during routines. “And less pretending. Internalize the good, shake off the bad.”

He wasn’t sure either of them were there, but they were closer, so he nodded. “OK. And—we’ve got time. One bad practice, one bad competition, isn’t enough to make us lose faith in each other, or trust in our training. We have more than two years. The performance that matters is PyeongChang.”

“That means you can’t get superstitious,” she teased, though she had always been worse, with her skate guards and safety pins and necklaces. He missed that Tessa, the one who got unfathomably happy when he planted a penny in a rink.

“I’ll be a little stitious, but not superstitious,” he quoted, and for some reason that made her burst into booming laughter. Then she quieted just as suddenly.

“I know—I know the last couple of months have been a lot,” she said, hesitantly. “You’ve been a lot better, recently, but Scott, three months ago I dragged your ass out of Joe’s. So I’m asking, are you going to be OK?”

“I’m not going to drop you, Tessa,” he insisted, the last year and a half tugging at him. “If I’m in this, I’m in this. Partners. Always.”

“That’s not why I’m asking,” she said, her voice small. “I’m asking because I was serious at the dog park, Scott. I want—more than anything, I want you to be OK. I want us to be OK. I meant it when I said—”

“I know. I think ... I think this is how I get there,” he admitted, his eyes fixed on the road. He was still roiled sometimes, with anger and fear and helplessness. “The only thing I’ve ever known how to
do is skate and work hard and be your partner, T. Not to, like, put a load on you, or anything, but I want to get those things right.” He didn’t want her to think that agreeing to the comeback was the fulcrum for his continued mental health. “I need to.”

She reached out and squeezed his hand. “What’s scaring you?” she asked suddenly, a look of dawning comprehension on her face.

“What?”

“In Scotland—you said moving forward with Kait wasn’t what scared you. Which implied something does scare you. So. What’s scaring you?”

He was quiet for a minute. “Fucking this up,” he finally said. “The comeback, yeah, it’s a risk and getting in shape is gonna be hard but—us. You’re my best friend, T. Part of coming back, it’s coming back to skate with you. And I know—I know we’re playing with fire, a little.”

She exhaled, a shuddery breath. “Good.”

“What?”

“Because this terrifies me too and if you weren’t—Scott, if you weren’t scared, after everything—that would be a red flag.” Tessa, per usual, had some of the most convoluted, devastatingly sensible logic.

He shrugged. “I think this, going through our love of skating again—I think that might be the best way.” He looked at her. Maybe the only way.

“Hypothetically,” she added, and he remembered she hadn’t agreed.

They arrived at the Wall then, busied themselves with finding the right parking lot and buying tickets and the sweaty climb to the top, Tessa pausing every few steps to read a factoid out from the guide she’d downloaded. Tourists thronged them, but nobody recognized them, ice dancers on the precipice of obscurity or greatness.

But soon they reached the top, and Tess folded a hand across her eyes. “Oh, Scott,” she breathed, her voice catching. “It’s extraordinary.”

He looked at her, the woman—kind and brilliant and flawed and sensitive and driven and artistic and beautiful—who had been by his side for two-thirds of his life. “Yeah,” he agreed, then cleared his throat. “I thought of another one.”

“Another what?”

“A rule,” he replied. “This is for us. It’s not for the ISU, or Marie, or Marina and Meryl and Jamie, or our parents, or the media, or a narrative, or because we aren’t satisfied with the other shit going on in our lives. It’s you and me, kiddo, chasing after a dream like we did in Kitchener.” Them against the world, again. “This is for us.”

Her eyes were liquid and serious, her hair falling from her braid and stringy against her forehead. She nodded.

In their end had been their beginning.
Tessa lounged in the Adirondack, crickets chirping, sand beneath her toes, book spread flat in her lap. Lake Huron, grey and placid under jammy, fast-vanishing clouds, stretched in front of her. On the cottage’s porch, she could hear the shouts of her siblings and their spouses as they played Cards Against Humanity, her nieces and nephews long since tucked into bed as they protested *but it's still light out!* She hummed, quietly; it was good to be back.

“Hey, little sister,” Jordan said, dropping besides her and offering her a stemless wineglass with pinot. At Tessa’s look, she said, “Come on. It’s one glass. It’s the off season. Sort of. Your Two-Year Plan can accommodate this one glass of wine.”

She took it with a quirk of her eyebrow and a tip of the glass and said simply, “Thanks.”

“Welcome. Happy Canada Day.”

“You too. It’s nice to have a little break.” The Olympics were eight months away, and they’d already informed their family they would be in Montreal for Thanksgiving, that Christmas was very TBD. If it was the last time away, four days on the lake was perfect.

“You and Scott OK?”

“Yeah, we’re great, just really getting into gear. You’re going to die when you hear this season’s music.” Her voice trailed off and her eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“I mean, he was supposed to come and then he didn’t, so I just wanted to … check.”

“Oh my god, Jordan, we were completely truthful—Tessa Two and Danny are back with the baby, and Scott wanted to see him.” She laughed, realizing something. “Did I just get asked, for the first time in two decades, if I maybe wasn’t spending enough time with Scott Moir?” She resisted the urge to text him immediately.

“Shut up, this is my supportive face,” Jordan drawled, her face blank and borderline stony. They both burst into laughter. “I just wanted to make sure I didn’t need to call Danny or Cara and have a council meeting.”

“We’re really not as hopeless as you all think,” she faux-huffed and took a sip of wine.

“No,” her sister said appraisingly. “No, I don’t think you are. You seem …”

“Different? Less dysfunctional? Less utterly co-dependent? Less likely to kill our career?” Her voice was dry. Jordan had never been shy about sharing her opinions on Tessa-and-Scott. “You can pick any of them, I won’t get offended.”

“All of the above, then,” her sister said. “And don’t worry, you’re still weird as hell, and nobody gets you.”

“Again, not offended,” Tessa shrugged. She didn’t get them, either. Objectively, they were pretty fucked up.

“But actually, I was going to say more *free*. Which seems weird, since you’re with, you know, Scott, and theoretically, that’s the opposite of what you could be.”
“No, I get it,” Tessa said slowly. “I think it’s true, though. It’s not … It’s not what it was. We’re not ... we have a skating partnership, and we’re both completely committed to that. And then we've got this personal thing, too, where we’re just … honest about how we feel. It just ... it doesn't touch skating, we don't make it heavy. And we're, I don't know, secure, in both of them? Which I think lets us be more free in both. I mean, it's still a little scary. Because it’s big, you know? It should be scary. But we’ve … grown into it.” Not everything hung in the balance daily, anymore.

Jordan snorted, a touch judgmentally. “You always liked the epics, Tess.” Tessa thought of the little ballerina bear, schlepped from Canton to Ilderton to Montreal, now perched on Scott's dresser next to his watch and a photo of his grandfather.

She shook her head. She knew, on the outside, that was probably what it looked like; if they announced anything, that's what people would decide they were. An epic. But from the inside it felt small, profound and odd and intimate and often even lonely: her and Scott and the slippery surface of the ice beneath them, day in, day out. Sometimes, they flew; sometimes they just tried to stay upright and hang onto each other. At the end of the day, that was all it was, the trying and the falling and the getting back up together.

And the talking and the laughter. Always the talking and the laughter.

“I don’t know if that’s necessarily a good thing. But we’re just .. we’re both ourselves, finally. Comfortable, I guess? We spend so much time together, the thing we care about most is still our skating partnership, so it might not read normal.” Honestly, she thought they weren't even particularly affectionate, at least off the ice, but she knew trying to argue that to people was probably a bridge too far. "It's definitely not perfect. There are still shitty, hard days, or weekends where I send him to Ilderton so I can go to the spa alone. But we’re just—a team, first and always. And it keeps getting better and better, all the parts, as we work toward the Games.” It was streamlined, uncomplicated, for the first time since they were teens and fucking feelings started fucking with them.

“Speaking of—” Jordan hesitated, “you guys give any thought to what comes next? Do I need to start prepping a speech?”

She shook her head, and lifted a shoulder. “Please. I know you and Danny have traded notes already, because you’re jerks.”

“Tess.”

She squirmed, tucking a leg underneath her. Thought of how, when she thought he wanted to move back to Ilderton, she mentally started rearranging her own plans. “You’re seriously not lecturing me right now?”

“It’s seriously different now.”

She sighed, twisted at a cuticle. “I mean, we’ve discussed what we want to do, we know we want to skate a lot and use our platform and see what opportunities pop up—just be present. Like we are now. Day by day.”

“But, like, together?”


“Tessa.” Her sister's tone said cut the shit, lady.

“Well… we haven’t talked specifics. But … yes, together. We're not going to drop out of each other's lives."
"Or beds?"

"I mean..." She squirmed, then volunteered, "If this was just, you know, a thing to help us let off steam, we couldn’t have told you, because you’re all, I repeat, jerks.”

“Supportive jerks. Concerned jerks. Correct jerks.”

“But jerks nonetheless.” She shifted. “I could see … Right now, the Olympics are the big project we’re working on together, then I guess we’ll see where we are on February 21st. But we’re not going to stop being friends.” She laughed a little at that impossibility. "Though we’re actually thinking of ways we can keep working together, too."


"Why wouldn’t we?!?" she exclaimed. "We would be crazy not to find ways to keep doing something we both love."

"Do you … you love him, right? As-you-wish, a-thousand-times-yes, boombox-over-the-head, puts-you-on-a-plane-to-Paris-during-the-war, love? Like, that is what we’re dealing with, here? And don’t pull the we’re-too-unique-to-understand bullshit. Being in love isn’t some special fucking thing; it’s honestly fairly universal."

“It’s not romantic, it’s not conventional, though,” she argued back. Trying to describe their funny little relationship was like trying to fill out a police description for a suspect you had only seen in a fun-house mirror—she was too close for objectivity or rationality, and she didn’t have the experience of not being in their partnership as a point of comparison. Everything she could come up with to describe him, describe them, felt trite and dumb and so so short. “This is why we don’t mention this to anyone—people only care if we’re fucking, or getting married, or childhood sweethearts.” They had worked too hard to be boiled down to those elements, to that narrative, to something conventional. She would protect their specialness, fiercely.

“Don’t think I’m people, here.”

"Sorry. It’s just, everything.” There was an edge, to them, still, that kept her vigilant. Careful. “He's everything to me. My whole life, my whole career, my whole heart, is wrapped up in his hands.” She knew how she felt—like Canada Day sparklers crackling in her chest always—but also knew that of the thousands of reasons she had to love him, so many of them were wrapped up in the way he cracked jokes during strength training and how protective he got when Paul was a close-cutting ass during warmups, his excellent pillow-substitution skills during long-haul flights, the way he pushed her into the choctow she always missed during Prince last year. The patience he brought with her, his dedication to talking through any disagreement, taking a deep breath and committing to try. The bone-deep trust that he would not drop her, ever. He gave her a new reason to trust him, every day, but they were still a skating partnership first. “It’s always been a lot. But I guess it’s better now, is the only way to describe it. And I get to jump him when I feel like it.”

Her sister stared at her. “You are really in deep if you’re too scared to plan. Either that, or you’re telling yourself this so you’re not lying if someone asks.”

“Awed,” she corrected, though it was certainly helpful when she could meet the letter if not the spirit of Scott’s No Lying edict. But really—it was a big thing. She should approach it with respect and humility. Like covering her shoulders in the Vatican. “I’m not—not planning my future. But we need to be focused on the Games. And then we’ll figure out afterwards, together.”
“So toast time,” Jordan summarized. “Translated to conventional terms.”

“Everything will change, next year, so I have no idea. Don’t bring this up again,” She made a face at her sister—a sharp grimace that would work on anyone but Jordan—but then softened, staring out at the water. “And don’t tell Kate,” she finally huffed as JJ cackled.

Jordan sat back. “Wow. Virtue-Moir, partners forever.” Her voice was near-stunned. “I can’t believe you guys made it through.”

Neither could she. “Not there yet. But, you know, thanks. For setting us up when I was seven,” she smiled at her sister, then stared out at the blank water.

“I’ll cheers to my awesomeness,” Jordan said, and they clinked glasses.

Later—not much later, since she still kept training hours—she dozed off in the little double bed she’d been assigned, the noise of Eleanor and Poppy and Jamie and Christopher giggling and wriggling in the attic bunk beds keeping her from sleeping fully. Suddenly, warm, familiar hands that she could recognize anywhere slipped around her waist and she turned, lurching inelegantly into wakefulness.

“Scott?” she asked, her voice groggy. He was so close, fuzzy in front of her eyes.

“Hey, T,” he said, kissing her nose lightly. “How’s it going?”

“You’re in Ilderton,” she said dumbly.

“I drove up after dinner. The family says hi.”

“Missed you,” she replied with a yawn, and promptly fell into a deep sleep, her last thought, another reason.

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iv. Five Months Before Today, Scott

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They were back in Vancouver, for the final official Stars on Ice performance of their careers, at—God and Tessa willing—the final regional morning-TV show where he had to mention she really loved Lindt salted caramel dark chocolate. The engagement announcement was about six weeks old, still generating rock-show-level shouts of joy at arenas. Tessa, much to the irritation of the Stars producers—exactly why they’d struck out on their own in the fall—had instituted a ‘no questions’ policy regarding their news; still, plenty of the stations had slipped sideways quips like How’s engaged life? or Did Tessa pick out the coordinated outfits? during the greetings (great, and obviously). In Halifax, they’d had them mini-golf against each other, technically not violating any of the stipulations, still making him look like an idiot.

But Vancouver’s hosts, knowing they were last, just straight-up ignored the stipulations—which Scott could have told them was a dangerous dangerous thing—and they actually just sprung the Newlywed Game on them. Live on TV. Tessa had pursed her lips, but answered the mostly-benign questions, like who did the laundry—they traded, thanks—and what Scott’s favorite old routine was — Umbrellas —with a placid Press Conference smile. He wasn’t much happier, but was mostly relieved this might actually fucking be the last time he’d ever have announce to the world that yup, mascots terrified him.

(It was the last time—she banned stupid newlywed games from wedding showers. They knew each other well. It wasn’t fascinating.)
After the game, the banter was familiar: they enthused about the SOI family and highlighted their commitment to putting on their best show as a huge thank-you to twenty-one years of Canada’s steadfast support—particularly Vancouver, where they had such special memories. They declared that they hadn’t really processed that it was their last official time on *Stars*—of course they hoped to be guests in a future show, but with other commitments a full tour would be hard next year. They hinted that sure, sure, their personal partnership factored into the decision, but pivoted to the larger point for both of them, they were interested in evolving their careers, and in engaging more broadly with the skating community and fans. They pledged to still be “around” but made zero firm statements as to how that would play out. Finally they formed words about his coaching career and show and her MBA and business ventures, and evaded questions about future children by repeating that all they’ve got settled is teaching ballroom dancing in the nursing home.

Scott thought, smugly, that he had finally nailed media training.

“Final question, maybe of your skating careers,” the very tanned male co-host said.

“Go for it,” Tessa smiled. The end was in sight.

“I don’t think I’ve actually seen you answer this one: how did you propose, Scott?”

“Oh,” he geared up, excited because it was *awesome* but also a little flabbergasted—he really couldn’t believe they had just *asked* that. He crossed his ankle over his knee. “It was, um, really good, I think. Like really really good, if I do say so myself. You know, all guys are gonna understand, but I was pretty nervous, and just really focused on making it a special moment between the two of us, not being an idiot through the thing. Private, personal, um, just us. Tried for perfect, I did OK. Very private, just the two of us. We were, um, in France.” Julia had released that detail weeks ago.

“It was so perfect,” Tessa smiled. “Like, amazingly perfect. You should tell the story, actually,” she said, patting his wrist, with an expression that was …. mirthful? Tessa didn’t experience mirth on TV. But she looked thrilled, open, giggly. Her eyes didn’t shut up.

“You sure?” He checked. He was perfectly happy to brag vaguely. Tessa’d been a lot more relaxed about PDA since the engagement—and the relationship felt like near-common knowledge for months before—but this was a whole new level of open. He almost asked, *the real story*, but it wasn’t like they had some narrative worked out.

They were out, fully. They still protected their privacy fiercely, but it was all public, now.

“I mean, it will end up in listicles and on The Knot, and I will never be able to convince another Canadian that we have a very normal and boring relationship. But you should tell it, yeah. It was … perfect.” She looked happy and proud, and the old, shocked whisper of *I did that* and *She loves me* curled warm in his belly.

“Price you pay for agreeing to make this partnership a till death do us part thing,” he teased.

She turned to the host, whose name Scott had already forgotten. “See? This is the amount of charm I have to put up with.”

“I mean, you got the brains and the beauty, I have to get *something.*”

She pursed her lips into a fond smile before taking his hand and continuing, “So it was the day before Valentine’s Day, and I walk out of a meeting in Toronto to find my sister—she lives there, but told me she was too busy for lunch—there to intercept me so that when I flew home, I wouldn’t
leave the airport. And then she hands me my passport, and a card from Scott. And so I fly back and
follow his directions and find him, with a much bigger bag for me. And he says we’re going to Paris
…” she looked at him as if to say Your story, Romeo.

With a smirk, he picked up the narrative thread, recounting every detail, Tessa chiming in with her
own version and opinions, like how she had found the ring months earlier, and she didn’t know if
people had picked up on it over twenty-one years of interviews but subtlety and secrets weren’t his
thing and anyways; she had definitely caught on by the time they boarded the flight to France, and it
was torture waiting the entire vacation for the proposal; and how the actual proposal was just So
Scott, because he didn’t know how to not bring an A-game and he got competitive against himself
with a proposal. It was mostly him, though, and by the time he finished with, “and then I just …
asked her to marry me,” the male host’s jaw was hanging open, stunned, and the woman had her
hands clasped together and pressed on her lips, her eyes wide as if holding in a squeal.

There was a moment of stunned silence as Tessa nodded vigorously, with the know-it-all look he
loved to kiss off on her face. “Yeah, I’m engaged to Canada’s boyfriend. Gold-medal proposal.
There’s going to be a Buzzfeed article up on this in five minutes,” she summed up, squeezing his
fingers reassuringly. He smirked.

(It took them about ten, but yeah.)

The host finally recovered his voice. “Well, we wish you both the best of happiness as you two
embark on married life. You’ve certainly earned your next big adventure. And for all our viewers,
you can catch Tessa and Scott’s final official public performance tonight at Rogers Arena. You two,
thank you so much for coming on.”

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v. Three Years Before Today, Tessa

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“You know,” Scott suggested, laving her collarbone, “if you let me stay—” he palmed her breast,
getting a quick tweak on her nipple that made her shiver, “I—could make you breakfast in the
morning. You could sleep in another ten minutes.”

“Or you could leave now and I could go to bed ten minutes earlier,” she retorted, but there was no
malice in her voice. He was a menace. She tilted her head to give him better access to her neck.

He kissed her one final time, nuzzled her neck briefly then sat up, looking a little distressed. And
kissable. “While I understand that capping the number of nights we spend together may make sense
under the rules Be Intentional and also We Have Time, I would like to counter that it is detrimental to
both No Distractions and This Is For Us.”

“How the hell is this violating No Distractions?” she exclaimed, sitting up. This Is For Us, she could
at least understand.

“Because it is distracting to lie in bed thinking about you in bed. Did she like the dinner I cooked
her? Is she in the bath? Is she in bed, too? Is she thinking of me in bed? Is she tou—”

“Stoooooop,” she whined, because he was very close to causing her to break the rules. She moved
her hands from where they’d drifted to his belt.

“I’m just saying, I sleep better next to you,” he smirked, but got up, pulling her with him to her door.
“When did you get so cute?” she half-demanded, half-groaned. She thought, this time around, she had eighteen years of inoculation against his smile, but the full-bore beam of his charm and giddiness was legitimately off-the-charts.

“I have always been cute,” he replied, borderline affronted. “I hate to get cocky—”

“Liar—”

“—But I have been this cute since at least 1998, and you’re my chief witness if my cuteness is ever on trial.” He smirked. “Anyways, I would like to bring up these limits at the next team meeting.”

“What, we’re discussing this with b2ten now?” she said dryly. “Having JF mediate a discussion of whether or not three nights a week together is enough time?” They has mentioned it to JF—who stared at them, silent, for a full 127 seconds; Tessa counted—and he had agreed to keep it between them and help them figure their shit out a bit more before bringing everyone else in.

(It has predictably led to a semantic argument, right there on JF’s couch as he processed dispassionately, somewhere around second seventy-eight. “It’s a matter of time ratios, and how many bricks we have weekly,” she had assured JF sensibly. “Seventy-five, eighty percent of the mental energy still goes to supporting the skating partnership that’s committed to a gold-medal performance at the Olympics. Twenty percent to a wonderful friendship of twenty-plus years, really building that base. And then to the extent that five percent is free, there’s now a physical component that we’re going to be handling responsibly.”

“Well, and a romantic component,” Scott had added.

“I call you when I blow out a tire and rely on you to feed me and want you at my sister’s engagement party. That’s plenty romantic. I don’t need like, a night out at the movies.” And god, how basic.

“He might, Tessa,” JF had finally recovered his voice.

“I would like to do something sweet in that five percent,” Scott had added stubbornly. “Occasionally.”

“You’re always sweet, already,” she insisted, horrified that he might not get that.)

(It was not surprising that JF ordered them both a copy of The Five Love Languages right there from his phone as they squabbled. It was the first therapist-assigned book that Scott finished before her.)

She was sure Marie and Patch figured it out, but they had been tactful enough not to say anything. Nobody else knew.

“No, the Virtue-Moir meeting. Dinner. Friday. Celebrating an awesome week of training, and four weeks of Taking It Slow.”

“Dinner out?” Like, a date? They weren’t dating.

“Yes. We’ve done a great job with our meal plans. We deserve a night.”

“I’ve had chocolate four times in the last two weeks and you had a beer when Paul came into town.”

“Dark chocolate, light beer.” He pushed some hair over her shoulder, eyes dark and concerned, slid an arm down her bicep. “C’mon, T. You with me?” The good old grounding technique.
“Yeah,” she said, leaning in to kiss him. “Dinner sounds lovely. Let me know what we’re doing so I can decide what to wear.”

He kissed her back lightly. “Will prep my arguments for taking a more flexible and less dogmatic approach to sleeping arrangements.” He kissed her again, once, twice.

“I look forward to hearing it,” she promised, finally manhandling him to the appropriate side of the door.

She knew—she had known since she’d mentioned it—that her suggestion they only spend three nights a week together for the foreseeable future was arbitrary, and imperfect, and downright quirky in a way that felt acutely uncool. She was twenty-seven years old, dammit, and she wouldn’t feel any differently about him if she slept next to him for a hundred straight days or zero. She was perfectly comfortable telling him to make himself scarce for an evening so she could take a bath, or go to girls’ brunch, or to review designs with a glass of wine. But it wasn’t about the sleeping arrangements for the next few weeks or even the next two years. It was making commitments regarding the sleeping arrangements for the next sixty when she wasn’t even sure what she wanted in three.

*Being present* was a choice, she knew—one she was making deliberately. But while she could take a mindful approach to skating, could tame anxiety with enough yoga and books and candles and bubble bath, reconciling a *be present* mentality with the fact that it was Scott and everything he was and represented—well, it was laughable. This wasn’t a no-consequences situation. This was profound and sacred, this was business and sport, this was laughter and conversation, this was her past and present and now her future.

This was everything.

Which meant that while she would love to *be present*—laugh and focus on his hands on her hips as he tried to teach her how to saute broccoli, like some simple girlfriend in a TV ad—it was both one choice and ten thousand choices, a Matryoshka doll that unfolded into paint colors for a kitchen renovation and whether French fries were an acceptable vegetable for a preschooler and if they should watch *Jeopardy!* or *Wheel of Fortune* in their room in the nursing home. Scott’s intensity, and her stubbornness, made that the statistical safe bet. That might not always be a good thing—she’d watched *The Americans*. But the two of them were, always had been, all-in, especially with *them*, even when *them* was overwhelming.

(And last time, they hadn’t been ready for it.)

(And it had exploded.)

And “overwhelming” was understatuing it, really. If she were one of her girlfriends, and she were listening to herself talk about getting back with the guy who had broken her heart not once but a hundred times, who let herself be treated so callously, who absorbed his angers and moods and skated with him *daily* after he cheated on her, babbling about how it was different now—well, she would dump that friend. Because that friend was beyond hope, logically.

(But somehow despite everything, despite all rational thought, it still stunned her, that he had lived through all that with her, that he knew—knew—the absolute ugliest parts of her soul, the knots and knobs of her personality, and still stood in front of her and promised good sex and laughter and dancing, for as long as she wanted them.)

So yeah, in that alchemy of uncertainty and obstinacy and anxiety, she had come up with a “three nights per week, max” rule. Because she wanted independence, and she wanted agency, and she wanted to win the Olympics, and she wanted Scott, most of all.
Friday proceeded like any other day: Scott knocking twice before entering with coffee, shouldering her skate bag on the way to the rink; two hours going over twizzles and lifts with Patch; once Marie showed up, half an hour working through new choreography together. As they talked, Scott noticed her shoulders were tense and moved behind her to give her a massage. She reached behind her to hold his hips closer to her, tilting her neck to give direction. Marie and Patch kept going on if nothing was unusual and really, it wasn’t.

“Tessa,” Patrice said as they went back to work. “Before you leave swing by the office. I have a few books for you.” Scott raised his eyebrows at her, and she shrugged back, with a laugh at Scott’s expression and gestures in response: She and Patch were nerds.

Later as she followed him into the tiny cinderblock office, where he and Marie and Romain did paperwork and stored their coats, she said, “You know, JF has us pretty covered on the motivational reading material.”

He didn’t answer, just leaned against the desk and handed her two worn paperbacks: *Gift from the Sea* and *Letters to a Young Poet*. “Motivational in a different way,” he explained, somewhat cryptically.

“A German poet and … is she married to the pilot?” she asked.

He sighed. “They were my mother’s. She … it was the Sixties, she married young. When we were out of the house she started reading quite a lot, collecting a library in English and French. These were a few that I picked up, and you reminded me of them both recently.” Watching her flip through the pages with her thumb, he added, “They are about artists, meditating on creativity, loneliness, relationships.”

“You just happened to think of me?” she quizzed skeptically.

“Yes,” he replied, keeping it simple.

“I’ll check them out.” She stuffed them in her skate bag. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

“Marie didn’t want to get married, did she?” she asked abruptly. “I remember, back when we all met. She laughed at the idea.”

“She did,” Patch nodded.

“What changed?”

“Well, you’d have to ask Marie,” he reminded her gently. “But, you know, her own parents had divorced, and she didn’t want to feel … constrained.” He smiled. “So I said OK, and we lived a good life, a full life, and we skated and we had highs and lows and were … there, and one day—after the Olympics, after we decided to retire, she decided she wanted to get married.”

“That was that?”

He smiled. “More or less, yes.”

“And you. When did you know that you wanted to marry her?”

“Our skating tryout.”
“And you just … waited for all those years?”

“I wanted to be a team with her. I empathized with her position. Accepted where she was. She was what mattered.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “Thanks for the books.”

They’d had dinner together countless times, but Scott was almost comically old-fashioned that evening, bringing her flowers and wearing a too-big suit jacket—she saw a shopping trip in their near future—and picking her up at her door. She was pleasantly surprised by the full Scott Moir Girlfriend Experience: dinner at a restaurant she’d mentioned wanting to try, followed by, he informed her with a smirk, one of those cheesy Montreal sunset river cruises. She smiled through a weird wonky flare of suspicion—this was how he’d always treated the second-most-important woman in his life—and breathed in a reminder that Scott simply wanted to do this right. It was beautiful and hopeful, to see how much he wanted this. Her.

She still wanted to be good at this, so badly, for him.

They debriefed the week as they sat down, chatting through Tessa’s costume ideas and whether or not the additional protein in Scott’s diet was providing the necessary energy. As they ordered entrees and a salad to split, they covered interview opportunities filtering through as the season approached—“back to reality” was Scott’s rueful summation as they worked through what they would say about Sochi, again—as well TSN’s idea for a comeback video for SCI. Tessa had selected the director, Natalie, had worked with her on the idea to highlight the isolation of the work and their love of the sport as well as the strength of their partnership. She liked it quite a bit—it was direct and authentic and take-charge and them—but there was an undeniably sexy vibe to what Nat was envisioning and she wasn’t sure that Scott would be OK with the ove e with which they’d be selling their—entirely real—chemistry. But he was actually fairly enthusiastic; at her raised eyebrow, he just shrugged and said, “I like the maturity, and the focus on lessons learned, and it’s showing us as something new. Plus, we are sexy.” She laughed. “And it’s real, isn’t it, T?”

“Yeah,” she replied, cautious. It was reality-as-performance: okay with him until it wasn’t, and she inevitably stumbled over some invisible ethical trip wire of his and he got mad at her. But they were facing another, more immediate debate, so she just shifted some shrimp around with her fork and said, “So, what’s your case? For the sleeping arrangements. Persuade me, Moir.”

“Well, first, cheers, to us, for a good week,” he said, and they clinked sparkling waters. He looked at her, all dark eyes and tipped chin and a smirk. “My case—I like being around you,” he said simply. “And you like being around me. So I think we should do more of that.”

“You’re really just skating on the fact that I thought you were cute in 1998, hmm?” she teased.

“Come on, T. If it were an issue of, that’s the amount of time, given everything else we do together, that we need to ourselves, that would be one thing. But Be Present is the definition of Taking It Slow, and we’re literally together until nine PM most nights, then back together within fifteen minutes of waking up. And if it were something about easing back into sex, I wouldn’t like it, but I’d be supportive. But you jumped me in the shower three nights ago before sending me home, so I don’t think it’s that either.”

He raised an eyebrow. He was so goddamned patient with her sometimes.

He knew her so well.

“It’s not about the number of nights,” she admitted.
“OK. Then I first move to rescind the cap and move to a case-by-case basis.”

She looked down briefly. “Yeah. Yeah that sounds OK.” She smiled, for him.

He turned his head a bit in appraisal, and she realized he had a pretty good idea of where her head was at. “OK. So you want to talk about what it is about? You’re … scared?”

She chewed her lip. “No. The number of nights … it was dumb, really. I just … have trouble not getting ahead of myself, otherwise. And if—as—we do this, I want to avoid traps.” She looked down, with a shrug. “I don’t want to set ourselves up for failure by going too hard, too fast.”

“It’s just me, T. Just us.”

Exactly.” Be present worked so well for Scott, because Scott was always, fully present. For better or for worse. It was part of his charisma, his emotional intelligence, his innate Scott-ness. She felt both wretchedly miserable and utterly determined.

“Is this … just to clarify, you want to do this, yes? Us?” He tried very very hard to keep his voice steady, and he failed.

“Yes,” her time was adamant, trying to head off a predictable You’re Gonna Take Over The World, Tess, bender. “And I don’t want to screw it up, or screw up either of us.” She didn’t want to resent him, she didn’t want to fail, she didn’t want to hurt him. “We’re really good at that. Historically, we’re failures, romantically.”

(She wished, not for the first or even hundredth time, that they could believe in themselves as fiercely as they believed in the other. God, even with the comeback smooth and purposeful, they were still each other’s greatest liabilities, still able to slip into codependency. Add that to the three-page list of things to bring up with poor overworked JF.)

“Well, then it’s good we’re talking now.” His voice was light, but with an edge. “We can stick to three nights a week, if you want.”

“I want this,” she reiterated. “Fuck. Scott.” She put her hand over his from across the table. “If I didn’t … I wouldn’t. But I want a lot of other things too—including the Olympics, our career, and my own sense of independence—and I’m just trying to balance them. For us,” she sighed. “If that makes sense.” She shook her head. “And I don’t want to get ahead of ourselves, or put too much on our relationship”—It had always been a separate thing, a third entity, and they weren’t great at not abusing it “—But we can’t fall into some co-dependent vortex. All because I do want to try this.”

"OK. So ... you're trying to make sure we're communicating? Being careful with our career?"

And themselves. "Sort of," she tried again. She wasn’t worried, about him not being committed to the Olympics, at not putting that first for two years. "Everything I said about how I feel about you and how you make me feel—all true. But everything that we’ve been through, done to each other, to our relationship ... that’s true too.” And it was scary. “I just—right now, I can commit to trying this, and commit to trying to do it well." Thank you, 2015, for your copious amounts of individual therapy. "But Scott, after Korea—eighty percent of how we relate to each other will change. I can probably speculate about how I'll feel about this, about us—but you know. You’re there. And I just … don’t. And I won’t be there, not until 2018. At least. So I just ... I don't want to hurt you." It always came back to that.

She looked up, expecting betrayal, but mostly got concern and compassion. It felt almost worse. “You're really struggling here, T,” he said, twisting his hand up to grasp hers. "Anything I can do to
be helpful?"

She smiled crookedly, not entirely convinced she should be let the hook. “Keep being you?” she suggested. “And … be patient, be honest? I know what I said can't be making you happy right now.” She should probably talk to JF. Or just read the damn book. “But I need you to be honest. I’m going to try too, I am Scott. This is me, trying. If—if you’re not honest about how this is making you feel, I can’t respond.”

“You're worth the wait,” he said, simply. "Seriously. And honestly? I just want you to be happy, T.”

She smiled, because god had he grown up. “Thank you. And I am, mostly. Skating, you, spending time with my family, working—I love those things. But I don’t think I’m built for happy.”

“What?”

“I mean … I’m built for success. And the chase. I don’t know if I’m built for happiness,” she dragged a tomato lazily around her plate. Happy felt simplistic, so childish and one-dimensional. She had spent her whole life poking through layers, assessing through motives, navigating through the politics of things unsaid, delaying gratification until she triumphed.

Convincing herself that happy didn't matter. (Wanting it anyways.) Learning time and again that it didn't get you anything. (Trusting it not at all.)

After all, gold medals and the guy of your dreams couldn’t protect you from the bruising, brutal whims of life.

He was quiet, and his eyes hardened briefly, focusing on a point beyond her. “You’ve never liked when things were easy.” He finally made eye contact, and raised an eyebrow. “Things don’t need to be hard to be worth it.”

She stiffened. “I … do know that. It just … takes time.” That was all she could offer him. As if they hadn’t had enough of that.

“Alright. I love you,” he said.

She nodded. “I know,” she reassured him. He raised an eyebrow at the non-response, and she exclaimed, “Of course I love you, Scott. I’ve loved you since I was seven.” She thought back to a freezing car on the side of the road outside Ilderton. I everything you. She hadn’t been lying. And everything was so much. “But I don’t know what that means, anymore, with you. And I’m trying to figure it out, so that I can figure us out. I’m sorry.”

“You gotta stop apologizing. What was that movie? Love means never having to say you’re sorry?”

She rolled her eyes. Kate loved Love Story; Tessa thought it was awful. “That is a terrible piece of advice.”

"Agreed. But we did agree to stop apologizing so much." His eyes were hidden by the sweep of his hair and the shadow of the sunset, mostly. He didn't look happy, but he didn't look surprised—just a little knocked-down, a little resigned, a lot of worry for her. And compassion. She could almost see him armoring up to soldier through this, the steadfast knight of her middle-school dreams.

“You're right. So … thank you.”

She didn’t deserve it, but she was gonna accept it.
The summer pulsed by in a flash of sweat and choreography and hands and sex and intentionality. Scott projected a confidence that for once she was sure he didn’t feel. He was patient, a keyword here and his lips there and a joke here and a grounding touch there and him—that warm secure safe presence that had been there for nearly nineteen years—everywhere. Choreography flowed like water, slithering as it slipped across the universe; they moved with synchronicity across the ice and usually in each other’s homes and hearts and beds. Her edges deepened, he became exuberant in choreography. Their heads tipped together frequently, his two fingers looped around her wrist, silently consulting before making decisions.

In both individual and couples’ appointments with JF, she started to see a glint of sureness and pride in their poor underpaid shrink’s eye as they tackled Kaitlyn and Cassandra and Ryan and David and Stay and Sochi and her surgeries and sex twizzling. Every viney, veiny issue related to guilt and anger, jealousy and confidence, sacrifices and worthiness, perceived deficits emotional and physical and mental—eventually all were parsed over like biblical text—disentangled like they were a fistful of necklaces and re-organized carefully, as if by categorizing their issues they could magically solve everything, easy-peasy (they usually ended up in separate apartments for the night post-JF sessions). Only time and practice, forcibly changing habits until they become muscle memory, will resolve these tensions and build that trust, JF, their relationship Yoda, said.

It wasn’t so different from when, years ago, she changed her stroking, the way she walked, the way her brain worked.

So she woke each morning, wanting to try to change those habits. Sometimes he got quiet, and she got tense, and then it passed, dissolved away by laughter and skating and sex; sometimes they went several nights a week without sleeping in the same apartment just due to a confluence of circumstances. Sometimes she prioritized a photo shoot because her career was still important, dammit; sometimes he found a hockey scrimmage with some of the guys because he needed the mental distraction. Sometimes training was hard, or one of them didn’t sleep well, or a conversation with the agent left him surly or her overextended. Sometimes he didn’t respond to a text; sometimes she burned a pan of his because she didn’t remember to turn off the burner (yes, that happened more than once). She shut down, shut him out, more than once. (More than twice; probably more than a dozen times.) I’m trying, she would explain, with a shrug, at the look in his eyes when she pulled away, or declined dinner, or woke him up with her mouth on his dick after a diffident evening. Really. I’m trying to be present. And she would take a breath, and he would see right through her, and still be there anyways. And the next day, she would try again.

(And truthfully, she liked that it was a little hard, liked that there were places where their personalities scraped at each other incompatibly, sandpaper against silk. It reminded her they were two very different people—their own entities, capable of changing a little but maintaining a fundamental form when constantly exposed to the other.)

The sex was sadly even better than she remembered—seriously, how the fuck had she given this up not once but twice?—still as dirty or raggedly wanton as anything they’d done in the Carmen era; still as adventurous or athletic as 2008. Only now sometimes it was so tender and ... loving ... that she wanted to cry. He could just as easily drag his teeth over her clit and fist her hair as he could kiss every inch of her ankle to thigh and bring her to an undulating orgasm. They napped on Saturdays, her body tucked against his in the lazy sunlight. His body was different now, dense and new, and she committed herself to exploring and claiming each and every new plane of muscle. It was lazy, intimate, unhurried, guilt-free. Sighs and tucks and nips and moans.

The talking and the laughter, always the talking and the laughter.

He was all-in, she knew, and kept the same unflagging commitment up even though it hurt she still
wasn’t quite there, was getting there in a different way, a slower way, a more selfish way. It wasn’t perfect but she took a deep breath and kept going, pushing herself to be present.

Even as she held her breath, it was grace, in its purest form. She felt herself unfurl, and loosen. Lighten. Loving him had been a burden she had carried for more than a decade. For so long it had been a hard pith at the center of the meat of her heart, essential and brittle and hard and capable of splintering if struck hard enough, and suddenly, it wasn’t.

Because sometimes, she would look over at him, on ice or at her mom's cabin over Labor Day or as he watched an Ali Wong special on Netflix in bed and she draped her legs his lap as she read *Gone Girl*, and she would feel a lick of fire. Not of desire—though there was plenty of that—but of propulsiveness, of potential. She and Scott had always been playing with flames a little, she knew. But that fire was as powerful and life-affirming as it was destructive. After all, when they had put their minds together, they'd gone straight to the top of their sport. Imagine what we could do as people, if we turned that passion and dedication and trust and all that makes us extraordinary, with each other at our side. We could probably take over the world, she thought lazily, spark lapping at her toes, as he watched the hockey pre-season report and she finally read *Gift From the Sea*.

She turned the page, and suddenly got why Patch had handed her the book six weeks ago. Subtle, Patch, she thought.

*When you love someone, you do not love them all the time, in exactly the same way, from moment to moment. It is an impossibility. It is even a lie to pretend to. And yet this is exactly what most of us demand. We have so little faith in the ebb and flow of life, of love, of relationships. We leap at the flow of the tide and resist in terror its ebb. We are afraid it will never return. We insist on permanency, on duration, on continuity; when the only continuity possible, in life as in love, is in growth, in fluidity—in freedom, in the sense that the dancers are free, barely touching as they pass, but partners in the same pattern.*

It was radical, and redemptive, logic.

She thought of the metaphors she had used to describe them over the years, the many ways in which she’d tried to use words to translate the depth of their partnership—binary stars and brother-and-sister and halves of a whole and an old married couple and business partners. And of course, the simplest metaphor worked: it was a dance. A push and a pull, a back and forth, a step forward as the other stepped back. An exchange, a tension, a symmetry. A symbiosis. She had always thought dance was about creating a moment, and unity; instead, it was the strengths that two individuals brought in service of something bigger. The music changed, the tempo quickened, the steps got more complicated, the style shifted, the distance between them grew and then grew back together. The steps often weren’t showy, sometimes not even visible to someone else. Sometimes one of them stumbled, and they had to find a rhythm together again. But they were always moving in the same dance. Together.

If Scott was surprised when she leaned forward to kiss him, laughing as she did so for the first time in weeks, he didn’t act like it.

ACI was their first competition of the year, of the comeback, the first baby step on their road. They kept the same routines they’d had for years, the same playlists and food and lucky socks and rehearsal, the same eye for where there was a camera in the athletes’ zone and the same cool detachment from anyone but each other. Though it was in Montreal, they moved into (and kept) their separate hotel rooms the night before competition. Kate and Alma and Cara and Jordan came, a few days early because it was Cara and Alma’s first time up in Montreal—they carefully reshuffled their belongings to be less obvious about the fact that oh hey, yup, sleeping together before showing off
their apartments—but they honestly forget their family was there by the time the competition started.

It felt good, right, the smooth arena and the cool-ice smell and the nervy energy. The spring of steel under her feet. Scott’s hand in hers. The dull echo of crowds bouncing through the rink and the wires snaking the hallways, bolted down with shiny duct tape.

It had always felt right. But it felt righter than it had in years.

And then she was walking through the bowels of the rink after the short-dance press conference when she was, for the first time in years—since she pulled back from Scott’s lips in Paris and saw Cassandra—utterly surprised.

“Michael,” she said, eyebrows up, staring at the tall, blond figure in front of her. Looking at him, she finally put together why Scott’s not-that-quiet nickname for Ryan was Bro Punchable Face. “Wow, I didn’t know you would be here.”

He was a friend of Midori’s new husband, a rugby player Midori had set her up with when he lived in St. John and she was there sometimes for competitions or shows. They’d gone out a few times after David, and then again after she and Ryan had broken up. One of her “friends,” as Scott would say, at which point she would remind him that at least she knew the last name of every one of her “friends.” It was never an argument that made either of them look or feel good. She’d seen him at Midori’s wedding, had briefly determined that yes, they both lived in Montreal, wasn’t that nice.

“Yeah, I saw an article about it in the Gazette, mentioned that you and Scott were skating. I realized—I meant to invite you out to dinner, now that you just moved here—” She had moved eight months ago “—but figured in-person was better.”

“Thanks,” she smiled, twisting the water bottle in her hand. “But I’m actually pretty busy with training, and we’ve got a Two-Year Plan that keeps us on our toes.”

He smirked, stepping into her space. “One dinner, one night,” he said, his voice husky and suggestive. “Come on. Nothing distracting, just a fun night out. You work pretty hard.”

“I do,” she acknowledged, staring him straight in the eye. “But I’m actually seeing someone.”

Michael raised his eyebrows. “Scott?”

“Michael,” she said, warningly. “He’s my skating partner.”

He squinted, not quite believing her non-denial. “Is it serious?”

“My relationship?” God, that was an understatement. “It’s getting there, yeah.”

“Alright,” he said. “Well, have a good competition, OK? You guys did great today.” He leaned in, and gave her a kiss goodbye. She squeezed his bicep, briefly; over his shoulder, she noticed Scott’s shadow noping out of the room.

Good Christ, sometimes she had the luck of Bridget Jones. She didn’t even like romantic comedies that much.

“Scott,” she called, jogging a little as soon as it was safe. “Scott?” she poked her head into the guys’ change room. “Scott!” she called, quietly, as she passed the media room. “Scott?” she asked Nikolaj. He shook his head, and she saw him push a side door to the parking lot open, the sunlight slanting over his locks.
Zipping her fleece up over her tutu—and feeling about as ridiculous as that statement—she jogged more determinedly after him. “Scott!” she yelled. “Hey. Stop. Please?” He turned. “Where—are you going?”

Don’t play dumb, Tessa.

“Was that … the St. John friend?” he asked, his voice almost boyish, a tremulousness to it that she hated—she’d prefer jealousy, even—and she felt absolutely low. He’d been so patient, so open, with her, for so many months. As if she had any doubt of the man he’d grown to be.

“It was. He lives in Montreal now, I found out at Midori’s wedding. He invited me to dinner. I said no. Obviously.” She stared at him for what felt like forever.

“It’s actually not that obvious, T,” he finally breathed, looking just past her.

“I know,” she started, and then failed. She thought of 2013, when she’d been so unready and terrified she had nearly shattered at an experimental I love you.

She could do many things here. Get out of this moment of reckoning. Piece them together tentatively, so that they could make it another step down the road without accidentally causing an explosion.

Only she didn’t want to.

She wanted to celebrate the good moments with him, and lean on him during the shitty moments.

She wanted to goad him into teaching her how to cook and then see how long it would take to distract him into burning dinner and ordering sushi instead.

She wanted to jump off the cliff her hand in his even knowing she couldn’t control where she landed. She wanted to win the Olympics with him, and figure out what happened next with him.

She still didn’t know if she wanted children, but if she did, she would only want to co-parent with him. She wanted the dog, as long as it didn’t shed and wouldn’t sit on the couch and Scott took the morning walks.

She was willing to consider opening a conversation on merging decor styles.

She looked forward to watching Jeopardy! in the nursing home one day.

She made one choice, and ten thousand.

“You have asked me for honesty, time and time again, and have been patient when I couldn’t give it to you,” she said, quietly, trying not to cry. Her head felt so thick, her heart like a gong. Her makeup felt gritty, sticky, almost suffocating. “Because this thing, it’s … so much bigger than us. That’s confusing, sometimes. And scary. But the honest truth is … You’re everything to me, Scott Moir.” The same words, the same truth, since she was seven, rearranged just a little, and it suddenly felt so different. “So yes, I’m in love with you. Always have been. Always will be. Of course I am, Scott.” She worked through this slowly, carefully, logically, and wondered if any of this was news to him—it was news to her—or if he simply needed it to be said. “And I’m sorry, if I made you doubt that ever. It’s you and me. Together. Always. I just … I really, really love you.”

She thought, unexpectedly, of a New York Times column Jordan had sent her, last year, about what the work that went into a relationship, how you defined success in a partnership. She’d read it twice on her iPad, thumbing over a reference to a Buddhist prayer: Life is suffering—and yet. It was alternately brutal and beautiful. Maybe both at one.
She squinted at him, silhouetted against the light. Bit her lip. It was tender and terrifying, to not wilt under her fears or the intensity of his fraught, hopeful gaze. She thought of their glossy narrative and their grainy truth, and realized she would choose the latter, every time, with him. They were messy and fucked-up and terror lurked, she knew. She might ruin him, he could definitely ruin her. A million things could go wrong. A hundred thousand definitely would. There was no promise that things would be easy, or happy, despite Scott's boundless, beautiful promises. This move was despite experience, despite her better judgment, despite rationality and logic. Everything pointed to no.

And yet.

And yet.

She wanted to figure it out with him.

She thought it was so complicated, but it was not. Not at all. Not even a little.

He slipped his hand slowly along her jaw, cupped the back of her head, tangled his fingers in her ponytail. Kissed her softly, all breath and nose and tongue.

It was the last time she fell in love with Scott Moir.

vi. Two Years and Two Weeks Before Today, Scott

“Ready?” Tess asked nervously, turning her phone over and over in her hand.

“Yup.” Next to her, he took a deep breath. “We can do this.”

“Absolutely,” her tone was resolute. “Stick to the script. Don’t let them derail you.” She stood. “I’m sitting at the island. So we don’t get crosstalk. I’m starting with Casey.”

“Danny,” he nodded. “Let’s go.”

She placed a swift kiss on his mouth and got up. He dialed. “Heyyy Danny,” he said when his brother picked up. Fuck, was his voice higher?

“Scottie! How’s life?”

“Good. You buy my presents yet?”

“Hey Case,” Tessa said from across the room. “How was Jamie’s hockey game? He looks so handsome in his uniform.”

“I think the more important question is, did you buy my kids’ gifts? You’re a twenty-nine-year-old grown-ass man. Charlotte wanted that doll I sent you the link for. Should Santa get it?”

“Uncle Scott has it covered, thanks to Amazon.” And Tessa. “Listen, I wanted to let you know my schedule over the holidays.”

“Your schedule? Aren’t you fancy.”

“—Oh he won, that’s so exciting! Listen, I wanted to give you a head’s up—“
“Yes, my schedule, you asshole. So next week Tess and I land around two-thirty Christmas Eve since we need to get rink time in the morning. We’re going to have to skip gingerbread decorating, unfortunately. We’ll do presents and Christmas Eve dinner at her mom’s place, then head over to Ilderton for Midnight Mass. Then we’re going to crash at Mom and Dad’s, skate from seven to ten and should be ready for presents by five after, if that’s good with the kids. After that we’ll spend the next two nights at her place. Together. If you weren’t getting this gist.”

“—No, it won’t just be because we need the rink in the morning. Please don’t make me spell this out, Kev—”

“So you really listened when I gave you that speech eleven years ago entitled Do Not Fuck Your Skating Partner, huh?”

“Come on, man. It’s not like that.”

“Yeah, and you also have been ignoring that speech for at least what, six years? Cuz it was four years ago when you two had sex with children in the house at three in the afternoon.” Fuck.

“Eight years of ignoring, actually, if we're being technical …”

“—No, please don’t tell Dad. No, I don’t know when I’ll tell him but I will, OK? I think Mom suspects; she was at the Final—”

“Christ.”

“We managed to win three Olympic medals in that time frame. Also, it’s a lot different this time,” he said levelly.

“You sure?”

“Positive. Just don’t give her too much shit, alright?”

“Big Hands gets no shit; you get all of it. I would say make sure she knows what she’s getting into, but it’s been two decades so, you know, horse is out of the barn.”

“Gee, thanks man,” he said dryly.

“Do you remember 2013, or did you fall and hit your head on something hard? Did one of those gargoyles in Montreal break off and give you temporary amnesia?”

“We’re super happy, thanks.”

Danny is quiet. “You tell Mom yet?”

“We’ve got two more brothers and a sister before we call the moms.”

“Well I’ll give you twenty minutes before I start the sibling group chain. Ok if I bring Cara and Sheri and Leanne in?”

Christ. “That’s fine. It’s gonna get out pretty quickly.”

“—Casey, you’ve known him for twenty years and he’s talking to Danny, you don’t need to—” she held out her phone. “Scott can you talk to Casey? He has questions about your intentions.”

“You want to talk to T?” he checked with Danny.
“Of course. I need to ask her if she perhaps got a brain virus from the water in Montreal. Also, well done, bro.” He held his phone out for a swap, and took a breath before talking to the tallest and oldest of Tessa’s taller and older brothers.

“Hi Casey.”

“—Hey Danny. Yes, thank you, we’re very happy … No, no brain virus that I know of, and b2ten is on top of that—”

“Bro,” Casey’s voice was amused. “What the fuck are you guys doing?”

“The answer I’m gonna give her brother is ‘what I should have done ten years ago.’ The answer I’m going to give the guy I looked up to my entire childhood is ‘figuring our shit out slowly and safely.’”

“Kiss ass. You realize the Olympics are in fourteen months, yeah?”

“We’re a little aware, yeah,” he replied dryly.

Lather, rinse, repeat.

“Yeah, Charlie, we are aware the Olympics are in fourteen months.”

“—Honestly, Kev, it’s Scott. Casey already checked out his intentions and he passed and if there was a time to question that it was, oh, eight years ago—”

“I’m just saying, have you guys talked to your team of shrinks? Nobody wants to be the sibling that says ‘2013’ but, um, 2013.”

“Actually, all of you so far have said 2013 and, thanks for asking, but we’re very happy.”

“—oh come on, Jordan knew about that summer so you knew about that summer, don’t try and evade. He’s finishing up with Charlie and I need to call Jo, you can call him in five—”

“I gotta go, Kevin Virtue is about to threaten to kick my ass.”

“—Hi Jordan. What? Yes, fine, I had sex last night—”

“Tell him to get in fucking line. Anyways. I’m happy for you bro.”

Click.

“Hey Kevin.”

“So you’re sleeping with my little sister now, huh, Moir? It wasn’t enough to break her heart when she was seventeen?”

“Hey, Kevin. How’re the kids?”

“—Fine, yes, Jordan, you were right—”

“You know if you break her heart or you guys fuck up this comeback by fucking we will come kick your ass.”

“Kevin, I swear, I’ve been in love with her since I was like twenty-two and am going to do my best not to fuck this up. Also if I do Danny and Charlie will kill me too, so you can all gang up on me together. How’s that sound?”
“—No, JJ, we weren’t *fucking* when we started the comeback. No I am *not* answering that, don’t be gross—”

“It’s a pretty good deal Moir. So when are you going to make an honest woman out of my sister?”

“—Jordan, he’s had *two* talks about his intentions, you don’t get to give him shit. Also, this is all your and Cara’s fault anyways so—”

“Nobody is talking *that* right now.”

“*Everybody* is talking *that* right now.”

“Kevin, before you get too high on that horse, do keep in mind that the summer I was *eleven* you explained—graphically—the bases. All of them. Also, I know for a fact that your mom’s crystal cat statue didn’t break when the cat knocked it over in 2002, it was that party you threw where you turned the kitchen into a vodka Slip’n’Slide. I still have to make it through the call with your mother, and I’m not afraid to use that info if I have to.”

“We’re all happy you got your shit together. Don’t fuck this up, and if you could send along whatever official date you’re counting as the anniversary to the siblings and your cousins, there is a *lot* of money on the line.”

“September 28th by my count. She’s going with mid-February.” Predictably, they each insisted the date was the one where the *other* had committed.

“—Mid-February. This night that I helped him hang a jersey his brothers sent. Yes, you called it—”

“Dude, I don’t want to know how you guys got anniversaries that are six months off.”

“Gross. It was just, the wooing … took a while.”

“Wooing? You’ve known her since she was in grade 1. Isn’t that romantic.”

“—No, again, I’m not answering that question … Why didn’t you ask me that eight years ago, I totally would have answered. … Yes, *obviously* things get better with age, including his tongue—”

“Ew, T, a man likes his to have some secrets!”

She stuck her own—very accomplished—tongue out. “—Yes, that was him … Incredibly. Like, so happy, JJ.” Her voice was soft. “We’re good.”

“Anyways, Scottie, congratulations, you may continue to date my sister. You’ve passed with flying colors.”

“Phew,” he said dryly. “Anyways, thanks Case. We’ll see you guys next week. Tell Poppy and Topher hey from Aunt Tessa and Uncle Scott.”

“—Love you, Jordan. We’ll see you and Ben next week.”

She hung up, and flopped on the couch next to him, face planted in the cushions. “Remind me why we didn’t just make Jordan and Danny tell our moms?”

“Because we’re excited about this, and your mom probably knows anyways, and it’ll be awkward to just show up to my parents with your suitcase?”

She smiled. “Call Kate and Alma together or separately?”
He sighed. “We should probably do separate. I know they’re gonna be happy and wanna talk to you … But I think they’re gonna have questions. And Kate too.”

“Yeah,” she stood up. “I mean, I’m sure she caught on at the Final. But. I’ll take your bedroom.”

He dialled as she shut the door quietly. “Scottie!” Alma said cheerfully. “How is Montreal? I saw you got some snow.”

“Yeah, we did, but those snow tires Danny recommended worked out pretty well,” he said.

“I checked the forecast and it should be clear next week. Did you decide what day you could get home?”

“Yes, Ma, we’ll be flying in Christmas Eve, our flight lands at two-thirty. Tess booked everything; I can have her forward you the flight info.”

“I’ll tell your dad so he can pick you up.”

“Actually, Kate’ll have us covered.”

“Oh, that’s very dear of her but no need to come all the way out here—”

“Actually, Ma, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Tess and I … We’re going to start the holiday off at her mom’s, and do presents and dinner at the Virtues. They’re weird and do German Christmas rules, you know.” It was because that’s what the Queen did, Kate once said. “Then we’ll make it to Midnight Mass at St. Joseph’s with you all, spend the night at your place. We’ll head to the rink early and be back for presents. And then obviously Christmas luncheon. But we’ll get out of your hair and crash at her place the next two nights.”

“You and Tess, together, are going to each family’s Christmas, together, and then crashing at her place … together?” she confirmed.

“Yup.”

“Is this, like, the latest evolution in Tessa-and-Scott’s-definition-of-a-skating-partnership, or …”

“Eh. It’s more like, the latest evolution in our definition of our friendship.” Shit, that was probably confusing wording, to his mom. He scratched behind his neck.

“So you two aren’t —” God. This was humiliating, and he’d spent his teenaged years wearing velvet in public.

“No. Um, we are. That’s, um, that’s the evolution.”

“But you two have in the past—”

“Ma, please don’t go there. But yeah. This is different though.”

“How, exactly?” her voice had an edge. “Scottie, I would lay myself on the train tracks for both of you—and god knows Kate and I have discussed this at length —but you’ve been here before and it nearly destroyed you both, not to mention your career. Have you two—” The door opened softly, and Tessa came out, her phone slack against her neck and a soft look in her eyes.
“Ma, trust me,” he said, staring deeply at Tess. “We’re good. We’re sure.”

“My mom wants to speak with you,” she said quietly.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “Hey, Ma? Is Dad around to help you with Skype? I think it might be easier if you guys and Kate and us all talked. Can we all Skype in like five minutes?”

“Yes, he’s around, that’s fine.”

“Great, we’ll start a Skype connection. Love you.”

“My conversation went about the same,” she said, moving to set up his laptop on the coffee table. “Apparently while she noticed we were different she ‘didn’t dare assume,’ and I quote.” Her hand slid down to grasp his as the screen alit. Her mother, in her armchair, appeared first, a glass of wine in front of her—seriously, Kate, a little dramatic—and then his parents, at the island in his kitchen, his dad’s arms hunched over concernedly, his mother with her own glass of wine.

Christ.

Forehead against his palm, he lifted their conjoined hands. “Hi, parentals. Alright. First off, we love you. Second off, yes, we’re planning on splitting Christmas between your houses. We bought good presents. Third off, we’re very very happy with what we’ve worked out. Now. Questions, comments, concerns.”

“Alma,” Kate’s voice was rueful. “Do you want to go first?”

“I think we have the same questions, if you would like to start.” Canadians.

“I’ll start,” his dad interrupted. “First off, we love you, and if this is what I think it is, we’re very happy for you two. Thrilled, actually. Second off, you’re adults. You’ve been here before and you know the stakes, and it’s your life and your career, so we trust that you’re being responsible as you navigate this. We assume the goal of winning the Olympics hasn’t changed. Third off, under absolutely no circumstances can you have sex directly above the kitchen at three in the afternoon when I’ve got nine kids under the age of ten in there. There are literally only so many times I can hear *Let It Go* from the basement a given year.”

“Excuse me?” Kate went white as her dye job as Tessa brought her hands—including the one still looped with his—to her face in mortification. He started shaking with laughter, he couldn’t help it.

“Deal, Joe,” she finally said, her face red but straight, lips curved up only a little. “I’m really sorry about that.”

“Thanks, Dad,” he said, pretty sure his face was somewhere north of beet red.

“I have questions,” Kate said.

“Please, Kate—”

“Not about *that*, good Christ, Scottie. No. Have you two discussed with Marie and Patch?”

“They’re *really* not opposed.”

“They don’t have your history, Tessa Jane.”

“They’re aware, and supportive, and have outlined some potential challenges we can anticipate,” he added.
“And really, it’s nobody’s business—” he elbowed her; she was getting salty, “—but this is in the five percent of time that we’re not a skating team, or a business partnership, or, you know, our normal level of lifelong best friends who already annoy people with inside jokes. It’s one day at a time and the comeback comes first.”

"One day at a time?” Kate repeated, flatly. "That's your plan?"

“Yes. Honestly, very little has changed,” Tessa swore, back on her best behavior.

“Are you ... telling people?”

“Absolutely not,” he said.

“It’s nobody’s business.”

“So Skate Canada, your agent, your sponsors, Stars on Ice, the press—”

“Are all concerned with the Virtue-Moir skating team, and nothing’s changed with that,” he said simply. Tessa leaned her head against his shoulder, then planted a dry kiss on his delt before rearranging herself there, smiling close-lipped at their parents.

There was some crosstalk, and then some more questions, and then finally some excitement, and a lot of We love you guys so much, and then both moms started crying and discussing a wedding and WHOA NOW GOODNIGHT. They shut the laptop.

She slumped against him, held out a hand for a high five. He tapped it. “That was exhausting. Go team go.”

“Yeah,” he hummed, checking his phone. Moir family texts were going to roll in soon. “Movie?”

“Perfect. Charade? Or Top Hat?’’

“Ooooh. Top Hat.”

As she settled against his side, Ginger Rogers’ smile spreading across his TV, he had the distinct and profound feeling of being at home.

Chapter End Notes

One thing that became increasingly challenging as we got into this strech (chapters 9-13) was balancing the “awwwwww yeah they’re gonna make it #goals!” feeling of inevitability (which was a direct result of having so much damn story behind us) with what felt like a ton of uncertainty during the 2014-2018 time period. Balancing being present with also working through what they want in the future, and making progress without moving too fast or treating their relationship like it’s a given and rushing through stuff. I don’t view it as particularly happy/fluffy but am also self-critical of the writing during this phase. Even when they were together, it was still pretty liminal, and very much a “we love each other deeply and the sex is great and we’re partners but we’re going to be living in the present and we still have a fuck ton of issues to work out.” That wary, careful mentality was supposed to be very real. It’s no surprise that the China section, the smoking section, the golf section, Worlds 2017 (both perspectives), Tessa’s “I don’t know if I’m cut out for happy” here, and Scott’s drinks with Patch (next
section) were some of the hardest to write. If I’d started this later, I think this phase would have lasted farther into the narrative, probably not closed out until 2019. But I’d given myself a hard deadline of "wedding in October of 2019" so I had to work to that.

I worked the China section and Tessa’s section over and over again, as those who read a few times probably know. They were supposed to be parallels in that it’s the “action point” from her struggles with happiness from 8 and his struggles with worthiness in 9—and were intentionally placed in the same chapters, since they’re now on the same page. But they’re absolutely not supposed to be a sure thing yet—they’re just kind of feeling their way toward purpose and clarity. You’re also still learning more about what happened between ch 7-now and filling in holes in what you thought happened. But this is the growing, and growing together, section, so seeing them sync back up, tentatively and tenderly, was so sweet and gentle and necessary in the broader arc.

Tessa’s ACI confession initially had a lot more words, and was supposed to sort of mirror Scott’s ch 10 speech. But eventually that felt way too over-the-top, and untrue to how the character would say it, so it became this “of course I love you” small-bore realization. Scott also in the first cut was initially a lot more words, and that’s what finally caused MB to track down my practically-dormant tumblr and be like “you are over-writing; trust more” and so I dialled it back to “it’s not that obvious” which is more of a sock-you-in-the-stomach statement. In this moment, it was important to me to flip the “I everything you”—which to me was used to include things like despise—to “you’re everything to me.” It has more positive connotations and preserves agency for both of them. She keeps saying the former as well since it’s more romantic but the second is also healthier. The moment become the final key locking into place after so much uncertainty. Quiet, logical, intimate. And the “last time she fell in love” was a callback to the Marina scene and the HS dance.

In terms of influences, I really wanted to highlight the Rilke’s work. “Letters to a Young Poet” is one of my favorite pieces of writing of all time: “to love is good too: love being difficult. For one human being to love another: that is the most difficult of tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation.” (It’s also one I use frequently.) but the Anne Morrow Lindbergh passage fit the theme so much better—I imagine Patch reading it at the wedding, for sure—so I went with that and moved Rilke to a tiny nod. The Modern Love column is one of my favorite and so resonant, so was excited to reference it. Jordan’s toast was drafted but completely different; when I had to scrap it later this was an easy pickup.

And finally, the “friends and family” one had me cackling too. I initially wanted it to be dialogue-only but that ended up feeling too try-hard, and became The Thing in the section, rather than the confessions. So I reworked it a little and it ended up a lot lighter and sweeter and funnier than the initial version. It’s definitely a favorite section.
i wanna lock in your love

Chapter Notes

* ahem. *taps mic sheepishly.* Hi, everyone. It's me. Having a good summer? How's it been? Does anyone still care about this story? VM? Please? Come read me, I promise it's still OK :) *

So sorry this took a bit longer than the weeklong turnaround of the last couple of chapters! Between vacation and Life Stuff, it definitely took some time to get my ducks in a row. Fair warning that the old pace is no longer sustainable for those Life Reasons, but I'm still getting some good writing time on the weekends — and finishing this is absolutely a priority for me — so hopefully it won't be as long as the last gap.

A quick housekeeping note — I'm leaving this chapter unlocked for about 48 hours but then will make it private. I'm still pretty tetchy about RPF stuff and ultimately this feels a lot more comfortable to me. So tell your friends to sign up if they haven't already :) 

This chapter is all about commitment, the many forms it takes, and the trial and error and grit it takes to make it work. It's the big stuff, the small stuff, the showing up, the supporting, the showing. Let me know what you think — I love hearing what's working and what's not.

And a massive massive *massive* thanks to Manque, because without her patience, 450+ (!) edits and willingness to be a sounding board, this chapter would not be finished or very funny, and there would be at least two scenes where Tessa has three hands. I am seriously indebted.

Hope you enjoy! Again, would love to hear your thoughts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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i. Two Years Before Today, Tessa

Since Suzanne started inviting their input into music back in the Kitchener days, song selection inevitably had become a joust. This year it was even more of a battle to the death, since the title of Best DJ would hold for forever. Scott changed his passwords on his laptop and phone; she uninvited him from her Spotify. He seemed so sure—he even would hum *Pride and Prejudice* during warmups, so cocky was he—that she straddled his lap one night and tried to grind the information out of him. But when he caught on he just flipped her over, pinned her hands above her, and breathed, “Turnabout is fair play,” into her ear, pushing three fingers three knuckles deep as his palm brushed over her clit. She gasped, and reached to tug his hair, music selection forgotten.

“I know you and my entire family think I can’t keep a secret,” he said later, smugly sitting up in bed as she stretched, catlike, alongside him. “But I can, and it’s epic, and I’ll win.”

They knew what they wanted: a moment, romantic and cathartic and redemptive, something that combined the tone of *Carmen* with the open style of *Latch*, that was as iconic as Mahler and
expressive as *Umbrellas*. She saw a red dress—Vancouver’s white evolving to Sochi’s light pink maturing into a scarlet type of love—but the rest was just beyond the edge of her vision. She literally dreamed of it and woke up not remembering, shaking so suddenly that Scott stirred.

When they finally squeezed around the table in Marie and Patch’s chilly office, tired and sweaty after a long day at practice, and she played *Feelin’ Good*, everyone shifted. Not quite right.

“Big is good,” Marie encouraged, tipping her chin onto her knuckles. She’d brought *Young and Beautiful*—Tessa and Sam had liked it; Patch and Scott had vetoed on grounds of “weirdness.” “We are all choosing the same. A unified vision.”

“Yeah.” She chewed the inside of her lip. “I was also thinking *Les Mis* but—”

“Too much of a warhorse,” Marie said with a groan. She spoke French; she was classier than warhorses.

“Agreed,” Scott said. “But I’ve got an idea.”

“You’ve been cocky about this for days,” Tessa smirked. “Man up, Moir. Show us what you’ve got.”

He smiled at her, heat in his eyes, and she realized he did have it. A familiar-but-forgotten tune filled the air and she gasped, tears involuntarily springing into her eyes.

“Yes,” she said automatically. “A thousand times yes.” He grinned.

“You just said no warhorses!” Marie exclaimed.

“*Come What May* isn’t a warhorse,” she explained, the lifts and choreography unfolding behind her eyelashes. “This is our story.” Their story, their epic. She cocked her head: you sure? If they did this, the choreography would be big and romantic, there would be questions from the press, comments about their narrative from fans. Questions she couldn’t bring herself to answer entirely honestly, comments she wasn’t sure he wanted to hear.

But if they did this—this song, this story, this them—they would win. She could feel it.

“First date I ever took Tess on was to *Moulin Rouge,*” he smiled, arms crossed, staring directly at her. Nobody else in the room. He nodded: *Sure*, and she realized he didn’t just mean the song choice. “She loved the dancing.”

“Please. I paid for my own ticket and he tried to cover my eyes during the sex scenes.” She grinned right back. Next to him, Patch raised an eyebrow.

“You two and your music, you must always make a connection,” Marie sighed, recognizing a lost battle. “So that is that. Korea, here we come.”

Later that night, after he went to physio and she went to Harry Rosen to pick up his new gala suit for the season, they took advantage of June’s flat humidity and spread over the apartment building’s rooftop deck. Tessa sat croslegged as she compiled expense reports on a chaise dragged over from the pool area, carefully watching to make sure none of them blew away, as Scott grilled fish a few feet away. Music lilted softly from his iPhone, first Tom Waits, then an older song of the Hip’s—Scott had been listening to a lot of Gord lately. At the first big strum of chords, Scott set down his spatula. “This would make a great exh,” he said, his tone a shade too serious for this to be a random thought. She tilted her head to pick out the tune—she was an Ontario girl, of course she’d heard it, plenty of times. Just, not for a while. “*Long Time Running*,” he supplied, a half-beat later.
She listened to the blues, straining against time. Small town, smaller stakes. It was grass under her
toes in the Moirs’ backyard, fuzzy pink dice gifted by Scott for her first car, slushies that turned her
tongue blue on the way back from Kitchener, hand-me-down costumes from Sheri that smelled of
sweat and detergent. Burned eggs and Christmas villages and sitting on a car hood outside Ilderton.
Safety pins—head up, always—Russian acting coaches, measuring tape looped around her hips,
silent chilly six AM practices, apologies delivered in coffee and looks and finger-squeezes. Memories
that were mostly feelings, the minor-key magic that guided life, nothing more. Certainly nothing less.

The talking and the laughter—always, the talking and the laughter.

Scott’s hand in hers.

If *Come What May* was the cinematic expression of their public narrative, an epic romance for the
ages, *Long Time Running* was the real thing: their own story, meandering and weird and deeply
personal. Performed in public but loaded with private meaning—actually, she realized, just like how
in *Moulin Rouge!*, Christian wrote the song for Satine as a way of publicly showcasing their private
story. She liked the symmetry.

“Let’s do it,” she said, rising off the lounger, a brilliant suggestion of her own forming to
complement. God, they were the best team. Slipping small hands around his waist and turning him
into dance hold, she declared, “I think we should choreograph it ourselves too.”

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**ii. Six Months Before Today, Scott**

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“T! Help me with the tie?” He called loudly, wandering from the en suite and colliding with her.
“Oh. Hey. Didn’t know you were there.”

“I’m stealthy,” she responded, nimbly folding the fabric. “You know, I thought you could tie a tie, it
made you feel like a man,” she teased.

“This one was hard,” he said, very serious.

“I’m beginning to suspect that this is just a scheme to get my hands on you.”

“Me? Never.” He grinned, fidgeting his hands at her waist. “You look really pretty.” She did: the
white halter dress was that stretchy, clingy stuff, and there were some side cut-outs, and the back
looked like a tic-tac-toe board of straps. She had deep purple heels that matched the tie she had
picked and brought her up to a height he appreciated, where if he turned his head he could kiss her
temple.

“Thanks,” she exhaled, and stepped back with a smile, patting the knot. She’d been flitty since they
got back from Chiddy’s last week. “Did you see the *Stars* paperwork I left on the kitchen table? I
updated all the insurance information but you still need to sign.”

“Yeah, done, I can fax from Gadbois tomorrow.” He internally rolled his eyes; it had been a solid
five years since he fucked up *Stars* paperwork. “Did you have time to run to the store yesterday or
should we go after this?”

“No, we’ll need to go; we’re completely out of toilet paper and you need a new USB for your phone
charger. Oh, and we need to get Quinn’s birthday gift. And we’ll need to send Sam and Marie and
Patch something as a thank-you.” The to-do list flowed as naturally and neurotically as a new twizzle
“Hey hey hey.” He checked in, sliding a thumb over the pulse in her wrist. She blinked, and took another deep breath. “Wait, we have to buy them something?”

“Yes.” Her tone was vehement. “Scott. Of course we do.”

“Alright,” he shrugged. He was learning pretty quickly that being engaged meant buying other people a lot of stuff. Also, writing cards.

“We’ll send Marie and Patch flowers and Sam a nice bottle of Scotch. You handle that one, OK?”

“Got it.” He knew better than to joke that they just repurpose one of the twenty bouquets Tessa’s associates and sponsors had sent them in the last two weeks—Nivea’s was blue and white and ugly as hell—and handed her her purse as he grabbed the keys and opened her leather jacket.

“Also, we’ll need to write a card.” She turned into the jacket. “You want me to drive?”

“I’m only having a beer,” he replied, practically pushing her out the door. They were late; she hated to be late.

“Ok. Did you talk to Patch, does he want to be a groomsman? I need to get my side set. Mostly, do I ask Kaitlyn? If we have Patch, I should ask Kaitlyn, since Marie said no. And Tessa Too and Nicole and Sheri and Leanne are OK, right? It’s just that our families are so huge, and—”

“Fiancée,” he said, very very casually, because he liked calling her that, liked having a concise term for her. “Are you having an aneurysm?”

She stopped, on the other side of the car. “Freaking out?”

“Little bit.”

“Oh.” She slid into the car.

“It’s just that you’ve been pretty chill and excited about wedding planning.” It was a freaking huge party with lots of lists to make and a costume to design; he honestly wasn’t offended that she was more excited about the event than the whole “spending the rest of her life listening to his jokes” part at the moment. He was used to playing the long game. “And this is decidedly un-chill.”

“Ensuring I don’t offend my future sisters-in-law or cousins or any of my friends—”

“Nobody will care. Anyone over twenty-five who gets offended about not being a bridesmaid—let’s just not associate with them, because they suck.” He started the car. “That’s everything?”

“Little nervous about this party, actually,” she admitted. “I knew there would be some attention, but did you see Huffington Post Canada published a list of ‘48 Times You Should Have Noticed That Virtue-Moir Were Totally Fucking’ today?”

“Pretty sure Cara’s forwarded that list before.” Also, if those forty-eight times were during the comeback or Carmen—thanks, Cunnilitus, and thanks, internet, way to beat Chiddy at naming things—Huffington Post wasn’t wrong. It was gossipy as fuck, but he’d been out of fucks regarding other people’s fucks on their fucking since Korea. “This party is friends, though. Who are excited.”

“Yeah. I just don’t like sharing you.” She squeezed his hand. “So who do you think’ll hook up at our wedding? JF’s single now, you know, we could matchmake.”
“Justin Trudeau and Gabby,” he said promptly, since Gabby Daleman fell into some weird too-close-to-too-many-people-we-want-to-invite category Tessa insisted existed, so she was coming, and Kate had actually fucking tried to put the Prime Minister on her list.

They would be terrible matchmakers anyway. They barely got their own shit together.

But Tessa laughed—goal achieved.

Sam’s Laval loft, white-walled and high-ceilinged and hipster in a way Tessa appreciated, was already filled. Jeff and Chiddy and Javi and Poje and Kaitlyn had all flown in—Kaitlyn’s presence stressed T out right now, given the bridesmaid situation, but it was nice to see her, weird-print dress and all—and were staring at Sam’s semipornographic sculptures with the Montreal skating crew. Babsy had come up, was trading notes with JF—not a discussion he wanted to hear. Several magazine editors and his TSN producers were in a clutch in the corner, leaning against a wall because they’d discovered that Sam’s couches were about as comfortable to sit on as the weird sculptures. Mike Slipchuk glad-handed whomever he could reach. Jess Mulroney and the Bitove girls mixed cocktails behind the bar—he made a note to avoid those; they would be a *heavy* pour.

Jordan and Cara were already chatting with Jacqueline the wedding planner, but other than the two of them everyone else knew them first and foremost as Virtue and Moir, the fashionista and budding businesswoman marrying the TV show host and promising skating coach. Five-time Olympic medalists together. Canada’s sweethearts. Co-producers of a successful cross-Canada skating tour. Recently announced founders and co-chairs of the Going For the Gold Foundation. Canadians on the verge—literally. *MacLean’s* said so.

Actually, he realized with a start, that Virtue and Moir sounded as much *them*, maybe more so these days, as Tess and Scottie, the kids celebrated at the Ilderton ice rink last month with a smudged-icing cake from Loblaw’s. Just as much as *them* as T and Scott, who had spent last night trying—and failing—to come to agreement on the flower budget for the wedding, and would be going to Walmart after this for toilet paper, and needed to finish remodeling the upstairs bathroom, and would probably get in an eyebrows-only argument later tonight when she found out how much they had to pay for the tickets to Calgary since he’d forgotten to book them until a week before their trip.

The two of them synced briefly with a nod, and then she headed to air-kiss some editor as he grabbed a beer and spun Billie-Rose, practically a pre-teen in sequins and kitten heels. He circulated assiduously, greeting Poje and then Zach and his latest twenty-one-year-old—what had Tessa said about plus-ones? Did they *have* to invite her, given that Zach's attitude toward dating was alarmingly close to Wooderson's in *Dazed and Confused*? Did it matter that it was eighty dollars a plate?—and then his producers and finally Sam, in his favorite Gucci genie pants. Chiddy found him to confirm that the August long weekend and Los Cabos would work for the bachelor party, which was an easy yes since Kat and Jordan had already decided Tessa’s bachelorette would be in Miami that same weekend. He didn’t want strippers and Tessa requested no social media, so just cigars, poker, and a lot of good tequila, please.

No matter how far from her he got, though, he still somehow heard snippets of Tessa, floating above the din like they were on a different fucking wavelength that anyone else’s.

“—Tiffany’s, of course, I made him watch enough Audrey—”

“—Our moms were rooting for London, but we’re so busy, it *has* to be Montreal. *Entrepôts Dominion*, keep an eye out for the invitation, October 19—”

“—yes, graduating with the psych degree this spring, though I will actually miss the ceremony with *Stars!* I think they’re just tired of me taking incompletes—”
“—Blush and burgundy, for the colors, eh. I’m guessing at some point Scott will lead us all in O Canada—”

“—I know you’re a groomsman, Jeff, but remember, you were my friend first—”

“—I’ll be on the last episode of the season! We just shot it last week—”

“—No, it’s really remarkable, I’m a little embarrassed seeing this whole ‘destiny’ narrative again, it’s just so Disney and I thought we might be done—”

He rolled his eyes at that one.

(Sh e might not believe it herself anymore, might be fiercely protective of their privacy, might be disgusted by speculation about their sex life, might want to be her own person, might want their career to stand on its own auspicious merits, but Scott knew that Tessa absolutely did not mind their public narrative, was secretly sort of dumbstruck-but-awed-and-proud about where the Canadian Sweethearts story had ended up.)

Eventually Marie, chic in her navy sweater dress and pointiest boots, clinked her glass. The crowd quieted, and Tess materialized at his side. He wrapped an arm around her.

“When they were younger, Patrice and I used to refer to Tessa and Scott as our little babies. They were so young—children, really, when we met! Well, they are no longer babies anymore.” The crowd laughed. “I remember taking them to dinner—she must have been fifteen—and Tessa was absolutely scandalized that one might, ahem, date one’s skating partner.” More laughs. Tessa buried her head in his shoulder, shaking and smiling. “Again, oh how times have changed. We have been so privileged, Patch and I, to watch you grow, together and individually, professionally and personally. And we are so proud as your coaches—and thrilled as your friends—to watch you take this next and most significant step. Now, Patch and I have only been together about two years longer than you, so no advice—” Marie was being too kind, too cute— “but we know that if anyone can commit to a marriage, commit to a life, it is you. To Tessa and Scott!”

“To Tessa and Scott!” Everyone chorused, and Jordan stuck her tongue out at him, rolling her eyes and shaking her head.

They kissed as everyone clapped, and she whispered, her voice breathy as it was during a Juniors interview, “You wanna talk?”

That … was kind of surprising. She had agreed to take this one earlier. Had a speech, probably, neatly written out on her monogrammed stationery and quartered in her purse. But he nodded.

Capitalizing on those purple pumps to kiss her temple, he entwined their fingers. “Well, first off, thanks, Marie, Patch, Sam, for hosting tonight. You’ve really made Montreal feel like home for two kids from Western Ontario.” He tipped his half-drunk beer at them. “And, well—hey, everyone. Pretty sure Tess just threw this one to me because I’m far more likely to cry. I think, um, yeah—this is the first time I’ve gotten to say stuff about Tessa without trying to convince anyone we’re um, not, um—anyways. Not so great at it yet, clearly! Be gentle.” He rocked onto his heels with a laugh.

Halfway back the room, Johnny turned to Miku and chuckled, “Bandmates,” loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Yeah, thanks man, really gentle,” Scott joked back. “You know, we get asked a lot for advice on maintaining a long partnership. I think the only true answer is to start counseling a decade before you propose.” That got the laughs he expected, and he felt her other hand vine around his wrist. “No, no,
I’m kidding. We—at least I—still don’t think we’re qualified to give any advice, but you know, even I will admit it’s been quite the journey. Quite the story, even.” He paused, and Tessa turned sharply at his use of the term. “I’ve been asked now, a couple times if it’s really a big deal to marry Tess. We’ve been skating together for twenty-two years, we’ve been … involved … for a while.” Tess squeezed his hand to say we can move on now please, and Meagan started choking on a mini vegan chicken sausage until Radford thumped her back. “But when people ask that, I can never tell if their point is that they’re assuming there’s no mystery left, or if it’s like, too expected or whatever.” Fuck that. “But either way—yes. Absolutely.” He stared at her, and she reached up to kiss him softly.

He twisted their fingers, thumb knocking against the new jewelry—gold because that’s what she was—as he tried to formulate words. He thought of the ordinariness that was beginning to fill their lives: wedding budgets and missed texts and that time he called Kate a permissive mother and the time Tess burned a pan making grilled cheese, again. Redoing Tess’s office again because she saw some new organizational system online, instead of addressing her Monica Geller Closet of Shame, stuffed with old costumes and three broken iPods and notebooks she’d slugged through two moves and magazines from 2008—as well as literally every random thing from the last five organizational systems she’d tried and discarded. The fact that there were no judges to grade their shelf-building, no GOE score for that family dinner, no technical bonus for not forgetting to grab coffee on the way home.

“Because it’s easy to focus on the work we’ve already put in, the story of our career. And it was good preparation, I think, because the medals—whatever people saw on TV or the internet—those definitely weren’t made in the spotlight. When you learn how to skate, you first learn how to fall—to fail, really. But what we’ve learned the last couple years—the normal life stuff is actually even harder than the skating. There’s not really a game plan in the same way. But that’s made it more fun. Even for us, and we’re people who—we hate unexpected things. Actually, remind me to tell you about Tess’s sixteenth birthday party some time—”

“You totally blabbed on that one!” She exclaimed, with a laugh.

He smiled at her. “You would have hated Jordan’s surprise,” he pointed out, which was true, before continuing. The crowd laughed at the bit, as well as at Jordan very classily flipping him off. “But anyways. Not knowing what’s coming, that’s kind of great, as long as it’s with her. And knowing that we get to have those adventures for the rest of our lives—when we’re choreographing, Marie’s always telling us to leave a little room for magic. What I’m beginning to figure out is that even when you’ve been holding this girl’s hand for twenty-two years, there’s plenty of room for magic. We’re still at the beginning of our story. And I really can’t wait to find out what happens next. So to Tess, first and always, and to you all, and to what’s next.”

After a few more loops through the crowd and a couple we told you so’s and watching Jeff accidentally get trashed off Kat’s version of a G&T, they headed out to their errands and unfinished bathroom, to the magic and the mundane. As he steered the car toward the store, he checked, “You good?”

She smiled back. “Absolutely. I really loved your toast, Scott.”

“You were kinda quiet.”

“I … it’s still hard to put everything into words, sometimes,” she explained, soft and contemplative, the Tess so few people actually ever saw, not even the group in the room. “And I had it written—it was even kind of on the same theme as what you said, actually—but it didn’t seem quite right, and I didn’t want to mess up talking about you for the first time, with everyone we love there.” She smiled at him. “I’m just … I’m really lucky to have you.”
He placed his hands over hers. “Partners, right?”

“Absolutely.”

“Good. Now, can you walk me through the rule about whether we need to invite that girl Zach is dating …”

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iii. Three Years Before Today, Tessa

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Tessa picked at a snag in the hotel comforter, listening to Scott’s end of the conversation with Paul. “Yeah. Yeah. Alright. Keep me posted. Love you guys, OK? Tell Hannah if she needs … Yeah.” He hung up the phone, tossed it on the bed next to her, face high and haggard.

“I’m so sorry, Scott. How are …” she tried quietly. “How is everyone?”

“Stunned, I think. Everyone thought he had more time,” he replied, his mind eight thousands miles away in Ilderton. He crossed his arms tightly, hands folded into his armpits. “Yeah. Stunned.”

She slipped her left hand into his, tugged him to sit next to her. He flopped, gracelessly. “How are you?” she finally asked, tipping a right knuckle under his jaw to try and get some eye contact.

He stared past her instead, fingers twisting with hers.

“I … Stunned. Yeah,” he said brokenly. His throat was raw; he’d been warding off a cold all week and she’d already been worried, what with the flight and competition. “I’m trying to remember—remember what I said, the last time we talked, and …”

“When did you guys talk last?” He and his buddies texted all the time, but that wasn’t the same; plus, the two of them had a tendency to disappear into training and let weeks and months slip by, and since the move Scott had been much worse about it than she. But their friends and families had always understood; it had never been a problem.

Until now.

“I think—I dunno, maybe September? Before ACI.” Before them. “Maybe it was their first anniversary?”

“That would have been … August?” She hated that she remembered because it was the last wedding he’d gone to with Kaitlyn.

“Labor Day, yeah. So I probably called after we got back from the cottage.” He looked so young as he tried to comprehend the incomprehensible, a little-boy-lost she had not seen in years. Since Sochi.

“It was his anniversary, he thought he had more time, you were both really happy. You probably said good things. It was a good conversation, Scott.”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “I wish … I wish I’d told him about …”

Her heart twisted. They hadn’t even mentioned anything to their parents yet—maybe they should, now. Life happened. “We can withdraw,” she offered. “We can be home in thirty-six hours.” It had taken them nineteen to get there; Tokyo to London was even less direct.
“Those tickets will be like twelve grand.”

“Scott.”

“You’ve trained so hard, T, you’re so good—”

“Scott.”

“We withdraw and we don’t make the Final—”

“Scott.”

He stared at her finally, bleak and certain. “No. I need to do this, T.”

She nodded. She knew him, knew he was too much of a competitor. But she would have left, if he asked. “Ok. You’re staying with me, though.” Skate Canada had graciously accommodated her polite request that she be allowed to room solo to help with mental decompression. It had been purely for preparation purposes, but she had to admit there were side benefits.

“Radford—”

“Will be fine. This isn’t the time to be noble, Scott. Just … let me help.” She stood, started to dial. “Lie down, ok? Hey, Eric,” she said as Radford picked up. “Listen—” She headed into the bathroom, and sat on the tub speaking quietly, explaining softly,

As soon as they hung up, a few tears sprang to her eyes; she balled her fists against her sockets until she was slightly more presentable. Scott needed her together; she could be together. She poured a glass of water and grabbed some Zzz-quil—buying herself a few extra seconds. “Eric is good, and said to ask if we need anything,” she said, emerging from the bathroom. He was on his side, breathing deep, eyes blank. “Here, take this.” She handed him the glass and pills.

“Thanks, babe,” he said, not quite moving yet.

She slid behind him gingerly, suddenly cognizant of how quiet her hotel room was. Even the heater sounded far away. Wrapping her arms around him, she kissed the joint of his neck. “I love you,” she reminded him. It felt too simple. Not enough.

“Love you too, baby.” He kissed the knuckles she’d looped around them before twisting all four of their hands together. She scooted up, letting her chin perch on his shoulder. “You know I’m not going to sleep though, right? Like, no way.” His laugh was hoarse and empty.

“Hmm,” she agreed, the tone vibrating through his body and hers before making a decision. She twisted and rose over him, rolled him so she could lie flat on his chest. “Other things we can do, then.” She leaned forward softly, kissed just below his ear before pulling back and breathing on it softly. She untangled their hands, reached down to weave her fingers through the bristly hairs just below his belly button.

“Tess—”

“I want to make you feel good,” she interrupted, putting a hand to his lip. “OK?”

In response, he bit her finger. Good.

They fucked through sadness, they skated through pain. They always had. She didn’t see why they still couldn’t use those *in addition* to the emotionally healthy coping mechanisms they now
possessed.

She could feel him start to harden, and slid the second hand down to shuck his henley. He tried to reach for her breast but she pushed him away, sitting back to remove her shirt and bra for cleanliness purposes. She smirked as she dangled the bra over his face before dropping it on the floor. He reached forward for her breasts again and this time she let him, leaning forward to brace his head and kiss him before trailing her mouth down his body. His hand slid around from tweaking her nipples to fisting in her hair—a gesture she always appreciated because she very much liked the sharp spike of pain, the feeling of power when she made him lose enough control to start really pulling, but also because it kept her hair out of her face and saved her from picking hardened cum out of her hair.

She nipped at his hip bone, right as the defined V of muscle started, earning a jerking moan as her fingernails scraped lower. She looked up to see the tight clench of his jaw—god, she loved his jaw. She pulled him out with one hand and slid the other under his ass to remove his jeans, his fist tightening in her hair once, twice. It had been eight years since she asked him if he liked blow jobs, lying on his couch eating ice cream in a jersey and trying desperately to be older than she was; in that time she’d given him dozens. She swirled his tip gently before giving a long lick—two patented moves—and got to work, tongue and teeth and throat and hands. She normally liked to tease a little, ramping up the sense of frustration and urgency, but it wasn’t the night for that. And while she was always proud of how quickly and easily she could make him come undone, always appreciated the sense of force he had, latent under her lips, there was a particular rawness that evening, which she hadn’t anticipated. He was quieter than normal—usually he talked until he was incoherent—and after he came with a guttural groan, hips bucking hard enough that she moved a hand to press them down, she looked up, carefully, to see his slack face.

“Thanks, T,” he mumbled, and she knew he’d be out soon enough.

“I love you,” she murmured again, sliding up his body until they were forehead to forehead, smoothing the worry lines in his face out as if they were clay. He half made a move toward her underwear—he took having an equal partnership very seriously—but she batted him away. “Please. Scott, rest.”

He kissed her, soft and sated and sleepy and still so very sad, then shifted so they were both on their sides. “I love you too, baby.” And with that, he passed out.

His hand was still pressed at the small of her back, though, and his breathing was still too shallow for her to move without waking him, so she stayed still, sifting her fingers through his hair. Not that she minded, really. Tonight was theirs. Tomorrow there would more international phone calls, and practice, and meetings with Patrice and Marie and the team, and the cold eyes of judges and commentators and fans. Judges who whispered that the only reason they’d done so well so far was because they’d been competing in Canada, commentators who murmured that she was looking quite “athletic” in this comeback, fans who recorded their every move. The scrutiny wasn’t as exhausting as before, when she never felt like enough, but there was a prickling frustration that after twelve years she and Scott were still at the mercy of the judges’ mercurialness, that there was still a highly performative aspect to their partnership. It wasn’t entirely theirs, out there.

They’d chosen it this time, though.

They’d chosen together.

So she sat there, studied his face, still pained in his sleep. She had expected that layering in sex over the last four months would be additive: simply another thing shared between Tessa-and-Scott, like it had been in the sex-twizzle days, only now with—hopefully—more communication and emotional maturity. But she was finding it was actually exponential: a deepening, a richening, an expanding.
The more she let herself love him, the better it was, bigger and braver and bolder. She had fallen in love with him logically this time, eyes opened, all other possibilities exhausted.

There was a sturdiness, a steadiness, that still managed to be new, even through spats both big and small, professional and personal. All those years in therapy were finally paying off, but it was more than that. It was like seeing him, seeing them, in completely new colors. He carried her, and now it was her turn to watch over and protect him. A law of their relationship, consistent and unobtrusive and constant as gravity.

His grip finally slackened, hand falling from the small of her back to the bed, and she took the opportunity to slide off, find a sports bra and sweater and fresh leggings. He probably wouldn’t sleep long; they’d barely eaten on the plane. She would find them some food, she decided, and be there when he woke up.

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iv. Fifteen Years Before Today, Scott

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Telling Paul and Suzanne had been hard, leaving the friends scattered all over Ontario was rough, but the worst had been the lectures: One by one over the last few weeks, both of Tessa’s brothers, her dad, his dad, and his brothers had all found an excuse to “just talk.”

Jim: Now, I know you, Scott, and I trust that you’re going to keep an eye out for Tutu in Michigan, ok? It’s going to be a change. She’s our baby. I’d like you to protect my little girl.

Joe: You two are going to be all alone down there. You know how Tessa gets. Keep an eye out for her. You two’ll need to rely on each other, be a team.

Casey: She’s my baby sister, bro; anything happens to her and you don’t take care of her, I know where you live.

Kevin: She’s strong but she’s really sensitive, and since we’re not going to be there, you have permission to beat up anyone on our behalf, ok? Deferred brotherly privileges.

Charlie: Anything happens to Tess, we’ll tear your balls off, OK, Scottie? You’re all she’s got there; don’t be a dick to her. Ever.

Danny: I know you’re not going to let anyone else hurt Tessa so, let me tell you: do not fuck with Tess. Do not fuck over Tess. Also, she’s pretty, you get that right? If you don’t, you’re going to soon. Do not fuck Tess. Like, ever.

(Danny retold this story at the wedding. Tessa Two got mad because he didn’t bleep out fuck in front of the children.)

Their parents had driven them down last weekend, but now, returning to Canton after their first week of training and first visit back home, the move—the choice—felt somehow more permanent. More adult. He glanced over to her, in the passenger seat of Danny’s old truck, her feet tucked under her to avoid the mountain of fast-food wrappers on the floor of the car that he absolutely had promised to pick up the last time she’d complained about them. She was sniffling, but only a little; Tess generally found tears to be a waste of energy. She had spent twenty minutes hugging her cat, though, so—“Hey, Tutu?”

“Yeah?”
“I know it’s scary, moving to Michigan—” The generic speech felt too adult for his mouth, like the
time he’d borrowed Danny’s suit for a distant great-aunt’s funeral “—but, you know, I’m here for
you. We got this.”

Her eyes narrowed. She complained about frizzy Hermione hair and her beaky nose but he did know
she was objectively pretty, was sometimes mesmerized by the vibrancy of her eyes, even when they
got this terrifying shade of jade that meant he had done something wrong. “Who talked to you?”

“What?”

“My dad? My brothers?”

Oh. “All of them, actually. And, you know. My dad, my brothers.”

“How utterly humiliating.” Her dry tone undercut the dramatic phrasing, and he knew she was
mostly utterly unsurprised.

“Hey—they’re just looking out for you.” Tessa just rolled her eyes. “Anyways. Me too. This is you
and me, together.” Her hand in his. The two of them against the world. “I’m here. Always.”

Their first keyword.

(It was so simple, so bold, so easy. If he had known that this was the deal—that so much failure lay
ahead, that sandbags and a reality TV show and three Olympics and three pissed-off ex-girlfriends
were coming, that dancing in spare bedrooms and grocery lists and morning sex and twelve
variations on the This Is How You Pack a Suitcase, Scott argument were all in his future, that he’d
eventually convince her that yeah, being married to him would be pretty nice—he liked to think he
still would have said that. Or something better, more nuanced, more reassuring and thoughtful and
confident. But maybe not. You never knew.)

(They started the hug that year, heartbeat thudding against heartbeat, anxious girl seeks overexcited
boy, two kind-of-lost, kind-of-lonely kids just keeping each other upright as they slid onto slicker and
thinner ice, adulthood and adult feelings as shady and slippery as ice dance politics. It was painful, in
retrospect, how naive and brave they were.)

“I know,” she reassured him, and he wondered just how much protecting she really needed, how
many times she’d actually end up taking care of him instead. She looked older, somehow, suddenly.
Shifting so she wouldn’t have to look at him, she added, “I always know, you know.”

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v. One Year Before Today, Tessa

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The suggestion was barely out of his mouth before her flat no was out of hers.

“Sorry,” he said immediately, his brow furrowing. “Just figured since we’d be in Toronto. Might be
nice.”

“We’ll be busy,” she countered, intently staring at the costume sketches Stars had sent over. Ugly,
again. Cheap, again. They would do better in the fall.

Something in her tone caused him to stop loading the washing machine. “Not that busy.
Comparatively.” Everything was busy these days. He leaned one elbow against the doorframe. “We
could make it work, if you wanted to.”

“I don’t want to,” she finally said. She looked up at him. Scott’s greatest strength and greatest weakness was that he was too damn nice, above and beyond what was required of Canadians—he still hugged Marina at competitions and asked David how life was going and took Zach Donahue for beers, when detached politeness would simply do. He had stone hands when it came to grudges.

“Besides, Kat offered us Raptors tickets that night.”

He cocked his head. “Just out of curiosity,” he asked, voice gentle but skeptical, “when was the last time you spoke with your dad?”

“Oh, I called him from Korea.” She pushed hair over her shoulder. “After we won.” He’d talked to Jim then, briefly, too.

He nodded, again so thoughtful and compassionate but expectant. A litigator never asked a question he didn’t know the answer to—her dad had taught her that. “And before that?”

She gaped, searching. “I mean … he was at Jordan’s engagement party. And wedding.” It was weak, and she knew it.

“Those were in 2016.” More to the point—as his flat, slightly annoyed tone conveyed—both of those blessed events had happened before they told their families they were sleeping together. He shifted a little in place, scratching the sandpapery stubble along his neck. “You know, he gave me literally dozens of speeches growing up—protect Tessa, take care of Tessa, don’t let Tessa down, all of them—and then he was around during Carmen and Sochi and saw … that, so I was kind of surprised I never got a call from him. And then I thought, hey, Kevin and Casey and Danny and Charlie were bad enough, with the intentions and everything, so maybe it was a lucky break. But you … never mentioned this to him, did you?” His voice became a little plaintive, but not hurt. Mostly sad, for her. She hated pity so much.

“I … It never came up.” She shrugged.

“Well yeah, T, you have to bring it up.”

Way to use her own words against her there, Scott. “That’d be a fun phone conversation: ‘Hey Dad. Long time no talk. By the way, Scott and I are fucking, too, on top of everything else,’” she said dryly. She rolled her eyes so it was clear she was—mostly—joking, but she felt her stomach clench. “I … yeah. He knows us; I’m sure he caught on from the footage.” Or maybe Jordan or her brothers had mentioned it, she didn’t know. She licked her lips. Everything was still insane with the nonstop tours and the planning and the media still a dull dreambeat in their ears and this made her head hurt.

“Yeah, but it’s been … two years, T.” He blinked a little, processing. “Two years.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“Not … mad, Tess,” he said carefully. “I’m just surprised, I think.”

“Well?”

“That you’re still pissed about the divorce.” He cocked his head. “I mean … you had a good childhood, T. Kevin, Casey, Jordan don’t care. Even Kate’s OK with how everything shook down. Or, more OK than this.”

She shrugged, making a note on the design sheet simply to have something to do. She knew it was insane. Childish. Beneath her. “He left,” she finally said, voice tight and careful. He had left, after
thirty-plus years, four children, for better or for worse. Chosen something new: a vegan, succulent-obsessed wife; stepdaughters on the swim team; an ugly modernist house.

She could keep rising above for years, be a gracious and thoughtful competitor and friend—really, being gracious and thoughtful actually made her happier, age had shown—and bury that hard, barbed place deep inside her that interpreted actions so decisively and definitively. But she would always roll her eyes when Gabi’s hand glued itself to Scott’s bicep, would always think of Emily Samuelson when she saw Evan, would always feel the itch to slap Jessica Dube whenever she popped up at some Skate Canada event. She had long ago accepted that betrayal and disappointment were inextricably linked; that jealousy was the flip side of loyalty.

He nodded, turned on the washing machine, and crossed to give her a kiss. Wait. “What was that for?”

“Two years, twenty years, still understanding new sides of you,” he said, sitting on the coffee table and placing another kiss to her forehead. The tone was wondrous, not judgmental.

“You’re OK with me not talking to him, then?”

“I … don’t agree, not really. And I think you should, at some point. For both of your sakes,” he said slowly. “But I understand why you haven’t. And I support you. Always.”

“You’re a good man, Scott,” she said with a sigh, running a palm across his cheek.

(She’d think the exact same thing when her dad shook Scott’s hand right before the rehearsal dinner.)

vi. Two Years After Today, Scott

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He trips over the diaper bag almost as soon as he walks in, hissing a curse as he stubs his toe.

“Scott?” Kate’s voice is quiet, and groggy. “You home?” She steps out of the living room, a book and blanket in hand.

“Yeah. How are the girls?”

Kate considers for a second then nods, eyes tired. “OK. She’s OK,” she finally says. “Congrats to Addie and Alex. Tessa showed me the video.”

“They’re excited,” he smiles, and he’s so proud of them. “You should go to bed, though. Thanks for taking care of everything.”

He kisses his mother-in-law, who heads upstairs, then checks the kitchen, empties the dish rack of pots that he’s sure Kate cleaned. He pads up the stairs and first pops into the baby’s room, but she’s zonked out, a decent enough sleeper at nearly four months. A set of bears, one in a tutu and the other in a Leafs jersey, stand watch over her. As he heads into the master bedroom, he trips again, this time over a pile of clothes.

“Hey,” Tessa says, sitting up, flipping on the light. Her voice is listless. “How was the flight?” Her pale skin looks almost waxy, her eyes glassy and her hair lank. She’s in head-to-toe baggy sweats of his, from a Stars tour god knows how many years ago. They seem to swallow her. She rubs a hand over one eye.
“It was fine,” he says, taking off his jeans and throwing them in the hamper along with the pile on the floor. It’s overflowing; he makes a note to do the laundry in the morning. “Sorry I woke you.”

“You didn’t,” she says, but he knows that already. There’s a bunch of crap on her nightstand—food wrappers and napkins, mostly—and he clears that too.

“How was the last week?” he asked, finally sliding into bed.

“Mom was helpful,” she says. “Calling was a good idea.”

“I’m sorry I left.” He really, really is. She told him to go about six times though. “How’d you sleep?”

“OK.” She lies down and turns her back to him, flicking the light back out.

“You know Dr. McKenna said Ambien occasionally is fine. Totally safe.” He stays flat on his back, uneasy.

“I can handle it, Scott.” Her voice is prickly. “And I wasn’t going to take anything when you were gone.”

He reaches out to stroke her hair, and she barely reacts. Everything is new and different now but that’s been the biggest change, how apathetic she is to touching, to holding his hand or leaning against him or slipping her arms around his waist when he’s cooking. Hell, she barely hangs out in the kitchen anymore, just like she barely goes to the gym, or visits Gadbois or goes shopping. They knew parenthood was going to kick their ass a thousand ways to Sunday, and he feels tired, overwhelmed, has definitely had moments where he’s holding the baby and thinks *Shit, what happens next*. But he is beginning to feel like Tessa, his T, is drifting farther and farther away behind her blank eyes. She’s always “fine, just tired,” or “fine, just learning,” or “fine, just achy.” And she loves the baby—truly, he’s never seen a mom look at a baby so purely and transparently—but he can also see that Ms. Excellence-Not-Perfection Tess is struggling even to feel like she’s just “good” most days. It’s disorienting to see her like this, to feel like this. He’s not sure if this is normal, or not, and she’s certainly not telling him, which is alarming in and of itself. They read the books and took the classes and prepped the way only two Olympians could, but he doesn’t know what is signal and what’s just noise. It’s a weird, uncertain place, but he hasn’t lost the near-pathological urge, after nearly twenty-five years, to always try and help fix whatever is wrong with Tess.

“Tess—” he starts, not entirely sure what he’s going to say. Offer reassurance? Suggest he take some time off? Clearly, the trip to Latvia didn’t do them any good. Insist she go back to the doctor?

But she snores in response, and he’s so relieved he almost wants to laugh.

He pulls her and she’s pliant under his touch. Her fingers curl unconsciously around his hipbone, and her head casts onto his shoulder.

He smiles, tucks her next to him. They’ll sleep, and they’ll talk, and they’ll figure it out in the morning, together.

They always do.

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vii. Two Months Before Today, Tessa

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She was absolutely going to kill Scott, Tessa thought, marching into Gadbois. Granted, that would make paying the mortgage and, you know, holding a wedding more difficult, but last night, when she asked, “What is the one thing you will absolutely remember to do tomorrow morning?” he had said, “Remember all my stuff,” and yet here she was, for the third time in two weeks, cutting her commute to class way, way too close.

“Scott Patrick Moir!” she exclaimed, pushing the double doors to the rink open. “Over here!”

He was on the far end of the ice, with Carolane and Shane, but started skating over immediately. “Hey!” he responded, lighting up at the sight of her. She held up the green notebook with all of Matt and Aimee’s choreo notes in one hand and his energy shake in the other. “T, what are you … Oh. Fuck.” He skated closer, sheepish. “I love you. You’re the best fiancée.”

“I know,” she replied, still peeved. “I put a Post-It on the door, Scott.” She slapped the damn notebook on the boards.

“I’m sorry. Late night—” he smirked, and she rolled her eyes, handed him the shake—“and I was trying to be quiet and … yeah. I’ll do better.” His eyes were genuinely apologetic under the Tigers cap.

She softened, but just a little. “I don’t mind, really—“

“You do—“

“—No, I just don’t like being late for class. Even if it’s just marketing.”

“You do have four hundred thousand Instagram followers and sponsorships with six major Canadian companies. You know one or two things.”

“Attendance is part of our grade,” she reminded him as she rested her elbows on the boards. She checked her watch. She could flirt with him for exactly four minutes, then she needed to leave, for real.

Despite her pout, he clearly knew he was forgiven, and leaned closer to her. “I’m going to put a reminder in my phone, OK?” he promised, knocking his forehead against hers. “That sound good?”

She kissed him. “It does. Thank you. I’m sorry for yelling.”

“You wanna play hooky and skate a while? Carolane could use your help on the Finnstep.” He started playing her hair.

“Class. Attendance. Important,” she repeated.

“Alright,” he sighed. “I know it’s healthy and whatever, but man, this separate careers thing sucks.”

He wasn’t wrong. “Why don’t I come by after class? Before we meet with Jacqueline and the florist.” She had a few calls and then a fitting, but they could make it work.

“Nah. Call with Mick and the production team to line up next season’s guests.”

“Come back after dinner?”

“Didn’t we promise to review the guest list for the foundation’s gala by tomorrow? I thought we’d have to do that tonight.”

She hung her head briefly. Then—“Screw it. Dinner after Jacqueline, skate after dinner, guest list
after. Forty-five minutes. That’s it.”

“You sure?”

“We make time for skating. Still, always,” she replied, determined. She hopped over the boards to kiss him lightly.

Four minutes up, time to go.

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viii. Three Years Before Today, Scott

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Scott blinked rapidly as they stepped out of the rink, his wet hair instantaneously going crisp—not dry, crisp—in the dense, shimmering heat. Fuck Montreal summers. “You wanna stop at Foxy’s before we head home? Live music, split the melon salad?” he asked. It had been a good practice day, but in between their two on-ice sessions they’d had a rough JF hour—“I trust him with my body, absolutely, I have since I was eight; that’s why the sex isn’t an issue, really. It’s just a little harder, with my heart, after … I just, I can hear my head saying no, stop. I’m trying, but those were … those years weren’t nothing.”—and while Tessa had been calm and centered when they got back to the rink, he’d been off, out of it just a little mentally, and her jokes and concern hadn’t quite been enough to keep his mind a hundred percent there.

She pursed her lips, spine tensed. “I have that call,” she said vaguely, and he tried to remember if it was jewelry or some Dove shit or something else entirely, if she had even mentioned it to him at all. He failed, and felt shitty. “Why don’t you ask Patch?” she suggested diplomatically. “It feels like you need to talk a little more.”

“Sounds good.” He scratched under his ear. “I’ll see you tonight, yeah?”

“Later, yeah,” she confirmed, her face blank behind shades. He should have known; she never came over after a JF session. She stared at him for a second, then pressed a hand to his chest briefly before she slipped into her car.

He sloped back into Gadbois and found Patch languidly pedaling a recumbent bike in jeans and his puffy vest, laughing quietly at animal videos on YouTube. He must have looked pathetic because Patch countered his melon-salad offer with “Or perhaps a beer at Thierry’s?” Scott nodded and hung out in the lobby, mindlessly inventing a game that he decided would be called Key Basketball, where he tried to toss the key through the attached key ring.

If Tessa were there, she’d totally confiscate his keys, but hand him string cheese in return. Maybe give him a kiss if he were lucky and nobody else was around. Patch came out of the office, finally, in a short-sleeved button down and chino shorts, and they headed out.

Marie and Tess both hated Thierry’s—the wine was too cheap and the pleather chairs too uncomfortable. Farther than strictly necessary from Gadbois, it was the guys’ unspoken go-to when Patch sensed that whatever Scott wanted to ramble about shouldn’t be seen or overheard. That happened pretty frequently; he’d always liked and trusted Patch but since the move he’d been really his only confidante, besides Tessa. Which was an issue, since ninety percent of the things he needed a friend for were related to Tess.

As was his MO, Patch waited until they’d made it to the bar, ordered a round of lagers, and discussed the start of Ligue 1, to say anything. “You skated a little … rough this afternoon, but you
look … you look rough, Scott. You two had JF today, yes?”

“Tessa and I are sleeping together. Again,” he blurted out. Patch’s face did not change. “You knew.”

“It has been … two months? About?”

“Six weeks, yeah,” he admitted. “We don’t want …”

Patch didn’t need explanations. “Makes sense. I don’t think anyone but Marie and I have noticed.”

“That obvious, huh?” he asked wryly.

“We know you well.” Patch shrugged.

“We told JF. We know—we’re being responsible.” He cringed at the phrasing. Fuck. He hadn’t been this nervous discussing a girl since Danny sat him down and told him never to fuck Tessa. The parallels—beyond just the fact that Tessa, apparently, had her own gravitational hold on his life—felt close even though they were half a lifetime apart. “And we’re taking it one day at a time.” He meant to make them sound like solid, responsible adults, instead of two kids fucking their career away, but struggled to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

“And how are you feeling about that?” Patch asked, his voice carefully neutral.

“I mean …” he sighed, went for deflection. “It’s Tessa. She needed four months and a twelve-column spreadsheet to pick marble for her countertops.”

“And how are you feeling about that?”

“I think … When this started, I was a little more there than she was. Or OK with just … you know, trying to figure it out as we go. But she’s all analytical, you know, and with the Games and our commitment there … It makes sense she needs more time. I told her to take it.”

Patch raised an eyebrow. “And how are you feeling about that?”

He sighed. Patch was almost as sneakily good as JF at getting people to talk. Not that he ever really needed the encouragement to pour his heart out. Fuck, that was how he’d gotten into this situation.

“Sometimes—you know T. Sometimes I feel like she … tests things. And then eventually, they break. And she gets to be right all along.”

The words, while completely true, felt like gravel in his mouth. A jinx, almost. He thought of 2013, completely different but also not, holding Tessa as she held her breath. Of 2008, even more completely different but also not, the fury and disappointment that she’d tried to contain until it literally broke her body.

Tessa’s will and determination was a crucible: nothing escaped unchanged. Including him.

God, especially him.

“So sometimes I feel like she’s just waking up and going OK, one more day.” To him, the definitions didn’t matter—they were skating together, and best friends, and also having sex? OK, great, that was literally everything he could possibly have hoped for. As long as they weren’t lying, he didn’t care, otherwise. But he’d done the instinctive, impulsive, Old Scott thing, jeopardized their career and friendship by casually—fine, not-so-casually—mentioning that after the Olympics, coaching their kids’ hockey team would be a good second act, and that had just freaked Tessa out.
Though she had kissed him first, anyways. So.

“And I’m there. I am, Patch. I know I’ve fucked up, but I’m there.” The same way he was on the ice, every day. But a dance required a partner. “She just … Christ, she drives me crazy.” And not always in the fun way.

He wasn’t sure what he had expected—he hadn’t been lying when he reminded Tessa that she had never been easy—but it wasn’t the days alternating between T’s Mona Lisa smile and her genuine laugh and the nights staying up wondering if they weren’t splitting a bed because she was tired of him or simply tired. Nobody else would view her behavior as anything other than consistent, but he could see, could feel, the vast degrees between hot and cold, and they were genuinely unpredictable. In addition to wrestling with What This All Meant, she appeared to hate dates, which was absolutely insane because Tessa loved being spoiled, and it was just sending him further into a confused funk. He remembered once, while watching Jordan complain about her high school boyfriend over Oreos and homework, Kate’s wink of “a fight’s just a good excuse to get flowers.”

Because for every night that dinner ended with a water fight over dishes and him eating her out on his counter, there was a session with JF where she suddenly brought up Jess and Cass, again; for every freaking fantastic session on the ice—and really they were all fantastic these days, he literally could not remember their skating ever being this good for such a stretch—there was a dinner where she informed him that no matter what he did, she wasn’t “built for happy.” It was one of the most haunting, utterly Tess things he’d ever heard, a statement that dug right under his fingernails to where he desperately wanted to scratch.

He’d put it all out there, and had nothing left, and it was like the tense, terrifying minutes before your scores flashed up—good or bad, at least you knew where you stood—in the Kiss and Cry. For the past month, he’d been holding his breath.

“Well,” Patch said, eminently and maddeningly reasonable. “You know what you need to do.”

“I do?”

“You told her she could take time?”

“Yeah.” She was worth the wait. God, of course she was.

“Well, then. You wait.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes.”

“You’re reaching Yoda levels of cryptic, Patch.”

“Be patient, you must.”

Scott laughed, hard. Whenever Patch made a joke, somewhere a skater found her edges. “Patience, huh?”

“I assume … you two don’t expect this to look like a normal … relationship?”

“No, of course not. It’s just like … an extra dimension.” Or something. That was the wording Tessa was experimenting with these days. To him, it mostly sounded like sex-twizzling, all over again, though it did feel different now. “Not dating. For sure.”
“Well, then. You forget that Marie and I remember twenty-year-old Scott. Tessa is allowed to get … to wherever on a different timeline than you, in her own way. Especially when she has been here before. This … I can’t imagine it’s easy for her. She is testing you, whether or not she knows it. It would be stupid for her not to. And Tessa’s not stupid.”

“No. No, she’s not,” he sighed. They were so close. But he remembered the eight years of guilt, of miscommunication, of silence. Of accusing her of not loving him as she fought to salvage their career in 2013; of ignoring and dodging her in 2008 until she, and they, were beyond broken. The bullshit he’d fed himself, the lines Tessa drew around herself. The ways in which the less-than-savory aspects of their personalities had a tendency to curdle and then clash.

Of the time they’d put in, the way they’d always come back to each other, the way they’d clawed their way back, hand-in-hand. Of the talking, the laughter. Of all the rice they had, a pile that still grew every day.

He took another sip of his beer.

“What if … what if we want different things?” He knew he wanted kids, eventually. After the Games. Preferably with her. He didn’t know where she stood.

“When you came back … Marie and I asked you, if the process would be enough,” Patch said carefully. “If it would be enough, even if you don’t win.”

“She’s always enough,” he swore. He wished she believed that too.

“Well then.” Patch shrugged.

“And you think she’ll come around? Eventually?” As an athlete he’d always thrived when cornered, and he was happy to grit into a challenge, but he knew you had to recognize, always, that failure was possible. If you didn’t, that’s when trouble happened.

He just … really hoped she would.

“When has Tessa ever given up on you?” Patch asked simply.

He headed home once his beer went lukewarm, was absolutely dumbfounded to see her curled into the side of his couch, reviewing sketches for the jumpsuit she wanted for Prince. “Hey,” she said, too engrossed to look up, but she did reach forward and press mute on her iPhone, which was blasting 1989—god, he had spent ten years tolerating Taylor Swift for her. “I grabbed your mail. It’s on the table. You really should check it more often; it was basically bursting out of the box.” She pointed vaguely behind her with a deal with it motion.

“Hey, Virtch,” he replied, stunned. “You’re here.”

She shifted, finally looking up. “Yeah? I said I would be when I left the rink. How was Patch?”

“Good,” he nodded, crossing to kiss her on the forehead, like a lame loser husband from a Fifties sitcom. Her brow crinkled under his lips.

“Everything OK?” she asked.

“Yeah. You want dinner?”

“Yeah.” She shifted on the couch to follow his movements. “You sure you’re good?”
“Yeah,” he smiled. “That’s why you sent me to talk it out with Patch, right?”

“You just seemed …” She faltered. “A little distracted. I figured it was what I said to JF.”

“I was. It was,” he confirmed. “But Patch was good, and I’m good.” For the first time since his attempt at a one-month anniversary dinner, he wasn’t trying to convince himself of that fact as he reassured her.

She eyed him, with the slightly-guilty look that always reminded him of when she’d gotten caught goofing off by Carol or smoking by Marina, then patted the space next to her on the couch. “Come here. Let’s talk.”

He sat, inches from her, and watched as she crossed her ankles and arms and looked ahead, face sculpted. Finally, she looked at him. “I know today was rough, and the last couple of months have been rough. You told me not to apologize for how I’m feeling, so I’m not … But I am … I am sorry it’s making you feel like this. Really. I can’t tell you how great you’ve been, and I’m so grateful it’s not impacting our ice time.” She took his hand lightly.

“Mostly,” he replied, acknowledging the day.

“Mostly,” she agreed. “I just … my mom gave me a talk before Sochi, about grace.”

“Like, the Bible stuff?” Surely Kate wouldn’t be giving Tessa a pep talk about dance fifteen years into their career. “God and Jesus and unmerited favor?”

“Yeah,” she blinked, looking surprised—which she shouldn’t have been; his family went to mass every week while her greatest exposure to Catholicism was The Sound of Music—then shook her head. “Anyways, I still think about it sometimes. Acceptance, letting go, those are really hard. But if I don’t start … actually forgiving myself for 2014—”

“And every year back to 2008?” It was uncanny sometimes, still, their synchronicity.

“Yeah. If I don’t work through the guilt and mistrust—of you, but also of me—the more I push and punish myself, the harder it will be. And Scott—Korea is hard enough, you know? This, us … just makes it harder.” She shifted, but kept his hand. “I mean, the good part is you know all the terrible stuff there is to know about me. So it’s like, no surprises, right?” Her laugh was a little raspy.

“And yet I still want to spend a hundred-plus hours a week with you.”

Her chest rose softly, breath catching. “That’s the grace, I guess,” she murmured. She looked at him, steady and steely. His Tess. “I am trying, you know, to be more trusting. And if I didn’t know that you could handle it, because you’ve always handled it … I wouldn’t have tried at all.”

She wasn’t always honest when she said she was trying—he knew her bullshit too well—but this time she was. He swung his arm over her shoulder. Kissed her temple, and reminded her, “We’ve got plenty of time to figure it out. This is where the taking it slow, being intentional, comes in.”

“You sure? You need to tell me if you’re not.”

“I would. I’m good.”

She scooted onto his lap, knocked her head back against his clavicle. “Kate—she isn’t using the cottage over Labour Day. She asked me if I wanted it. Do you want to go? Just the two of us?”

This was her, trying.
“Sounds great,” he said, keeping his voice light. “Hope you like burnt s’mores.”

“Hope you like sand in your swim trunks.”

“That better be a promise,” he laughed huskily, kissing her collarbone and neck as she shifted, providing better access.

She turned, eyes bright. “It is,” she promised, turning around on his lap and beginning to explore his neck, alternating between sucking lightly and raking her teeth over the area. With a giggle that went straight to his groin, she started rocking slowly over his dick, hands tickling his waist.

And then her stomach fucking growled, and she started laughing, so hard her nose kept swiping his Adam’s apple, but still definitely turning him on, since she was basically vibrating on top of him. He threw his head back with a groan.

“OK. Dinner. You need to be fed.” He shifted, composing himself. “You owe me.”

“I’m good for it.” She smacked a kiss on his throat and got up so he could, a glint in her eyes before she snapped into all-business. “We need to discuss nutritional strategy tonight, and I kind of want to practice the entrance to the Latch lift. And I’m going to reorganize your DVD collection while you cook.”

“You organized my DVD collection.”

“Yeah, but I saw a new idea on Pinterest that I think will work better. You’ll like it.”

He wouldn’t care, but he didn’t say that. She worked quietly and he started assembling ingredients, the only sound in the room a tinny How You Get the Girl. The conversation felt unfinished—and really, nothing had changed—but he felt slightly less raw about the ragged, quiet stitching-together of their lives they had to do for the first time in weeks. It would be work; it was going to be hard, and he was going to be here. Wherever they were going, they were going to get there, together. It wouldn’t be normal, it wouldn’t look normal, but whatever they created would be theirs.

It would be enough.

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ix. One Year Before Today, Tessa

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The puppy—nine weeks old and twelve pounds of shaggy reddish perpetual motion—was Scott’s We’re Home from Tour/early Christmas present, but from the moment he suggested naming her Audrey Hepburn Virtue Moir, she became a gift to Tessa as well. A way to say something definitively without saying anything.

Those twenty-plus years of uncertainty and stress and fear and miscommunication had proven to be a powerful and powerfully confusing security blanket. It had given dubious coverage to even their most pathetic lies, casting their actions as Maybe Just a Tessa and Scott Thing to fans and the media and even acquaintances—Gabby Daleman was seriously confused the entirety of Stars on Ice. She could mention they shared a king-sized bed, he could tell a bunch of fans he was going home to her, and as long as they didn’t say yes when asked if they were dating—and they weren’t—only Ellen DeGeneres would publicly challenge them.

(Which was still actually insane, because once they’d stopped lying to themselves, it turned out they
were terrible liars.)

But the name—and, obviously, Audrey herself—was a pretty damn clear sign of commitment. The only thing she could think of that was more blatant, in fact, was an engagement ring.

So maybe better to debut her on Instagram now.

“What do you think?” he asked, still entranced to the point of distraction by the Golden Irish furball. Scott and a puppy—she wasn’t entirely sure she was ready for the havoc. “You like that for her name right?”

“I love it,” she cooed. “Hiiiii Audrey.” This puppy was adorable. “Are you surprised?”

He leaned forward and kissed her. “Are you kidding? This is the best early Christmas gift ever.”

“We should post a photo. I mean, each post a photo.”

His brow furled. “What happened to …”

“We agreed we wouldn’t say anything until we had something to say. We got a dog; that’s something to say.” He still looked skeptical, so she added, all in a rush, “We don’t have to if you don’t want to. But at some point in the course of living our lives, she’ll get out. I’ll probably mention her in an interview for Nivea or Adidas.” It would be a humanizing detail to throw in. “Or you’ll be out walking her and someone will ask for a photo. Or—”

“Yes, yeah.” He kissed her to make her stop talking. “You’re OK with it, actually? Not as like, a defensive PR strategy?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I am.”

He grinned. “OK, what do we do next, Olivia Pope?” He stuck the bow that had gone on Audrey’s bowl on Tessa’s head, and she got an idea.

Hours later, as Scott watched the Leafs-Canucks game with Audrey sleeping on his chest, tuckered out after hours of playing, he asked, “Hey, did anyone say anything on those photos?”

From the opposite corner of the couch, where she was curled up reading *An American Marriage*, Tessa reached for their phones. “Well, we probably should have told Alma first, but Cara’s shown her photos … Anyways. She says she hopes she’s housetrained by the time we come visit. Also, Marie-France texted says Billie wants to dogsit. Julia asks if we have anything to announce. *Nope.*” She shifted over to hand his phone to him to reply to his mom, then toggled hers to the photo she had posted: Her with Audrey under the tree, cross-legged in glasses and laughing as the puppy tried to catch a ribbon. The caption said simply *Meet @scottmoir14’s new favorite roommate.* “Fifty-two thousand likes and counting, lots of heart eyes and OMGs,” she observed. “And a few dissertations on my phrasing of ‘favorite’ roommate. Couple people realize that this is not my house or your old apartment, which: kinda creepy.”

“The London house is all white. This sofa is an adventurous shade of dark gray.” He was chirping her, but it was well more than that: in the Westmount townhouse she had her nice wood floors throughout and her white formal living room lined with built-ins, but besides the adventurous dark gray couch, the TV room—calling it a family room seemed a little too heavy—had a pool table, and all their medals in a display, and Scott’s hockey memorabilia, and those maple leaf pillows she had thought were hilariously tacky when she had been decorating Scott’s bachelor pad nearly three years earlier. Upstairs, three of the four bedrooms were almost pathetically empty—the house was the third they’d looked at, and they’d closed barely a week before leaving for TTYCT, because everyone
who thought they were insane was right—but they’d painted the walls of the master a watery grey similar to his old place, had selected a black frame bed and added a few sage accents.

Relationships were about compromise, after all.

“Shhh, you. But lots of people think she’s cute. Ha, including Meryl. She texted.” Of course Meryl Davis’s first intentional contact in literal years was because of a puppy, not, you know, *when they won the fucking Olympics.*

But she thought of the last real conversation that she had had with Meryl—*I hope you get everything you want. After the Olympics, of course*—and thumbed a gracious text back, then turned to him. “I do think I get a gold medal in puppy-picking.”

He laughed. “How did you guess that was going to be my gift for you?”

“Twenty-one years and you still can’t know all my tricks.” She flipped to his profile, with the photo of him and Audrey playing in the snow in Mont Royal. *Thanks for Audrey Hepburn, T! Best early Christmas present ever.* “The Internet seems to approve of your naming skills.”

“Everyone clear on the relationship upgrade to dog co-owners?”

She shrugged. “There are a couple people saying I named the dog before giving her to you, or that it’s not our dog, it’s your dog, but otherwise I think so. Sure.”

“Sure?”

“They can ask questions, or ask to know more. Whether or not we tell them … up to us.” She’d forgotten that sometimes, in the last year. They both had.

“That’s it?” he pressed.

She stroked the dog. She knew she could seem opaque or reserved, and that made Scott doubt, and when he did, she needed to take the first step so he knew where she was. This was one of those times. “I know we probably could have kept her on lock, but she’s cute, and I want to show her off, and that’s it. It just … feels like time. Really.” The last year, to put it simply, had been exhausting, and she was tired of over-analyzing. Dogs lived to be ten or twelve. Sooner or later, Audrey’s existence would come out. Sooner felt simpler for her, more honest for Scott. Just another decision that didn’t feel like a choice.

But it did feel good.

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*x. Eight Months Before Today, Scott*

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His surprise trip to Paris was the first time they seriously traveled together—stolen getaways to the cottage and fifteen years of tours and competitions absolutely did not count—and of course, given that one minute his stomach felt like bicycle chains were jangling around in it and the next minute like snakes swimming in it, nearly everything went wrong at first. Instead of helping him figure out what Tessa would want to wear, Jordan spent an hour razzing him for wanting to propose to her sister; then he and Tessa went to two different Starbucks in the international terminal at Trudeau and couldn’t find each other; then Air Canada lost his bag, which—seriously, Air Canada? At least it wasn’t THE bag because no way was he checking that.
But as soon as they landed and she got that Audrey-Hepburn-and-croissants look, as soon as she gave her customary Even the Light Looks Different in Paris, Scott spiel that he probably had memorized—nothing else mattered, not even the hotel not having their room ready at check-in. Tessa used the missing bag as an excuse to make their first stop Hermes— a weak excuse; buying a scarf on every trip had been one of her insanely expensive “traditions” since she was sixteen and they got their first JGP check—to buy him ties. He stood still willingly for ninety minutes, letting her snap possibilities over his shoulder as easily as she had once festooned his wrists with her favorite slap bracelets.

This was life, now.

“So, oh thoughtful business partner of mine,” she said, fingers wrapped around his forearm as they waited in a crowded line for their first round of hot chocolate and pastries. “how long are we in Paris for?”

“A week,” he said, very casually. He concentrated on Pierre Herme’s dainty desserts in the gleaming, dark-wood cabinets, mentally going over pronunciations so he wouldn’t make an ass of himself with the snooty salespeople. “I figured Valentine’s Day falling on your midterm break had to be a sign.”

Her eyes widened, and if she had any doubt about why they were in Paris (she didn’t; she hadn’t since Toronto, thank you very much), she didn’t now. “So, through the 21st,” she confirmed, cheeks pink, staring at the mille-fleurs and macarons instead of him

“The 21st.”

She asked no further questions the entire week, sure and certain. He’d made plans—good ones, thank you—but it was a rambling, low-key vacation: a fancy dinner for Valentine’s, champagne and gardenias waiting back in the room; a night at the Moulin Rouge that led to exploring new uses for all those Hermes ties; afternoons rambling anonymously through art museums. Sleepy morning sex and baguettes in Luxembourg Gardens and a lot of boutiques where he mostly told Tess she was gorgeous. Paris was blustery but anonymous, overcast but enchanting, and he goddamned started to see what Tessa was talking about with the light.

As soon as she realized the languid, expansive pace of the week, she bought tickets for a Paris SG-St. Etienne game at Parc Les Princes, in a gesture that was as competitive and thoughtful as always. While it wasn’t hockey, Scott Moir had never turned down any game tickets and wasn’t going to start now, so he yelled mindlessly for both teams, arm wrapped tightly around Tessa’s neck as she cheered along, kissing the hot chocolate mustache off her more than once. She posted some stuff for sponsors on Twitter and Instagram, but he was pretty sure nobody but Jordan and his brothers knew where in the world they were, and it was freeing, to be totally them, unburdened and unworried, after the year they had had.

They were wandering through Le Marais after the Picasso Museum one afternoon, picking their way through jewelry stores where just the rings retailed for three hundred euros, when Tessa noticed an enormous mural arcing over three stories of an old building a few blocks from the Seine. A silhouette of an old-timey couple kissed in the bottom right corner, a spot of yellow gleaming from a painted streetlight the only color. YOU’RE IN EVERY FLASHBACK IN MY STORY grew over and around them in enormous script.

“It’s perfect,” Tessa breathed, gloved hands clasped like she was the heroine in a romance novel. “Excusez moi!” She hailed a nearby middle-aged French woman, who knew what request was coming and looked decidedly unimpressed. “Pouvez-vous prendre une photo de moi et mon copain?”
They took a couple of photos, his arms slung around her waist, until she finally gripped his cashmere peacoat’s lapel and pulled him in for a kiss, a tangle of hands and mahogany hair. When she pulled back, she whispered, “I’m really glad you’re in every part of my story.”

“I’m going to turn you into a squishy pile of brie one of these days,” he teased. “But me too. So fucking much, T.”

(The photo ended up being the centerpiece of the save-the-date, a triptych of older photos below—them in their first competition outfits; looking classy while doing a handshake behind the boards sometime around Sochi; a little drunk-eyed at a gala in the protest-hair era. In all four they struck a sharp, undeniably bridal contrast of him in ebony and her in ivory. “I had to cut out Jess, Fedor, and Chiddy from the 2007 one,” she informed him when she showed him the proofs. “I decided that was a pretty good metaphor for our relationship. Especially Chiddy.”)

“So why Paris?” she asked on their last night in town. They were tucked into some nondescript cafe in the Eighth with squeaky violin music and the damned wicker chairs he hated and a lot of old-timey photos of flowers and accordion players and Notre Dame. She was dressed down in leggings and a pale pink sweater, hair a messy pile, as she tucked into her fourth dinner of crepes. Across the table, he had his fifth plate of steak frites, and a bottle of champagne nestled in a tray between them. “It’s your favorite place, T,” he pointed out, because it was obvious.

“I mean, yeah, it’s my favorite city. But why not, for a trip for today, why not … Montreal, or Vancouver, or London … even PyeongChang, I guess.” Places that had significance to them, on a day that had significance to them. She stole another one of his fries—really, he was signing up for a lifetime of fry-thieving; she was lucky he wasn’t possessive like she was—and looked at him thoughtfully.

He nodded. “I … I wanted better memories of this city, I guess. Because it’s your favorite place.”

He’d worried, for so many years, that he wouldn’t fit into the world she was building for herself, wasn’t worthy of her time outside the rink. He might never call the Tokyo office, but he knew now he’d go to Japan dozens of times for tours and to take teams to NHK, and he was sure, now, that it was close enough. That the world she preferred was one they built together.

She crunched the fry. “Was last time we were together in Paris seriously … Yeah. It was.”

“I … grew up a lot since then.”

“We both did,” she said, an eyebrow raised. “Don’t forget, I spent that season trading away our lives to try and screw over Marina.”

“To win the Olympics. And I didn’t trust you when I should have.”

“I—” she stopped herself. “Not a competition. We’re still here. A team. We grew, together.”

“We grew together.”

“Chose this partnership every day.”

“It’s still pretty extraordinary though, right? How everything lined up eventually. I’m going to get you to say so, one day.”

She paused, considered, stopped saying something and finally started again, voice firm. “No. Even if
there is destiny, inevitability—the beauty’s in the choice, Scott. I’ll always choose you.”

He’d almost thought he’d had her, finally, but her words left his throat dry.

The bicycle chains returned to his stomach, this time in a furious foxtrot with the snakes.

“So to us, making better choices in the future than we did in the past.” He raised a glass.

They finished the bottle and “split” a dessert and got the bill, but as she started to wander back to the hotel, vaguely subdued and huddled against him due to the wind, he said, “No. This way.”

“Scott. It’s almost eleven. Where are we going?” Her tone was carefully oblivious, but her eyes lit up as if she’d had three shots of espresso.

He smirked, the tempo of the chains-and-snakes duel picking up. “Shhhhh. Sweetie. You’ll see. What were you saying, about Madi and Evan’s Worlds choreo?”

She gave him an unimpressed look of I Am Onto You, Scott Moir, Partner of Twenty-One Years, but dug back into her twizzle analysis. But eventually they both fell silent.

He led her through the winding, glittering streets, wind whistling softly. Through a park she’d visited a million times before. To the base of a pretty damn iconic monument she had loved since she was six and her dad brought it back to her in a little snow globe with the inscription La Vie Est Belle. She looked around, curiosity finally getting the better of her. “Are we … having a picnic?” She craned her neck in search of a traveling harpist or a cheese basket or something basic-ass romantic.

“No,” he nodded. “We’re going up.” He took her hand, led her to a fence they’d have to hop.

She blinked. “How?”

He shrugged. “Romain knew a guy.” That guy had received a wire transfer from him equivalent to a mortgage payment. He thought, fleetingly, of the You’re a Good Kid Scottie years: Charlie’s insistence that he would propose to an Ilderton girl, last name unknown, after a Leafs victory; Leanne and Danny’s earnest discussion about whether it would be two marriages or three; Cara’s cackle as she bet Sheri that whomever Scott married would be pregnant at the wedding. He couldn’t wait to get home. God, he couldn’t wait to get home and see the looks on the stupid smug faces as Tessa—Tessa Jane McCormick Goddamned Virtue—outlined how he’d rented out the Eiffel Tower. He wanted to yell, run, divest of some excess energy, but that would kill the moment a little. “Come on.” Her eyes widened, wild and knowing.

He held out his hand. She took it.

Romain’s guy’s guy, Denis, waited at the base, waved them over. They exchanged a few words en francais but he was clearly freezing and not impressed at having to keep the Eiffel Tower open late per a special friend of a friend. When the elevator stopped at the first stage and the guide beckoned out with a flick of the wrist and a smile, Tessa looked at him, confused again.

He tugged her forward.

The floor was eerie and empty and echoing, dim floor lights casting more shadow than guidance. He’d done reconnaissance when she was shopping the other day, and had a map in his head, but he still went left first instead of right, Tessa trailing silent and a little nervous next to him as they wandered a bit. Finally, he saw the glow of yellow and white he was looking for. He led her toward it, and she gasped, “Oh Scott.” Her hands pressed to her mouth as tears sparkled in her eyes.
An ice rink, cool and glistening and overlooking a near-sleeping Paris, unfurled in front of them.

“We did say,” he finally said, voice cracking, heart racing, coat pocket burning. “We did tell everyone we’d get together for an Olympic anniversary skate every year.” He didn’t think he’d ever been more nervous in his life.

She threw herself at him, body pressed close through their winter layers, heartbeats syncing, the kiss deep and wet and just a little dirty, breaking apart only when her laugh-cry grew too loud. “Happy anniversary, Scott,” she finally said, tipping her forehead against his, smiling through her tears. “I just … I ... You’re everything to me, Scott.” She curled her fingers through his hair. “You’re the love of my life, you really are.”

He thumbed her cheek, wiping away the wetness. “Happy anniversary, T.”

She pulled back, still a little overwhelmed. She sniffed, wiped her eyes, took a deep breath. Composed herself. “Ok. So, did you fit skates into your jacket or …” She laughed, a little wild.

“There are rentals,” he said, heading toward the booth. He’d planned this, planned all of it. “They should be … aha!” He pulled two beat-up pairs out from the counter, hit play on the sound system while he was back there. Valse Triste wafted through the air first.

She laughed a little, an of course you did kind of thing. “Do you remember any of the steps?” she asked, pudgy gloved hands fumbling over her laces.

“Not really,” he admitted. “Maybe the step sequence. But the feeling, yeah.”

“I remember the costume. I loved it so much, even though it was so itchy. But I felt grown-up, for the first time. You, me, center ice.”

“It was always real.” It might not have always been romantic, but it was always real. Raw, unfiltered, honest, too much, too real.

“Every time,” she breathed. “Here. Check my boot, will you?”

He tugged the laces. “You’re good,” he confirmed.

“Ready?” she asked, standing at the edge of the ice. The waltz ended, and This Must Be The Place, a favorite warmdown for years, kicked up. He thought they had about a dozen songs until Come What May, but honestly, he was so nervous he wasn’t sure he knew his middle name, and he sure as fuck didn’t remember what was on the CD he’d handed the guy.

He checked his pocket, surreptitiously. Good to go. “Always.”

He took her hand yet again, and they skated toward their future.

Chapter End Notes

This was my first chapter back from a big vacation, first with an editor, and I think it was just a lot more settled after a big writing frenzy in April and May. It’s fitting, given the theme of commitment. I wanted to get across a “were really doing it” mentality, show them choosing each other each and every day, but also make it clear that even after all that growth stuff still wasn’t easy, or perfect. Two sections I ended up liking
best were theme-fillers, first Scott when they’re driving to Canton and then Scott with Tessa and the new baby (and wow I was surprised at the # of questions I got about postbaby Tessa! She has two more kids, guys. She’s good.). They, and the section with Tessa’s dad, were there to illustrate the importance of quotidian steadfastness (well, I felt I needed to wrap up the Tessa’s-parents’-divorce thread, and get a dig in at Evan Bates, as well.) I tried to be really conscious that this wasn’t the “triumphant” section—that was 14–and to keep the story evolving and interesting. Those, plus the BJ scene, helped with that a lot, I think.

The Patch and Scott scene was really exciting for me to write, though I’m only 95 percent confident I nailed it. But Patch had been waiting so patiently around the edges of story that it was nice to finally bring him in and to play up the square of the four of them again. This section, if it’s unclear from the timeline, happens in the middle of Tessa’s earlier—after her “I don’t know if I can do happy” and before ACI when she puts both feet in. It’s her trepidation from his perspective, and he finally reaches a breaking point at ACI. I wanted to still keep emphasizing their imperfections (the next chapter helps with that a lot too!) and loved the money line about Tessa breaking things and getting to be right.

Her musings on grace were initially a lot more of a cast-iron pan to the face, but it started to feel like, between her “I love you” last chapter and that it was a little too much of Tessa Speaks At Scott About Love. So it got dialed back, and a little more ruminative. And it felt pretty heavy on the GRACE IS A THING thing. Giving her the space to keep working it out was critical, a give and take that didn’t quite leave it settled but left Scott in a ready state for the future, whatever it holds. It’s again a small-bore commitment, nothing big or flashy. Just knowing that he promised to wait for her and she’s worth the wait, so he’ll hang in there.

Of course, since we’re so close to the end, it’s time to start getting some of the fun, showy forms of commitment in there. I’d had the dog and the proposal blocked out for some time, but it was super fun exploring Paris and just casually researching small details for the fic. The mural was based off of a mural that was a lot more melancholic I stumbled upon in the Third—it read “There are still too many flashbacks of you in my story” and decided to get that in there. I was very sure by this point I didn’t want to write out the expected moments, like the actual proposal, but I really wanted a big, crescendo-y, Rom Com Moir moment. Part of this was because I was running out of Big Words to use, since I’d used so many, but it also kept with the spirit of the narrative and kept the moment between the two of them.
nobody sees what we see, they're just hopelessly gazing

Chapter Notes

Annnnnnnd I'm back! Apologies for the amount of time between posts; I know that I had hoped to be better post-vacation, but the Life Reasons still apply. This chapter -- which deals with fights and forgiveness, and the moments in a relationship that nobody else can see or understand -- also kicked my ass three ways to Sunday, since a lot of it takes places in the post-PC 2018 era. Wrangling a through line that worked was a little bit harder than I expected, as I tried to make it "fit" with some weird behaviors:) It's also, um, pretty long. Though I feel ya'll know what you got into? ;p Two to go and then we're wrapped up with this crazy crazy ride.

Massive thanks to manques, as always, for nearly 1k edits and comments and suggestions, including to absolutely rewrite two sections and flip a perspective (which I had never done before). If you empathize with Tessa, it's because she made her empathetic. And a huge thanks to firstofall on tumblr for letting me bounce ideas regarding (ie, bitch about) their PR strategy off of her. It's so lovely to have another comms professional to talk these through! (And before you ask, this is not how I would run their press or media strategy.)

And finally, I want to just mention that the Charlie section was one of my top-five sections, along with the discussion of Carmen, the prank scene, the car-hood breakup, and Chiddy. It’s completely unnecessary to the narrative but following the thread of that friendship was just gratifying to me.

Title is from Beyonce's XO, one of the most romantic songs of all time, from one of the best poets about adult relationships of all time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

i. Nine Months Before Today, Tessa


“Upstairs!” she yelled back, quickly setting Audrey down on the floor so she could trot over to the bed inside her crate. Scott said no dogs on human beds, but this was why Audrey liked Tessa best.

“In bed already?” he asked, appearing at the bedroom door.

“Ugh, yes. Yesterday was like eighteen hours of meetings and two shoots and a banquet in Toronto, then I had to go to London for class, and I swear twenty-two is so young, like, god, kids these days —what?” He looked dopey, and suspicious, his arms pretzeled behind his back. Scott was so bad with secrets.

(Most of the time. The proposal was a total surprise.)

“Hi,” he said, leaning down to kiss her. “I missed you. Montreal was colder without you here.”
“It’s January, you goof.” She smiled and tugged at his elbow, shifting up to sit on her haunches. “What’s behind your back? A present?”

“Special delivery!” He brandished his treasure.

She examined the puffy oversized envelope, his name and Gadbois’ address printed clearly on an address label with the logo of Condé Nast Canada. “Is that—which ones?”

“Both, I think.” He tore open the shiny plastic, and two magazines tumbled out. From their bed, she smiled back from *Elle Canada*; he smirked at her from the cover of *GQ*. They were courtesy copies, would hit newsstands on February 1. “Which one do you want to read first?”

“Yours, obviously.” She grabbed the copy. “Hi, handsome,” she cooed at photo-Scott. “That shirt really is great.”

“That shirt was $700,” he rebutted. She had purchased it from the shoot anyways—investment piece, she’d get him to agree eventually. “You look really beautiful, Tess.” He stared at the image of her brushing faux-windswept waves out of her face in an oversized Kit & Ace cashmere sweater.

Getting the cover had been a dream for so long, but like most material dreams, it now felt like a checked-off box rather than an actual achievement. She’d accomplished so many dreams in the last year, a beautiful and unbelievable and hard and weird year. Now that they were on the other side, the attention finally receding, it was time for new dreams.

“Thank you.” She smiled, settling back to stare at him in the Theory shirt, his hair her favorite length. Her mom was already planning a side-by-side frame in the library, next to the photos of them winning sectionals in middle school.

“Are you reading?” he asked. “Don’t laugh. I sound like an idiot. ‘Uhhh Tessa, Tessa so nice, I miss Tessa.’”

She laughed, then kissed his cheek. “You sound like that when I’m there too,” she assured him, straight-faced. “I love it.” She flipped to page 57, as directed by the table of contents. The interviews had been on back-to-back days earlier in the month. They’d done them separately, since they were separate projects, though she had come to his photoshoot to be supportive and make sure his smile didn’t look too goofy or forced.

“Your feet haven’t touched the ground since PyeongChang?” He looked up from the copy of *Elle*, amused. She always sounded like the most frozen, cliched version of herself in interviews.

“For a lot of reasons,” she said, waggling her eyebrows at him before digging into his piece. She scanned until she started seeing her name.

*Normally a motormouth, Scott struggles to describe his partner. “Tess is the most extraordinary person, hands-down, flat-out. Most creative, most thoughtful, most beautiful, most driven, most visionary, most supportive. Funniest, steadiest, you name it. Making her laugh still feels like this, Christ, her, she thinks I’m funny? thing. You know? But most of the day-to-day, it’s just us still figuring shit out, making sure the dog doesn’t go hungry and choreographing show numbers and managing schedules and talking through individual projects like [ A Little Moir Conversation ]. She saw the email with the offer first, came up with the name about two minutes later. Weighed in on the theme song, every major creative or brand decision because she’s brilliant at that.” He knocks a 5-ball into the back right pocket and raises a fist in victory before refocusing. “So every day, it’s just very small and normal and fun and relaxed. And then suddenly I step back and see the full sweep—it feels so big, bigger than us. Feels like a story to me too, sometimes. And then I realize—she’s made*
me who I am. She makes me better, the longer we stay on this crazy journey together. And that—I know now, twenty-one years later, not to take that for granted.”

“This ... is lovely, Scott.”

“You too, Virtch,” he said after a beat, voice hoarse.

“I don’t remember—what’d I say?” She leaned over to peek.

“It’s been the most incredible, overwhelming year,” Virtue starts, carefully tucking her hair behind her ear before wrapping her hands around her oversized tea mug. “Achieving our dream, on our own terms, as adults. We just wanted to win the Olympics, not meet Ellen or mount this really special tour across Canada or get these crazy new opportunities and elevated profile and amazing experiences. Everything was just incredible, and touching, especially coming out of a tightly focused training environment. But the interest, particularly in our personal relationship, was also really overwhelming. I’m super private—twenty years in a sport as image-focused as figure skating, and you need to draw really clear lines around what you will let in and what you just can’t—but also very much a people-pleaser and a perfectionist, so I didn’t want to let anyone down or, you know, make the wrong move. And figuring out how to explain something that is so big and precious and central to my being was hard. I was caught off-guard, we both were. People wanted answers, about us and our relationship, about us as people, about what we were going to do next. Frankly, we had no clue. About any of it. We could barely wrap our heads around winning the Olympics.” She looks contemplative, almost surprised at the honesty—as she reminds me eight more times, she’s very, very private. “So it just forced a lot of conversations, about our comfort with the public, about our future, about what we wanted to do, together and separately. We were grateful to have those conversations. And at the end of the day, nobody else can understand the life I’ve lived but him, and that just makes me so grateful, and humbled, and feel so safe.”

She wrinkled her nose. Even just the quotes felt like re-reading a book—a story that happened to someone else. “I mean, it does sound real enough—especially for me—” she started.

“But nothing like reality?”

“Exactly,” she said, burrowing into his shoulder more deeply. “Nobody has any idea that the reality was better.”

“Eventually.”

“Eventually.”

They both laughed.

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ii. One Year Before Today, Scott

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The delirious Oh shit we’re going on Ellen! phase lasted a full eighty minutes—from Tessa’s scream when she saw Julia’s email as Sam was driving them home, through a Yeah! dance party in the car, through some very enthusiastic sex, first against the doorframe and then in bed. But Scott could practically feel the millisecond that Tessa’s liquid limbs began to freeze.

It had been a dizzying few days back from PyeongChang, to say the least. The Ellen offer was like everything else that had transpired since Mike had asked them to carry the flag—pinchable and
dreamy to the point of absurdity. Their world had cracked wide, their platforms had risen, and though he hadn’t processed it fully, he could feel there was no going back. “You a’right, T?” he mumbled, sliding his palm behind her shoulder muscle. Tense.

“Mmmm,” she responded, then shifted. “It’s just … You know why Ellen asked us on, right?”

“Because we’re the fucking Olympic champions.” He kept his voice light and steady. None of the shit she worried about actually mattered. The Olympics, them, that’s what mattered.

“Sure, but also because they think we’re fucking. She’s going to ask about that. She’s, like, famous for it. Making celebrities squirm.”

“We’re not celebrities,” he said, but that wasn’t the case, not at the moment. They had tripped over their toe picks and charmed the world, becoming front-page news in every outlet in Canada, posts on more blogs than he knew existed. The rampant interest from the U.S. and Russia and Jordan and South Africa all centered on their epic history, their chemistry, the question on the tip of everyone’s tongue: Where they dating? Or fucking? And then there was the backlash, the loud and sanctimonious insistence that everything was a marketing tactic, just excellent and committed acting done for the sake of judges and fans, that anyone who thought they were fucking was a simple-minded idiot. Danny and Charlie had laughed so hard at that, even Jordan told them to knock it off.

Not-lying-not-addressing had worked before the Olympics because nobody in skating cared and the Canadian media had stopped asking around 2012, but now with the international interest, the question was suddenly fair game at home too. Now their non-answers were hilariously, bewilderingly, painfully inadequate.

And none of that even took into account everything happening across social media.

The girls at bars asking for selfies. iPhones pointed at them on the street outside of the Bell studios. GIFs of him touching her, always. Tessa had initially kept up the same upbeat parry—or so Cara said; he didn’t check—but as the chorus of fans had gotten louder, she’d slowly retreated behind an internet version of Press Conference Face. It was bewildering to realize that people suddenly wanted a photo with him not because they were genuinely figure skating fans, but because it gave them some weird social media cachet.

He and Tess had sorted through offers with Julia and Tom, genuine excitement mixed with grateful awe with a dash of deep ambivalence underlined by bone-cutting exhaustion. Tess had spent about forty-five minutes on the phone with Elisha, Babsy had gotten him in touch with Sid and the Great One himself, and the message from all of them was basically: yeah, fame was weird and it was going to suck for a while, but it would die down and you learned to cope. T’s face had looked more pinched afterwards, not less.

She sat up, slipping slowly into her new Leafs jersey, and slipping away from him. “I just … We’re going to be a brand for a long time,” she said, hesitant and surprised and a little sad. She started futzing with a hairbrush. “People are going to want us together.”

“Try not to be too upset about that,” he said dryly. He couldn’t help sounding a little stung. “Gee, three Olympics together, committed for two years, best friends for twenty—god, I wish he weren’t associated with me.”

“Please don’t,” she said. “I don’t mean it like that. This has been a dream. A beautiful, insane dream.”

“I know,” he acquiesced, with a soft smile. “But.” She had a but, of course she had a but.
“But it’s going to take longer to untangle professionally than we thought. We’re a package deal, and people are going to want us, the partners. That’s not necessarily a bad thing,” she added quickly. “I’m OK with the attention—it could be good, we just have to make sure it’s calibrated to work for us. Right now we don’t know how this will impact future plans.” She chewed her lip, considering. “I mean, it’s more insane than Vancouver. And a lot of that’s the romance angle. Especially for Ellen.”

“Especially how?”

“People are more interested in that than the skating or the win. Ellen’s only inviting us on to grill us about whether or not we’re sleeping together. It’s the only question she’ll ask. The … evading, the not-answers, that’s not going to work. Fuck, that didn’t work at the Olympics.” Her eyes flicked toward him, appraisingly, coolly professional. She leaned back against his dresser, hands on its edge, one foot curled back and her big toe stubbed into his carpet. “I think we need an outright denial.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “A lie,” he clarified stubbornly.

“Sure, but to protect ourselves. We know the truth.”

“It’s still a lie.”

“We’ve said the entire last two years that it was a skating partnership first and our friendship second and then sleeping together third,” she said, clinging to her old rationale even as her voice weakened with each word. “It’s not that different, right?”

“Tess.” She knew better. “That’s bullshit.”

“Scott. I just want to protect our personal privacy. And keep our professional life focused on our achievements and goals,” she pushed back, earnest and insistent. “We just won the fucking Olympics, Scott. The Olympics. Do you really want people talking about our sex life instead of that?”

“So what if we just tell them?” he suggested. “Everyone has questions. Answer them, once and for all. Rip the bandaid off.”

“Scott—”

She stared at him, mouth open and alarmed. “No,” she said, raw and final and betrayed in a vehement combination that surprised him. “Absolutely not.”

Taken aback, he folded his arms, and raised his eyebrows, which she noticed. “Madi and Evan are public, and nobody cares. Kaitlyn and Andrew have their whole weird showmance going on, and nobody cares.”

“Yes, because nobody cares.” She rebutted, then softened. “We … agreed we wouldn’t say anything. Or that we wouldn’t … say anything … until … something.” They hadn’t agreed, he realized. They hadn’t planned anything. Tape from any press conference in Korea would prove that.

“We’re together, aren’t we?” he asked, defiant and irritated. “That’s something. But right now, it’s a will-they-won’t-they narrative. Like Meredith and McDreamy.” And Tessa thought she was the only one who knew PR and Shonda Rhimes. “We give them answers and the mystery is gone. Nobody will care.”

Her eyebrows jumped to her hairline. “Lots of people will care, because they care right now,” she retorted, and he felt like he was being fucking scolded. “And a confirmation gives them permission to care more. Not about our skating, about our lives. Whether we’re fighting, or not. Whether we’re
engaged, or not. Whether I’m pregnant, or not.”

“Does it?” he asked, genuinely questioning. “We say something, they get their answer, it goes away.” He scratched under his ear.

She struggled for words before settling on, “Scott, I don’t think that’s how that works. Especially right now.”

“Why the hell not?”

“You really want to announce we’re … I don’t even know what, to Ellen DeGeneres? Seriously. Will you be jumping on a couch, too?”

“Yeah, it’s our story. Together, us. It’s us. All of us.” He was sick of evasion, and the attention, but he also—he got why the narrative mattered, finally. Hell, he knew it had set them apart at the Games. “Would it be the worst thing, to give people a happy ending on the way out of the door?” Especially if doing so meant he could hug her in public without freaking out about some camera pointed at him? The jig was up.

(Granted, they, especially him, had blown the jig up, but still—jig, up.)

“We don’t owe anybody anything. And I don’t want our sex life to be the capper on our careers, on twenty years of friendship. The gold medal is.”

“It doesn’t take away our medals. Or history. And I’d like to hold your hand in public sometime in the next decade.” He’d needed her, coming out of the London airport, and she’d recoiled from him. It had hurt.

She looked like she might be persuaded, but then she shook her head quickly. “I have always done what it takes for our career, but since Sochi I promised myself that I’d get to have a private life, Scott. You and me, that’s that.”

“We’ll still get that! People will just know we’re together.”

“Have you read anything that they’re writing about us? About how when we say we’re creating a story on ice it means we’re faking an off-ice relationship? And milking it all for media attention?”

“I think you’re overthinking this. Have you read anything? People want us to be together! We are together! Everyone’s happy, everyone wins.”

“Yeah, most people will think it’s just our whole romantic Canadian sweethearts narrative, but we’re going to get people who say we’re still faking it. Or in it for the attention. Especially since we confirmed on Ellen. Or they just want more details.”

“I thought you no longer cared what people thought.” He felt a little shitty throwing it back at her—he knew what sort of number Marina and David and the judges and the blogs and hell, even Kate OK’ing the nose job had done on her, why she protected her privacy so vigilantly—but this was now absurd. If they had kids, were they supposed to refer to them as a business collaboration?

“Yeah, but I don’t see the need to feed unnecessary speculation about our personal life. What do you think would happen if we just announced that we’re a couple on Ellen?”

“I don’t know, T, I guess you wouldn’t be able to back out as easily.” He tried to keep the frustration out of his voice, but he couldn’t. He was probably being a little idealistic, but she was being unrealistic. He felt as exhausted as he had in Korea. How was it less than a week ago they were
giggling through a business meeting on this topic in her bed in London? It felt like the giddiness of
the last several days—months really—was about to bubble over into some more dangerous.

She stopped, softening. “Scott. That’s not what I meant.”

“OK. What did you mean, then? You’re all over the place here, T.”

“We’ve never needed anyone’s external validation.”

“Because I didn’t think you were scared of what we had. Now, with this? I don’t know where
you’re at, T.” It sure as fuck sounded like she was scared, and running.

“Don’t force me into a corner here.”

“I’m not the one boxing us in.”

Hurt flickered across her face, and he tightened his arms across his chest. She wasn’t the only one
allowed to be stubborn.

“I just … You know what they say about making big decisions at really busy moments, right?” she
asked, switching tacks. She started pacing the room, catlike.

He knocked his head against his headboard. “What do they say?” He tried not to sound as frustrated
as he felt.

He felt her come to a halt in front of him. “Don’t.” Her tone was dry, almost amused, and it rankled.
His neck snapped back up and he stared at her, incredulous.

“That’s your move here? To not move?”

“Baby. It’s just … It’s a frenzy right now, and saying _hey, world, we’re together!_ will only feed it.
We need time to breathe. To think.”

“I don’t need time to think, T.” He hadn’t for three years. He was pissed and hurt, and the accusation
—that she did, was back to having one foot out the door—bled through his tone.

“Not about … us.” She looked stricken. Fuck. “About us and everyone else. About us and skating.
About us and the rest of our lives. But not about _us_. No, Scott. Not that.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. He always apologized first, he was beginning to notice, and it annoyed him. But
he had clearly wounded her, and the overprotective instinct was hard to override.

“Me too. I do … I want to be present, like with skating. And enjoy it, together, and keep it _ours_, as
we figure stuff out. This … This is amazing.” She laughed a little, like she still couldn’t believe it.

Because it really was extraordinary.

But.

He chewed at a cuticle. “People still want answers.” He snagged some skin along the nail, drew
blood. “And if we confirm, at least we’re not lying.” He thought of all the things a denial would
entail: separate travel plans and stupid questions and more evasion. Guilt that ate him up, divided
them.

“Lying again,” she spat in a strangled groan, more to herself than him, eyes on the ceiling as she
shook her head. She put her head in her hands briefly before snapping back to look at him. “OK.
Fine. I’ll do it.” Her voice was clipped, but calm. Her face was classic Press Conference. The mood in the room shifted just as abruptly.

“What?”

“Let’s tell Ellen. We’ll get a lot more questions—at every Stars interview, every interview for our fall tour and for anything new, every interview. We’ll get shit from fans on tour, get a lot of comments on Twitter, get requests from magazines to do another TV show. We’ll become the commodity. The story.”

“Come on, Tess, we’re already the story.”

“And that’s so great, isn’t it? I’m sure we’ll sell more tickets on tour. No more questions about our skating or the twenty-one years of work, or how we’d like to say thank you to Canada, or how we’d like to improve skating culture. But hey, we won’t have lied to Ellen fucking deGeneres!” The press conference composure slipped as her voice got increasingly bitter and wild, shrill and shouty in a way he hadn’t heard since Sochi, since Marina. That even then had been pretty rare. She was terrified. It terrified him.

Then her face folded back into What a Compliment Press Conference face, and he realized losing her permanently behind that mask terrified him more.

“If lying to Ellen is your line in the sand, Scott, fine. Let’s tell Ellen.”

He realized that, despite the sarcasm, she really would cave, if he pushed hard enough. If this mattered enough to him. Tessa was committed, and Tessa was a professional, and she would go out there and bat her eyelashes and say “Well, actually…” and giggle and let him kiss her hand, or some bullshit like that. She would joke with Ellen that since they announced it there first, she could officiate the wedding. She would smile patiently through all the questions, charm the pants off every interviewer, drop some comment about how he never put away his hockey bag during the Tessa Takeover Day that Jess was helping her to plot. She would do all those things for him, a performance on the outside and dead inside the entire time.

And it would break her. Shatter the boundaries she’d constructed around herself over the last two and four and twenty years, cut right to the soft sponge of Tessa. It drove him nuts, a little, but he could tell it would.

And if she broke, they broke.

He couldn’t be the guy that pushed her to that point.

“I’m being an ass,” he said at last. “Come here. Please? I’m sorry.”

She moved closer to the bed. “I’m sorry too. For yelling. And for not bringing this up earlier. I … was kind of avoiding it.”

“You knew we would get Ellen? And that everything would … get to this? Come on.” She was good—and she thought she was even better—at playing the PR game, but this entire ride had been a trip, already.

“No, of course not,” she said quickly, curling onto the bed. “It’s just … You hate narrative and PR so much, and evading—‘what a compliment,’ ‘it means we’re doing our job,’ we went through all of that at my suggestion, and in the end it wasn’t a very good strategy.” Her head listed against the pillow. “I thought I could handle it, and I left us vulnerable, and I’m sorry.”
“Why—” He stopped himself, searched for less confrontational phrasing. “I’m curious, can you tell me why you didn’t say anything?”

She rolled her neck, stared off. “The show was my idea, the bridal magazine was my idea, the photo shoot in the lake was my idea. We’re a team, but I took the lead on the off-ice PR stuff for so many years.” She held up a hand before he could protest. “No, I did. I talked you into some stupid stuff. And during the comeback, I just really didn’t want attention or to fight. So I avoided it until it blew up. Right now.”

He tugged her into his arms. “Yeah, I didn’t exactly help, though, or make it easy, before the comeback. So, I’m sorry for that.” He thought back to a Tim Horton’s parking lot, Tessa next to him and a thousand miles away, neatly laying out the frameworks of narrative. Realizing that it extended far beyond the boards, well past the judges. Even then, she’d known how to make it work, had played the long game.

“I appreciate that.” She finally touched him, running fingers through his hair as she appraised him. “So, Ellen won’t let us get away with a deflection—she’ll push and push until it’s basically a confirmation anyway. And if we’re not confirming, that means we have to deny.” He stiffened a little. “We’ll just do it this week, ok? Now, on Ellen, when everyone’s watching. Then it’s back to change nothing, confirm nothing. Nobody will care, after. It’ll go away soon enough.”

(It would not.)

“OK,” he sighed. “Just this week?” It mattered somehow.

“Yeah. I’ll even say it, OK? So you don’t have to lie.” It was a technicality as thin as the ones they’d used during Carmen, but that was sort of their style. “We have Le Monde tomorrow. I do think it’ll be easier if we go on there, say something first. Less staged. Take some air out before we go on Ellen.”

“It’ll be OK,” he said. “We’re great performers.” He was trying for supportive.

“But only with other people, not with each other,” she reminded him. All real. “This is for us. I don’t want to say anything until we have … something to say.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Something?” Something meant one thing to him, one small thing from Tiffany’s. Of course from Tiffany’s.

“Something,” she confirmed. “Someday. But not yet. We don’t have the time. And the next couple months are gonna be incredible. We want to savor this, right?” Her eyes shone with excitement, possibilities. He knew she had a better sense than anybody of what they could make this year.

“Right,” he agreed. If it kept the attention at bay, if it kept Tessa from freaking out, if they’d get to a something —fine. He could deal with some craziness in the course of what was already an amazing year. “Yeah. So when we finally come back to Montreal—” It was going to be a while, probably July or August or never, at this rate “—what do you think about looking for someplace permanent? I’m thinking like a house.” Tessa would never sell her London place—and it made sense to keep something local—but he was beginning to think, if they ever finished the renovation, he should just gift his house to Charlie.

She stilled. “No rash decisions when something big just happened,” she reminded him. But while her mouth wasn’t smiling but her eyes definitely were. She wasn’t at a no, not even close. “Let’s think about it when we’re done with tour.” She pulled him in for a quick kiss before standing again. They were meeting the Carons for dinner.
“You’d get to redo another kitchen,” he pointed out, as he tugged his shirt back on. “New spreadsheets about marble. You love spreadsheets about marble.”

“I do,” she said, pawing through the shirts she kept in his closet.

“Hey T?”

“Mmm?” She turned back with a smile.

“I’ll help with the Ellen question, OK? And the rest of them,” he said. “Partners. Even in this insanity.” He wasn’t sure this was the best way to deal with it—and god, he wanted to hold her hand when they walked onstage—but she was so worried. And he trusted her. He’d never dropped her before. He wasn’t going to start now.

“Scott, I know you don’t like—”

“Partners. Even through this insanity.”

She nodded, wary and resolute, wearing the same look she’d had when they drove to Canton for the first time and when she woke up from surgery for the second time and when she’d first-kissed him for the third time.

Come whatever-the-fuck may, they were in this.

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iii. Two Years Before Today, Tessa

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“OK, so you’re upset,” she said, tossing her purse down on the king-sized bed in her room. “Let’s talk.” She paced toward the window.

“I’m not mad, I’m disappointed,” he said, and there was a dry thread of sarcasm that made the hair on the back of her neck prickle. “We’re not dating. I get it.” He flopped on the bed, almost petulantly.

She stared at him, hands on her hips. “Are you pouting? Seriously? She was some junior pairs skater who saw us in Vancouver when she was in grade two. Did you want me to clarify that we had sex last night?”

“Tess, I get keeping stuff quiet, really, I do,” he responded, his tone just barely staying on the polite-Canadian side of sardonic. “If you say that it’s going to impact our narrative—”

“I said it would detract from our skating,” she corrected, serrating her words with careful, huffy breaths. “And it would. The whole Canadian sweethearts narrative? We’ve worked too hard, Scott.”

He sat up on the bed. “You created that narrative.” His voice was flat. Terrifying. Accusatory.

“*We* created that narrative,” she countered evenly. “We are a team. And you’ve been there every step of the way. Feeling me up on ice, putting your arm around me in interviews, talking about how I was your first kiss, mentioning that we’re sleeping together in a Skate Canada video! That’s all narrative. I mean—you picked *Good Kisser* for a tour when you were dating Kaitlyn!” She busied herself removing her jewelry, placing it neatly in its leather case.

He blinked. “OK, that came out wrong. I meant it more in an ownership way—it didn’t just happen.
You’re right,” he said, with enough contrition that she believed him. “I’m sorry.” But then, “Wait. You said you didn’t mind the ‘you’re so restless’ thing!”

“I said it didn’t matter. Not that I didn’t mind.”

“What’s the difference?”

“The difference is that people are going to think whatever they think, but no, I would prefer not to tell Canada about our sex life.” She grabbed silk PJ shorts and a Tigers shirt of his and started changing, trying to keep moving, her eyes anywhere but him.

“It was a slip!” He yanked off his own shirt over his head, probably for the same reasons.

“That’s why I didn’t care,” she repeated, trying not to roll her eyes. She threw the dress—beautiful, but now claustrophobically itchy—into the laundry bag. “Which is good, frankly,” she added, before she could stop herself, “because you slip all the time.”

“That, there! I’d like to talk about that.” His tone took on the annoying, therapized bent that made her so irritated. “You obviously do care.”

“I actually do not, and I think we’re still talking about the fact that you’re pissed I didn’t tell some sixteen-year-old that we’re sleeping together.”

“It’s the lying, T. I can’t, again. Do you remember where we got in 2014, with all the lying, to everyone, to each other, to ourselves?” He removed his pants without getting up, threw them into the suitcase from the bed, then stared at her, wild-eyed and fluffy-haired in his T-shirt and boxer shorts. How absolutely childish.

“That silver had a hell of a lot to do with the ISU and Marina, too. And I’m not lying, I’m protecting us. I’ve been very honest about both of those things.”

“Tessa, I understand that you have this hangup where you think being called out for lying makes you a bad person, but I’m serious here.”

“I don’t like feeling like you’re judging me and calling me a liar, yes. Why is being honest with random people more important than being honest with ourselves?” They were speaking in reasonable enough tones, but there was a dark current charging underneath the words, a simmering ribbon that had the potential to burst out of either of them, to strangle them with insecurities and accusations they would regret. She felt tired and overwhelmed and suddenly very very fearful that after four good months together, a year into the comeback, they were so close to falling apart.

The difference between success and failure together, she knew, was thin as a skate blade. They’d been there before.

“You said that we were nothing more than skating partners and best friends! I agree we’re not dating, but that’s because I love you, my feelings for you aren’t casual, we’re not just best friends. Are you—” He stopped mid-Lloyd Dobler rant and stared at her as she whipped out her phone. “Are you phoning a friend? Or Kate? We are seriously not getting Kate in thi—”

“I’m calling JF,” she informed him, words halfway to a hiss. “Because we’re fighting, Scott, we’re not hearing each other, and I refuse to let us fuck ourselves up again. Not after—” Her voice broke, erratically.

He finally seemed to see the terror and tension coursing through her body, and deflated almost immediately. He propelled himself off the bed as she dialed, all overprotective motion. “Baby. Hey.
I’m sorry. Calling JF is a good idea. We’ll get through this, OK?” He pawed at her shoulders, led her back to the bed, danced his fingers into her hair. Shaking, she leaned her head against him, twisting to put the phone on speaker.

“Hello?” their poor therapist asked, confused. Tessa looked at the clock—it was nearly eleven. Fuck. This was not part of b2ten’s deal.

“Hi JF,” she said, voice small, feeling fourteen and nearly Scott’s height again, crying and lying at a practice because she had heard him tell some guy that she’s not a girl, she’s Tessa. “It’s Tessa. And Scott. How’s your Sunday evening?”

“Good. Just watched The Night Manager. And then I went to bed.” His tone was pointed.

“We’re sorry we woke you,” Scott said, exchanging an oh shit cringe with her. He tugged her down until they were both lying back on the bed, the phone—and JF—literally between them. “We just, we got into a discussion that got a little hot, and we wanted to make sure we resolved it correctly. It’s, um, personal. Professionally, we’re national champions again.” His cocky smile definitely made it through the airwaves. She elbowed him.

“Congratulations again,” JF said, then slipped into therapist mode. “OK, Tessa, why don’t you recap your perspective.”

“Well, I think that we both know where the argument started,” she said. “We were at the banquet, having a lot of fun, and Kaetlyn brought over some junior to meet me, and we were talking and it was lovely. Scott comes over to get me to dance and he’s, you know—”

“Overly demonstrative?” JF asked.

“Yes. He’s Scott—being himself, basically feeling me up, and this little junior goes ‘you’re such a cute couple,’ so I tell her we’re not dating. I said, skating partners, best friends, that’s it.”

“Which made me feel hurt and unimportant,” Scott interjected.

“Tessa, are you OK with Scott taking over from here?”

“Yeah. I can chime in.”

“Anyways. I felt stung. But we had to, you know, be gracious National Champions—”

“—And Team Canada veterans—”

“—All the public shit. So we danced a little, socialized. But I was upset.”

“Which I could tell.”

“So when we got upstairs, Tessa said we should talk.” They slowly continued to talk over their various points, tripped into apologies to each other, defensively rationalized their own actions.

“Tessa, how did you feel when you and Scott started getting into this very honest conversation?” JF asked.

“Scared, and a little cornered, obviously,” she said, then course-corrected. Obvious things were not always obvious. She shifted fully onto her side to face him, and he mirrored her. “Scared, and a little cornered. But just, there’s a lot riding on this and it brought me back to past experiences. When that fight is, you know, not that bad, and then suddenly … everything is bad. And I hate fighting.” She
directed the last part to Scott, thumbing his cheek. Thank God JF wasn’t there. “I really, really do.”

“I know. I’m here.” His voice was so quiet that she was positive JF couldn’t hear.

“And Scott, when you heard Tessa deny a relationship, how did that make you feel?”

“It made me feel frustrated since I can’t know everything that’s in her head all the time—you just think in a way more complex than me, T—”

“That’s not true—”

“You just think in, like, space chess and I think in checkers, OK? So you say we’re good, but then you say that stuff, and it just…it hurts, and we’re back to last summer—fuck, the last decade. Especially since we have this track record of—let’s just call it what it is—lying. We’re already complicated enough. I don’t think we need to be confusing people even more, especially since you’re always saying everything is OK with you, everything except for actually finding a label for us.”

“I do not feel everything is OK with me right now.”

“Let’s not deflect,” JF said sensibly. “Scott is asking for clarification on your boundaries and comfort level so he can respond appropriately.”

“Well, I would like it stated for the record that he should ask appropriately, but as for boundaries, we’re nobody’s business, and they can call it what they want. How I feel about him hasn’t changed, nor has my goal of winning the Olympics in thirteen months. Even when he told Skate Canada we were sleeping together, nothing has fallen outside the realm of the things he’d say and do when we weren’t together. So that’s fine! But it creates this image of us—I’m not the only one who does that—and if the result is that I want more privacy in our personal life, I shouldn’t get blamed for that.”

“OK.” Scott sighed heavily, thankfully (but stupidly) blowing past the idea of defining them again. “My point is, I don’t want to answer questions anymore than you do. I don’t want to hide either, and yeah, I wonder if other people would really care. But if it makes you happy, it makes me happy. I don’t blame you. I trust you too much for that, T.”

“I felt like you did, though. Blame me. When you said that the narrative was mine. We’re back in that cafe arguing after the show wrapped! I felt like you were saying I’m this malicious, conniving liar.” Scott opened his mouth to object but she continued before he could say anything. “I know, it came out wrong. But it wouldn’t have come out that way if it wasn’t what you really thought.”

“So what I’m hearing—” broke in JF, “—is a tension in values complicated by the underlying insecurities about your pasts that make you vulnerable when an outside force interferes. In this case, I believe her name was Evelyn and she was sixteen? We’ve discussed recognizing how the other relates to the world and how it’s important to express yourself in ways that the other can understand. I think you both need to accept that, rather than avoid it.”

“And stop calling our marriage counselor at eleven PM as he’s sleeping?”

“Ideally yes, that would be part of the solution moving forward,” he said dryly.

“Sorry, I just…” Tessa started, voice wandering off.

“It’s fine. I’m teasing.” His tone was kind. “But you need to get to a place where you’re comfortable in the uncomfortable—personally, not just with professional stuff—and you can discuss these differences. Tessa is not going to stop being an honest person who is hypervigilant about privacy;
Scott is not going to stop being a private person who is hypervigilant about honesty. Those are different things, even if they generally get you on the same page. And let’s step back: Tessa, after nineteen years, do you really think Scott thinks you’re a bad and untrustworthy person? Scott, do you think that Tessa really would notify a sixteen-year-old junior she just met of a shift in your relationship first?"

“No,” they chorused, feeling distinctly like children.

“But, based on past experiences, it is reasonable to have that reaction. Just remember: Your differences are strengths. But you still need to build that foundation.”

“Agreed,” she said, but before she could help herself added, petulantly, “I just want to feel supported, that’s all.”

“So do I,” Scott pointed out with a groan.

“That’s actually a good starting point. Now, accepting that your points of view are unlikely to change, let’s talk communicating.”

Half an hour later, with promises to bring him back something nice from Ottawa—seriously, they were going to have to go find some good cheese at ByWard—they finally hung up, stalemate negotiated. She flopped her head back against his shoulder. “We do need to learn how to disagree better.”

“Or we can just keep JF on retainer for the rest of our lives.”

She poked him. “I mean it. I really don’t like it.”

“Me neither.” He stroked her side. “We’ll get there. Grace, right?” It had become a keyword, of sorts, in the last six months. “Agree to disagree.”

She kissed the hollow of his neck, scratchy and salty and him. “You really think—telling strangers we’re not dating matters that much?”

“Yeah,” he said plainly. “It doesn’t bother you?”

“Not as much as lying to ourselves does, or lying to each other,” she admitted. He was pretty damn good at lying to himself, she knew. “We don’t owe anyone else the truth.” They could barely explain it to themselves; why try with the rest of the world?

“I just … don’t see it that way.” Of course he didn’t. Everything was so black and white for Scott.

But as a not-girlfriend she was so much work for so little reward, she thought, rubbing his collarbone like a worry stone. “I’ll stop,” she acquiesced, after a beat. “Or. I’ll try. To avoid it. I’ll say it’s a compliment and a reflection of our on-ice work or whatever. But I won’t … I won’t say we’re not together.” It was as much as she could give.

She still sometimes didn’t know why he loved her.

“Thank you,” he said, and the relief in his voice seemed to surprise him too. He leaned forward to kiss her and she slipped her tongue into his mouth, simply glad that the fight was over and they’d made it through.

As her hand had drifted lower, though, a question that had niggled in her mind for nearly two years resurfaced. “Scott?” She pulled back a little, elbows on his chest. “Why did you pick Good Kisser,
anyways?” His laugh reverberated through both their bodies. “What? I’m serious! It’s about blow jobs after a divorce.” He’d been so salty about Stay for years.

“I’m not laughing at you, baby,” he said, tucking some hair behind her ear. “I think … I think I wanted to prove it was just manufactured, nothing real, all performance. Just something we could turn off and on on the ice, then I could go be with Kaitlyn. But also …” He swallowed deeply, still playing with her hair. “I think I just fucking missed you. Even then. It was shitty, to both of you, but I … just wanted to be close to you. Even if that was all I could get.”

She could write it off as Scott believing his own bullshit again—but something deeper told her it was unfolding self-awareness.

She burrowed further into both his shoulder and their bubble.

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iv. Three Years Before Today, Scott

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They ran into Charlie White at, of all places, the Grand Prix Finals, where he was doing, of all things, interviews for the ISU’s YouTube channel. “Tagging along with Tanith; thought I’d keep myself occupied,” he explained when they saw him after the short. “Wanna talk about your performance?” They did a quick, joking interview, mostly about the choreography, and hugged him tightly. “And nice hair, buddy,” Charlie smirked. “Happy to give you tips on product to maintain those luscious locks.”

Tessa giggle-snorted elegantly, and Scott exchanged a quick wink with her as she tried to get her shit together.Tessa, despite the WASPy exterior polish, was the biggest rink bunny he’d ever slept with. “Trying something new,” he laughed. “Hockey flow.”

“He’s channeling Patch’s Fabio days,” Tessa said, recovering nicely. “Good to see you, Charlie.”

Charlie looked at them. “Yeah, it really is.”

“That was nice,” Tessa said later that night, as they relaxed in the jacuzzi in her hotel room. “I sometimes forget how good of friends you two were.”

“I’d rather have won the gold than stayed friends,” he told her, lazily tracing circles up her thighs.

“I know, but it was still nice.” She took a deep breath before plunging her hair and entire face in the water.

Rich, coming from the woman who refused to say Marina’s name and still got mad when retelling the story of how Lindsey Ariano wore “her” dress to the grade seven semi-formal. “Who are you and what have you done with Tessa?” he asked nobody.

The next day, after they fucking won for the first time ever—he still couldn’t quite believe it—Charlie found them again. “That was awesome, you two,” he said, giving them both hugs. “Well done. I know it’s been a long time coming.”

“Thanks!” Tessa said with a laugh, still on a high. “Oh my god.” She gripped Scott’s bicep, near-delirious, forehead knocking against his and torso curving into along his body. “We won.”

Scott grinned, grasping both her cheeks and locking eyes. Her eyes were tender and luminous under
the laughter and fake lashes. “Yeah we did, baby,” he murmured, and hugged her again. It felt really fucking great. “We did it.” He spun her around so they were both facing Charlie, her in front of him, his arms crossed her shoulders. He might have sniffed her hair or kissed her shoulder. Charlie’s eyes flicked between the two of them, then he smirked. “Feel this good any of the times you guys won?” Scott asked.

“I don’t think so, actually,” Charlie said. “Of course, we did do it five times so it got kinda old after a while …”

Scott disentangled from Tessa enough to punch him lightly. “Way to rain on our parade, man,” he groused.

“Sorry,” said Charlie, and it sounded goddamn genuine. “Hey, Scottie, there’s a Rangers-Blackhawks game starting at 3 Eastern, if you wanna find a bar to watch. Would be good to catch up.”

“Oh, my god, Scott, you totally should,” Tessa exclaimed, running a hand along his shoulder blades. “Charlie, how sweet.”

Charlie looked at her as if she had grown a second head—Scott didn’t think she had used the word sweet in eight years of training in Canton, let alone to describe Charlie. “You sure?” Scott checked. “Your mom’s here.” The three of them were slated to have dinner.

“Yeah,” said Tessa. “I’ll take care of Chiddy and get dinner with my mom and pass out. Have fun. I’ll see you in the morning.” The last part was thrown in purely for Charlie’s benefit; she would be seeing him when he slid into her bed and took the book she’d fallen asleep reading out of her hands. She quickly kissed his cheek, and then, realizing what she had done, leaned in to give Charlie an awkward peck to cover.

And thus he found himself in a random bar in Marseilles with Charlie White, convincing the bartender to put on the American satellite feed of the game.

“Your French is actually good,” Charlie said, impressed. He had barely learned spasibo in eight years with Marina.

Scott shrugged. He’d always had a decent ear for music and language, tried to at least maintain a respectful level of competence in French and Russian and Japanese. “Patch and Marie would kill me if I didn’t sound at least halfway decent, living in Montreal and all, eh.”

“Plus you’ve got Gabi and Guillaume.”

“I mean, yeah … they’re around.” They got along perfectly well—it was hard for Scott to dislike anybody—but being around the two of them all day was like being trapped in a refrigerator with precious, vaguely exhausting theatre kids. He wondered if he and Tessa had been that exhausting, back in Canton. Probably.

“So you and Guillaume don’t play hockey?”

“Oh, he and Tess hung out more, for a bit. They liked to go to hip-hop class together,” Scott replied. “Donahue and I catch a game sometimes.” There were a lot fewer hockey fans at Gadbois, and besides Zach, the rest of his rec-league team was random finance guys and then Mick and Jesse. It was one of the few things he missed about Canton. “But yeah, everything’s respectful, there’s no drama”—Charlie snorted “—but, you know, Tess and I are older. It’s our workplace. We go there
for eight or ten hours, we're pretty focused on our job, we go home, we try to have lives—side projects, friends, family, hockey league, her book club.” They were settled. Truly.

“Ah,” Charlie nodded, chirping a mercy! at the bartender. Scott shook his head. Such a linguistic klutz. “So you and Tessa, huh?” He tossed a peanut a foot in the air and caught it in his mouth. Scott remembered sitting in his room for hours at a competition in 2003 with Trankov as they worked to master the trick; Charlie got it in about three attempts, Max in about half an hour, Scott never.

“Yeah, pretty exciting to finally win the Grand Prix.” Scott took a swig of the beer he had granted himself.

“No, I mean the fact that you’re dating.” Scott choked on his beer. “Or at the very least sleeping together again. I don’t think it can count as dating if you’ve already been stocking her brand of tampons in your car since you were fifteen. Anyways. When did that happen?” Scott opened his mouth to protest, deny, something, but before he could, Charlie shook his head. “Eight years, Scott.” Charlie sounded almost disappointed in him. “Anyways. This seems … new. Better than whatever the fuck was going on when you did Carmen. Oh, or danced Stay instead of talking your post-Carmen shit out.”

“We’re not … yeah,” Scott said, cringing a little. “It’s not dating. We’re still not really sure what you call it, after eighteen years of …”

“Being Tessa and Scott?” Charlie said dryly. “God, you guys were always the worst.”

“Yeah, eh.” There was nothing starry-eyed about them; if anything, they were too old and too scarred to be anything but truthful. “Chiddy knows—” hence Tessa was buying him dinner “— Marie and Patch know … But the Games come first.”

“But you guys are … good? It’s not like—”


“So …”

“If it’s not Tessa, I’m dying alone.” His family had their bets and shit, and he knew they were on the mark. He’d become fun uncle with three divorces whose niece finds him among a bunch of beer bottles.

“Well, hell. You’re marrying Tessa.”

“We’re not there yet,” Scott cautioned. They still had fucking-disaster potential written all over them half the time, they still were doing everything in service of a gold medal, first and foremost. “Like not even close to being on the radar.” Except for when it was, because how could it not be?

“You will be. Congrats. I always knew you two would work it out.”

Scott snorted. “No, you didn’t. That is a fucking lie.”

Charlie laughed too. “Yeah … Kinda hoped you two would kill each other and would be a much easier path to gold.”

“I mean … that was all of 2013. You’re welcome.”

“Oh, we would have kicked your ass anyways,” Charlie said lightly. “Anyways, so … Tanith and I have some news too. 2017, we’re going to, you know. Start trying.”
It took Scott a second. “For a—”

“Yup.”

“Jesus.” He shook his head. “Congrats man. Also, I don’t think I’ve ever said this, but I’m sorry I didn’t come to the wedding.”

“I… hoped you would but I certainly didn’t expect it,” Charlie said. He took another sip of the beer. “Thanks for the tumblers. Seriously. We use them all the time. Tanith still has the card.”

“Tess picked out both,” Scott admitted. Even though he’d been with Kaitlyn at the time. “Anyways. Twelve years ago—you think we could’ve predicted we’d end up here?”

“God no,” Charlie laughed, then raised his beer bottle. “To finally figuring shit could.”

“I’ll toast to that,” Scott replied, and did.

It was a good night.

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v. Ten Months Before Today, Tessa

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“Prior to taking the ice dancing course, it is expected that you have a very good understanding of all Senior and Junior compulsory dances as these will not be taught to you step-by-step at the course. What are two things that you will do to prepare yourself for taking the course?” Scott read aloud from his Provincial Coach Home Study Workbook, a mandatory exercise to get his next level of coaching certification, after Skate Canada had politely reminded him that ‘mentors’ couldn’t just hang out behind the boards offering ‘advice.’ “First thing: win the 2010 Olympic gold medal in ice dance. Second thing: win again in 2018.” He laughed at himself as he wrote something—hopefully not that—down. The joke had been for her benefit, though, and when he noticed he was laughing alone, he kicked her feet gently. “Tess? Hey. You with me?”

She looked up at him: sitting across the couch from her on a Friday night, studiously doing inane homework in his glasses. He was adorable. She adored him. “Sorry,” she said distractedly. “Everything OK?”

“Just trying to find a time to meet with the lawyers about the foundation incorporation.”

“Monday, right?”

“Yeah. You’re at the rink until two and then we have the call with Julia at two thirty, but we could do three. We can’t do Tuesday because I’m going to Toronto for the Great Kitchen Party board meeting and a photoshoot for Nivea. Then down to London for Saffron Road Wednesday, and out to Regina for Hillberg on Thursday.”

“OK. Monday sounds great.”

“Good, because all I have Monday so far is to call the vet for Audrey’s shots and the contractor for the kitchen and studying for the GMAT.” And a note to call both their mothers to discuss the holiday schedule. And she needed to call the cable company and yell.

Fuck.
Their lives were *utterly* domestic.

“OK. So do you wanna call the lawyers at three or three thirty?”

Instead of saying that three was fine because it wasn’t like they ever spoke to Julia for more than ten minutes, she blurted out, “This is what you want, right?”

His forehead crinkled. “I mean, I’m never convinced the lawyers aren’t bullshitting us to hit their billables but both your folks say this is necessary so, yeah, I’m there.”

“No, I mean *this.*” She gestured around, to the soon-to-be-demoed kitchen and the ring upstairs in his sock drawer and the shared Grocery List note on both their iPhones. They had a dog and a mortgage and they were planning their first real vacation together in May after *Stars* and GKP, to Greece because she wanted to be on a beach and he wanted a photo of them standing on the podium in the first Olympic stadium in Athens.

(Paris ended up being their first vacation, but the photo of them was pretty cute.)

Their parents were flying up next Sunday to watch them record their retirement interview with Scott Russell, which the CBC would be airing that Monday, along with a half-hour documentary retrospective. Ten more days, and their competitive career would be officially over. Skating was in no way their primary partnership, their joint endeavor, anymore.

The ratio had flipped, and she hadn’t even noticed.

“The house? Um, T, you were there when we signed the papers. I like the plans for the kitchen, I promise, both those countertops looked great so it’s whether you want the granite or quartzite.” That was a lie; he thought the quartzite was too expensive, but whatever.

“No,” she tried again, squirming under his curious look. “I mean, we just … This all happened fast. So I’m checking. Because a lot has happened in the last ten months. So … I’m checking.”

“On what, exactly?” His voice was bemused, but it was the same tone he used when his brothers pranked him: liable to tip into annoyed and sarcastic at the drop of a hat.

“That this is what you want,” she repeated. She felt flustered and low and stupid, with her need for constant check-ins and affirmation. But so much had happened, they had been having so much fun, and she had barely noticed that they actually had all but settled the next sixty years.

“This—the foundation, the touring, the show, school—”

“—The house, the dog, the bills, the Saturdays running errands,” she finished. “I just … It’ll be boring, or a lot more boring, from here on out.”

She let the implication hang, but he figured it out—he always did. “And you think I’ll get bored,” he said, incredulous. “Seriously?”

“No,” she said, before amending. “It’s just going to look a lot different, from now on.”

“You’re worried I’ll get bored,” he concluded, wounded. “Tessa Virtue, you have kept me on my toe picks since I was nine years old. It’s gonna be boring, probably, a little, from here on out. But I’m not gonna get bored.”

She thought of all the Scotts that she had known and loved, from the sweet boy who couldn’t talk to her as he held her hand through the jackass teenager who couldn’t wait to let go of it. The cool guy
who always had somewhere better to be and the diffident family friend who liked to make fun of her for caring too much.

The partner who had gotten her to and through the Olympics, three times; who counted reps in accents to make her laugh; who had purchased a mortar and pestle to add mint to her favorite strawberry-peach shakes; who was as rough and dirty and foul-mouthed as she wanted without making her feel objectified; who always saved her the pink Starbursts, though sometimes he’d put them in his mouth and told her she needed to French kiss the wrapper off first (this never worked, they had tried).

The only person who could make paying bills and syncing calendars on a Friday night fun.

But— “You like big, Scott.” He’d always been overwhelming. The last year had been overwhelming. “And it’s just … everything is going to be ordinary, from here on out. And don’t give me a sappy line, about how every day with me is extraordinary. I get to check.”

“Yeah,” he said, “you do.” He paused. “It’s not a line though.”

“It is and it isn’t,” she countered. Scott was so stupidly charming that he actually goddamned never realized it. “This isn’t an Olympic cycle, it could be … it is … the rest of our lives.” He shifted. “You don’t like big, sure, but you also don’t like ordinary,” he said. “You don’t like not feeling special. You don’t like being normal. Are you ready for the next ten years?”

“I ... yes,” she said. “As long as I keep going in my career — and my career isn’t us — And I’ve got that ... independence... yes.”

“So yes, as long as it’s entirely on your terms?” His tone is pointed but not judgmental.

"I just ... I want to be here, with you, and I don’t want to ... resent you, or resent this, later.” She was suddenly close to crying.

“Where are you on kids?” He asked, shifting suddenly. Twenty years and they’d never talked about it.

“I would want them, with you,” she said, feeling like the conversation had gotten very far away from her. “It’s just, that. That from here on out, it’s just you and me, kiddo. Hell, in ten years, we might be those boring suburbanites who schedule sex in between PTA meetings and, I don’t know, tee time. And you want kids. So I get to check, yes.”

He studied her carefully. “So here’s how I see this going,” he said, jaw twitching slightly and his tone short. “You finish your degree and your MBA; I do the show twice a year—that’s about five months of filming, a couple of days a week—and coach at least six, eight hours a day. After you’re done you start a business or join Adidas or Mathieu, and keep doing the fashion-y, social-media stuff to promote that. You design a line of high-fashion workout gear and I start a network of schools. We launch the foundation—which, still need to find a time to talk to the lawyers, on Monday—and do the speaking thing, the gala thing for it. Make sure other girls don’t feel they have to subsist on oranges and coaches can’t be assholes and kids who can’t afford skates still get to learn. We keep touring for a couple of years. We finish the damn renovations on this house. We get Audrey housetrained. We’re still flying all over the world, all the time—you guessed a year, right after Korea, I don’t see that changing for basically the rest of our careers, T. You’re gonna need to be in Toronto and Paris and Vancouver for shit all the time; I’m going to go to the ass-end of Croatia for Junior Worlds every year. It’s a good life. A big life.” He took a deep breath. “And then somehow in the middle of that, yeah, we add to Team Virtue Moir. Maybe get a second dog. Have some kids, eventually. Teach them how to skate, go to dance recitals, convince my mom to babysit so we can
golf, have dinners at Marie and Patch’s, go to Banff with Chiddy and Liz where we try not to kill ourselves skiing. And when, exactly—” he raised his eyebrows “—do you think I’ll get bored? Fuck, I’m mostly worried that we won’t have the time to see each other or even sync our goddamn calendars in person.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, immediately. He’d said as much, two and a half years ago, earnestly laying out a promise for good sex and laughter and dancing. She hated that her reflex—with him, with everything—was to doubt (but would they have been so successful, so in sync, without her skepticism?). “I … That sounds really nice. Pretty perfect, actually.”

“You know…” He crawled over, removed the computer from her lap, fitted his body over hers. “I don’t mind giving the speeches or making the gestures or having a punch card at the florist’s, but if you don’t think I’m there, that I’m … mature enough, or here enough … Or if you don’t want those things …” Here his eyes got a little scared, because they both knew they came at the kid thing so very differently. ”Then we kind of do have a problem.”

She shifted, to the extent that she could. It had the unintended consequence of pushing their hips closer together. “I just …” she tried again. Her lips brushed his.

Their future, the prospect of children, had never been a conversation because she had just known that if they ended up together, there would be kids. It was Scott, it was her, they were a team. And it was a choice—it was always a choice—but she wouldn’t be leaving. Ever. She was too stubborn, too much of a perfectionist to ever throw in a towel on marriage or a family. She didn’t like how vulnerable that made her. “Scott, the family thing is just one of those things, like skating, that you were born to do. The world is just better with Moir kids and Moir dads. But I … Scott, I don’t know if I would want that … could even do that unless it’s with you.” He made her brave, and a little reckless. So I need to check, because …” Please don’t leave me was the end of that sentence, too pathetic to verbalize, but it hung there between them.

She felt more than saw his smile. He started planting a constellation of wet kisses along her jawline and neck and chest. “I just—no.” He nuzzled her collarbone. “Tess, I tried the not-being-with-you thing, I sucked at it. And it wasn’t very fun.” He leaned up to look straight at her. “I know I can live without you, OK? I just don’t want to.” He kissed her again. “That’s the plan, OK? We’ll stick to it, we’ll keep talking. And I really don’t think we’re going to need to make a google calendar reminder to use your handcuffs every other Thursday or whatever. That’s the thing I’m least worried about.” His grin made her toes curl, the same way they had when she was nineteen, and—yeah. That wasn’t going to be a problem. “But. I’m ready for it,” he said seriously, pulling a hand through her hair. She was struck by how sure he was, after a year of mostly delaying, of letting things go unspoken as they navigated immediate concerns. “And for it to be soon. I’m not really the one to be scared of boring. That’s you.”

"I know." She admitted, again. He had her there.

"And you know, a couple weeks ago, you said you were ready. For the boring stuff, too. So. Are you? Really?”

Last chance to remind herself that that she didn’t know how to change a diaper, that she couldn’t drive a minivan to save her life (despite assurances to Ryan Reynolds), that things would be hectic enough with school in the next couple years and maybe they should wait. Catch their breath for real.

And yet …

“Next year, little buddy,” Scott sighed, patting Chiddy’s cheek. He fell forward into his friend. “We’re gonna win the Cup.”

“Yeah we are,” Chiddy slurred back, very seriously. He turned out to face the rest of the bar. “Stanley Cup 2019!” He grabbed Scott’s wrist, raised it high. God, that was a brutal loss.

“Alright, we are getting you both to the hotel before you get any drunker and Tessa kills me,” Eric informed them. “Get up, brothers.”

“Tessa won’t kill me, she loves me,” Scott explained, as Radford helped him stand.

From where he was gathering Patrick—Chiddy’s limbs seemed disconnected from his brainstem at the moment; he would need to fix that before the show, Scott thought—Javi laughed. “Say that much louder and she will kill you,” he said.

“Try to act sober,” Radford encouraged. “Do it better than when you try to act like you’re not in love with Tessa.”

“Do they need water first?” Javi asked as they began to make their way out of the bar.

Eric sighed. “And fries.”

“Not poutine though. Tessa hates poutine. She’ll smell it on my breath.” Scott laughed, because somehow that was hilarious. “Don’t tell; she’s thinks it makes her look less Canadian.”

Eric shoved him out the door. “Please be less obvious.” Javi helpfully smacked him on the back of his head. “You’re supposed to be committed to this not-a-couple thing.” Javi started laughing because really, it was hilarious.

“You guys are so lucky none of you have to deal with this,” Scott groaned. “And it wasn’t exactly my choice.”

But they were a team, and he was there with her, always. Even through the booze he knew that.

“You know, people might ask fewer questions if you stopped talking about her like you’re Westley and she’s Buttercup,” Radford pointed out as they exited the AleHouse, searching for their Lyft.

“Also,” Javi added, shoving a still-giggling Patrick into the car, “this one is right. If you feel her up during tour the way you have been during rehearsals, that is very unhelpful behavior too.”

He smirked. “I like feeling her up,” he retorted. Confirm nothing, change nothing, she had said. And tour was just fun, Tessa all sexy and loose and vibrant in a way she could never be during competition. They were still on an Olympics high. He climbed in behind Javi and Patrick and checked out the driver: an older, bored man who appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent. Good, he probably wouldn’t recognize the pack of them. “She’s pretty. She’s so pretty.” And his bedsheets did smell like her. “No, she’s perfect.”

Chiddy cackled. “Neither of you two can complain,” he proclaimed to Javi and Eric. “I have been dealing with this shitshow since 2007.”
“Yeah, and in return you’ve been getting free food for the last two years, so we’ll complain all we want,” Eric scoffed. “The rest of us just lost bets.”

Scott wondered, briefly, when the rest of their friends had found out, or at the very least put it together; he figured sometime around the 2017 Final.

(They knew a lot earlier than that.)

“Not all of us,” Javi smirked. “But yes, let’s get the poutine. You must be less drunk, Scottie.”

After the fries—cheesy, not poutine—and a litre of water, Scott was at the parched, spongy, pre-hangover stage, just aware enough to notice he had been pretty drunk. Before taking a still-wasted Chiddy to bed, Javi and Radford dropped him off at Tess’s room, wishing him luck.

Why did he need luck? He smirked. He had the best girl.

He entered quietly, but Tessa, voice sleep-dry, immediately groaned. “Scott. You’re not that graceful when you’re drunk.”

“Sorry,” he apologized, tripping into a lamp before giggling.

“S’fine,” she mumbled, face already buried in her pillow. “Sorry the Leafs lost, babe.”

“Me too,” he hiccupped. “We drowned our sorrows a little.” He tried to remove his pants quietly, but that task required balancing on one leg and—yeah. That was the dresser.

“Scott,” she groaned, turning away from him.

“Sorry,” he repeated. And then, since she was up, “Did you have fun with Jeff and Justin?”

“Yes.”

Even with the amount of beer he’d had, something in her tone felt off. Weird. “Are you still getting up early for yoga with Meagan and Little Kaetlyn?”

“Yup.”

Weird. “Are you excited to see Joannie in two days?”

“Uh-huh.”


“Scott, just change and brush your teeth and let me sleep, please. It’s really late.”

“Why are you upset?” he asked stupidly. He crawled onto the bed, shoes still on, pants still around his ankles—ohhhhh yeah, that was how he fell—and spooned her. He resisted the urge to tickle her until she talked.

“I’m not,” she responded, in a tired tone that made it clear that oh, fuck yes, something was off. She pushed his hand away from where it had attached itself, magnet-like, to her hip. “Let me sleep, Scott. And good god, brush your teeth.”

“What’s wrong?” he asked. God, alcohol made him needy. “I’d like to talk about it.”

“In the morning,” she said, her voice sounding significantly more awake. “We’ll talk in the
morning.”

“Yeah, cause now we’re both really going to sleep well,” he pointed out. He was feeling significantly more sober, took off his shoes and pants to prove it. He sat there expectantly in boxers—not briefs—and his luckiest Leafs tee, and ran a finger gently along her spine.

With an exaggerated sigh that reminded him of the Canton years, she sat up, turning on the light and unplugging her phone in a fell swoop. She pulled something up on the screen and then practically threw it on the bed between them. “My phone started blowing up with that sometime around our dessert course,” she informed him, voice calm but flat. She seemed more irritated at having been woken up, but he wasn’t sure.

He stared at the grainy Instagram footage: him dancing briefly with some girl in the bar in a Leafs jersey. “Um,” he started. “I’m sorry?” They’d literally had this conversation a year ago, around Worlds. Shit like this ended up on the Internet; Cara had pointed out something similar in Toronto before media day. He studiously avoided checking what was online these days. It was a squicky feeling, the whole someone-watching-him thing, so he tried to keep it out of sight, out of mind. He didn’t like the fact that suddenly, he had to moderate his life, but he also didn’t think that Tessa was angry at him about this.

“What are you sorry for, Scott?” she asked, over-patient.

“Why don’t you tell me, so I can apologize, so we can go to sleep, T.” He tried to keep the irritation out of his voice but—nope, totally there.

“Well, yeah, because this seems a little ridiculous, and I don’t know what’s wrong.”

“OK, sorry. Time out,” she said, running her hands back into her hair and somehow sliding it into a ponytail. She tapped her fingerpads along her skull, thinking. “We need to deal with this, Scott.”

“With what?” he shot back, exasperated. “I don’t even know what I did wrong. You know absolutely nothing happened. Are you … jealous?”

Her entire posture changed, got more defensive. “Don’t be absurd,” she scoffed, sidetracked. “Those girls are bigger rink bunnies than Cassandra.”

Hilarious, coming from the woman who had begged him not to cut his hair until summer. “Yeah, that doesn’t sound jealous at all, T.” He rolled his eyes. His head fucking hurt. “Fine. You wanna talk? Let’s talk about this.”

“I’m not jealous, but we’re not going to talk about the gendered ways in which people get accused of that.” Good Christ. He was a straight guy in fucking figure skating. “No. It’s not you, it’s everyone else. There’s a hashtag,” she all but hissed. “Hashtag-sorry-Tessa. People think I’m duped, or pathetic, or whatever. And no matter how many photos I post of us rehearsing, or as kids, or at the Games, or happy, none of that matters when you’re telling people you have to get home to me or dancing drunkenly with thirsty fans at bars!” Tessa had never handled pity well.

“This isn’t about the dancing with fans at bars, you have never cared about that. But if you mind now, I will stop. Obviously. Christ. It’s not like I seek out girls in Leafs shirts.”

“No, but you’re a magnet, and you’re nice to everyone, and a flirt, and you just attract people, Scott. I know because you have just attracted me since I was eight. And then you’re so naïve and sweet that I can’t get mad at you for being an idiot!”
“So you’re mad because I was an idiot and danced with some fan who requested it?”

“I’m mad because you’re my idiot, not theirs, but also … These days, yes, you should be a little more careful.” She flung herself back on the pillow, more mad, he knew, at the world than him.

“So you are jealous,” he concluded. “T, I love you. I won’t dance with them. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not … jealousy.” He believed her—she’d committed to caring less about other people around Sochi, and while she was still an intense, straight-edged people pleaser at heart, he was proud of the job she’d done. She flicked her eyes away briefly before returning to him. “I know you don’t like it, but there’s still a lot of attention on both of us. I kind of feel like this is a subconscious response, you know? Like you’re trying to prove you’re still the same guy.”

“Tess—” maybe her psych degree was sticking after all.

“It’s fine,” she added quickly. “Because you are the same guy. And I’m having trouble processing the negative side of the attention too.” She looked small and scared, curled there. “I want you to be able to live your life and be nice to fans without it blowing up my phone. Truly. But I need you here. I can’t be here alone, OK?”

“I know, baby. You’re not. I’ll keep an eye out, OK?”

“I’m sorry it’s like this,” she said, finally settling against him. “It’s just the Olympics.” The scrutiny wasn’t feeling like just the Games, though, not anymore. Tess had been tired, borderline exhausted, since they got back, trying to please everyone and yet somehow still have the time of her life even as they processed the end of their career. He felt shitty; she was barely keeping it together, and he knew it. “But I’m … When you do stuff like this, it reflects on you, and I know you don’t want some moment of you out at a bar being everyone’s impression of you. It’s stupid and unfair and awful and a big fat lie. But also—” She hesitated, then swallowed—“Just … You’re barely on social. Which is a choice. But I’m getting a lot more comments, especially on the tags—”

“What kind of comments?” he asked, his voice flinty. She was silent. “Tess. What kind of comments?”

“Just—comments,” she said quickly. “People who are being a little demanding for photos of you. People who think I post too many photos of you and taking advantage of you. People who want me to make a statement about my nose job. People who want us to visit their school. People who think you’re the only reason we won the Olympics. It’s a small number and I ignore it, honestly, but sometimes … it’s hard.”

“They do what?”

“You know this happens,” she said, in a tone as even as his was commanding. “I know you’re not tuned in, but you’re aware.” He was—he tried to ignore it most of the time, but yeah, it wasn’t like he’d never heard of online trolling, never seen a comment on Tess’s Instagram that rubbed him the wrong way. “You have been since Canton. The comments I get, the shit I’ve had to deal with, it’s different.” He was silent, thinking back to the people who applauded him for looking lean, criticized Tessa for bulking up. Beyond just choosing to have a presence on social, she’d always borne the brunt of other people’s expectations. “And you’ve been so supportive, always, Scott. But there’s more attention than ever, now. And I need my best friend, my partner, OK?”

“I’m sorry. You know they’re full of shit, right?” His voice was hoarse, fervid.

“I don’t let it bother me, I don’t. But between the comments and the fact that you don’t want to be a
Molson ambassador … I wanted to have a reasonable, sober conversation in the morning. About you needing to be a little bit more careful. About me needing you. At this point—I care about the response I’m getting, yes. And we’re in this together, so we need to move, together.”

“Done,” he said, immediately. “I—I will. Done.”

“Thanks. I know you’re sick of this, and think I’m full of it,” she said quietly. “Just—really. I mean it.” She tugged him closer, nuzzled his collarbone for a second, then nodded before confessing, a little lightheartedly, “Also … yeah, I was a little jealous of Cassandra. And Jess. And Kaitlyn. And Samantha. And Heather and Monica. And Whitney. And Whitley. Basically they all sucked.”

He burst out laughing. He didn’t even remember the last two. “I know, baby.” He twisted a finger around her hair. “For the record, I called Semple ‘Bro Punchable Doucheface’ behind your back for years.”

“More like two inches behind my back. I heard.” She shook her head. He leaned in to kiss her, made out with her for a few minutes before she pulled back, tipped her forehead against his. “Scott?”

“Yeah?”

“Really, go brush your teeth.”

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vii. Four Months Before Today, Tessa

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The bed shifted as he slipped in. She cracked an eye, grunted as he draped an arm around her waist. “Hey,” he said, softly.

“I’m sorry,” she said immediately, shifting closer to him. “That was dumb.” It really didn’t matter. Her nose found his collarbone, his chin found the crown of her head.

She felt more than heard a laugh rumble in his chest. “Was that the dumbest fight we’ve ever had?”

“I think there was one about Power Rangers in 1998 that was up there,” she hummed, eyes still closed.

“We’re probably gonna have dumber ones eventually,” he yawned. “We’ll get through it.”

“Love you.”

She was asleep before he could repeat it back.

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viii. Seven Years After Today, Scott

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With a smile and a thank you, Scott unclips his microphone and hands it back to the tech. The globe lights of the studio blast on, casting the faux-living-room set in a harsh, almost acidic light. Beside him, a little pale but glam in a black cashmere sweater and army-green silk pants, T does the same, leaning forward to grab her phone. Tucking her hair behind her ear, she immediately starts typing an email. Life doesn’t stop when you’re the Senior EVP of Global Strategy and Brand at Lululemon,
overseeing everything from the development of home-goods and high-end fashion-y lines and expansion into Asia and the Middle East to their rebound as one of Canada’s hottest companies and emergence as an advocate for girls in sports. Not even for an hour-long sit-down interview on how you’ve been a badass since the age of seven.

Though honestly, it’s not like Scott has much time these days either: in addition to personally coaching nearly a dozen teams at the school he, Trankov, and Chiddy run for elite juniors and seniors—Liz handles the business side and CanSkate programming—the rink also runs a daily program for underserved kids in Vancouver schools through their Going for the Gold Foundation, which they still co-chair; plus Scott oversees a system of camps for promising juveniles, novices, and juniors across Canada so they can get support and high-caliber coaching without having to leave home. And while after five seasons it’s not feasible to fit the show in anymore, he still appears on TSN as a regular-guy correspondent whenever he can, mostly for shits and giggles.

They’ve done exactly as they planned. It doesn’t go perfectly all the time—or even most of the time—but when you keep at something, you get it right more often than not.

“So, I know you couldn’t give an official answer on air … but off the record, you guys are totally lighting the torch, right?” asks Nicholas Chang, the Vancouver correspondent for The National and one of Scott’s regular hockey buddies, as they wind their way through the wires and cameras and discarded furniture piled neatly around the studio stage. He’s doing a piece on the two of them—part a retrospective on their career, part keeping Canadians up to date on where they are now—in advance of the Calgary Games.

Tessa stiffens beside Scott, irritated at the question. “You’ll have to watch and find out,” she smiles. Newspapers have printed this rumor like it’s fact, but like most rumors about them, it’s entirely false—if it’s not decided already, he hopes they’re in the running, but they certainly haven’t been asked yet.

“Coaches march,” he reminds Chang. “I’ve got plenty to do already.”

“Yeah, Addison and Alexandre—their chances looking good?”

He nods as they walk into the green room together. They were the first team he ever coached entirely on his own; Marie and Patch handed them to him as a gift to launch his coaching career seven years ago. Three years later, when he and Tessa moved to Vancouver after she took the Lulu job, Addie and Alex came along. They were World Junior Champions two years ago and Canadian champs the last two years. They are young, almost as young as he and Tessa were—but they are damn ready to compete. “It’ll be overwhelming, I think, but they’re ready. They stay focused, not get distracted by the bullshit, and they’ve got a good shot at the podium.” He grabs an orange, hands a banana to Tess.

“They seem like they’ve got good heads on their shoulders,” Chang nods. “They dating? Isn’t that, like, a thing Canadian ice dancers do?”

He scoffs, choking on the fruit. “God, no. She lived with us for three years. Nope.” The two of them have a Charlie-Meryl-esque connection—best friends in the trenches together. “Off the record, he’s got a girlfriend, and Addie’s too responsible for him.”

“Give it time,” Nicholas smirks. “Worked for you two. And what was that thing he said in his interview about you yesterday? That they were so grateful to be able to learn about trust and commitment and partnership from you guys? Sounds like there’s a spark.”

Scott tries not to roll his eyes too much; Addie and Alex have also learned plenty about developing a
narrative. He knows one day they want to talk about what it’s like being a biracial French-Canadian man and a gay woman in ice dance, to make the narrative about acceptance in sports, but that’s not what these Games are about.

Ice dance is evolving—Scott and Tessa are making sure of it—but it’s not there. Yet.

“Oh, I kinda hope not,” inserts Tessa, playing along. “They start dating and we can’t trust our best babysitters not to have sex on the couch.” She slings on her coat. “The kids love them.”

“Speaking of the kids, we’re still all meeting tomorrow at three to film their skating lesson, right?” asks Chang, holding the door open for them to walk out in front of him. He swipes his card, taking them into the nicer, more corporate areas of the building. They did b-roll around the house after work yesterday, lazy shots of Scott singing as he made dinner while Tess painted with the kids, of the two of them stealing a kiss and dancing as they did dishes, Audrey and Axel tearing through the kitchen. Their son feeding Sabrina the cat, their daughter reading to Tess, Tessa not giving his corny jokes the time of day. He caught the camera panning over the photos all over the house—Greg’s portraits from when the kids were born, Danielle’s candid from the wedding, shots of them vacationing with Marie and Patch and skiing with Liz and Chiddy. Tomorrow they’ll film him coaching, plus the two of them skating and teaching the kids. Tess is nervous about the kids being on TV—she puts their Christmas card on Instagram every year, but otherwise posts older or obscured pictures—but both of them have inherited his extroversion, the perfect personalities for being the children of moderately-recognizable, very successful people. Later on in the week, he’ll be trailed at the studio before Saturday’s hockey pre-show and a crew will follow T around at Lulu for the morning, watching her lead power meetings and pick campaigns and boss people around and stuff. It’ll end up being a thirty-minute segment, their longest in-depth, joint interview since they retired.

“Yup. Be on time, though, I have a four-thirty call.” Tessa gives Chang her Do Not Fuck Up My Life look.

“Aye aye, chief,” he says, with a mock-salute, as they hit the security desk. “Can the youngest one even skate yet?”

“He mostly stumbles around as Scott holds his hands, but hey, he’s pretty cute,” Tessa says.

“Our daughter’s got her sit spin down though,” Scott brags. “Waltz jump too.”

“How old are they again?”

“She’s five in July, and he just turned two in November.”

“And I gotta get to a doctor’s appointment now,” Tessa announces. “At some point in the lead-up to these Games, I’m going get around to doing my job.” Scott feels a pang of sympathy—in addition to all the renewed Virtue-Moir craziness, work is especially busy because she single-handedly negotiated the deal for Lululemon to kit out Team Canada, so she’s got a ton of additional promotional and logistical responsibilities. And it is weird, gearing up for a Games where they have dramatically different roles.

Plus, the actual secret they’re carrying around: they took the test last night, after the camera crews left without noticing she was too nauseated for dinner. A doctor’s confirmation is next.

They walk out of the CBC’s studios, his hand at the small of her back. He imagines her hips are just beginning to flare underneath his fingertips, but she’ll remind him it’s too early, nothing has physically changed yet. “I liked what you said in there,” she says when they get to the car.
He laughs. “You liked something I said in an interview?” Only took twenty-seven years.

“Yeah.” She bites her lip. “About how it’s rough, and real, and worth it.” She brushes the hair out of her eyes. So much of their lives and their relationship has been performative, for judges and the media and even for themselves, and it’s still strange sometimes to remember that they’re only in it for themselves now. It’s tougher, just as he predicted at their engagement party. It certainly isn’t perfect—he nearly went to Chiddy’s couch last year after a fight about whether or not Kate should move in; a few years ago when she was pregnant he forgot to tell her about a competition until he literally texted her from the airport. And he loves being a dad but they both know parenting is a lot harder than uncle-ing or aunt-ing. Their kids are Moirs so they’ve both been in the ED for stitches already. There was a terrifying fever when their son was four months old Tessa still doesn’t like to talk about, and their daughter comes home from the playground bragging about her bruises. He knows one day it won’t just be a bruise.

They are both incredibly busy and incredibly boring. Nothing is quite like they planned.

He likes it that way, a lot.

His phone buzzes in the cup holder as he pulls onto West Georgia. “Can you get that?” he asks. “I think it’s Chiddy.”

“No, it’s Mike.” Her tone is surprised.

“Babcock?”

“Slipchuk.”

“Fuck,” he groans. The man will never retire, and he’s currently being an ass about Alex and Addie’s training regime—he thinks twenty-five on-ice hours a week isn’t enough. “Put it on speaker? I won’t yell at him if you’re listening.”

“The Nice Incident proved otherwise,” she smirks, but she connects it to the bluetooth. “Hi, Mike. It’s Tessa. Scott’s driving.”

“Actually, I wanted to speak to both of you!” he exclaims. “Scott, Tessa, turns out the rumors are true. On behalf of Skate Canada, the Canadian Olympic Committee, Team Canada Inc., and the Calgary 2026 Committee, and in recognition of the way you represented Canada for more than a decade on the international Olympic scene, we would like to formally ask you to light…”

Scott doesn’t hear the rest of the sentence. He’s too busy pulling the damn SUV over to kiss Tess.

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ix. One Year Before Today, Tessa

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“Alright, T, Round Room says the contracts look good, so I’m going to sign and fax those tomorrow. Kate says that she’ll take a look at the costumes in the evening, London time. You saw the confetti thing too, right?” She heard him shift in the desk chair to look at her. Planning the tour from Japan was insane on plenty of levels—her mother and Jeff mentioned this frequently—but the time difference was an enormous blessing in disguise, giving them a built-in excuse to disappear into her room together for hours. Carolina and Miki and Javi and Jeff had been tacitly aware of their relationship for the last few years, but there were far more overexcited Russian twenty-year-olds with cell phones than decades-old friends on this tour. Conference calls were fantastic cover: change
But that wasn’t what she was concerned about now. No, instead of replying to Jess and Ben’s email about Media Day arrangements, she’d dipped into the tags, toggled onto the websites, scrolled through the conversations. She didn’t like having to monitor a few thousand fans’ faceless conversations or wake up to a Google alert of her name, but sometimes she just needed to know. Most of the time she could approach it in a borderline clinical way—she knew what to expect, and it didn’t really impact her. She didn’t like to delve too deeply—she was too busy, anyways—but it was like taking a few minutes to the weather report, she had once explained to Jordan.

But not now. This was exactly what she had been fearing ever since she had fully processed just how much interest there was in them, ever since she had started trying to navigate just what exactly “change nothing, confirm nothing” looked like on social media and on the streets and on the ice. She kept tapping through maniacally, trying to find it.

“Tess?”

“Hmm?” she asked. Her brow furrowed and she bit her lip, leaned forward to rest her temple on her palm as she kept scrolling. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Ashley said she found some confetti that we can skate over,” he said. “Babe? Everything OK?”

She finally made eye contact. Her face felt cold, drained of blood. He was going to be so angry. She felt both violated and like this was her fault. “There’s a video of us.” The words were a brick in her throat.

“What?” he asked, confused. And she remembered that there were lots of videos of them.

“No on ice. Out. In Kobe. Being cute, the tweets say.” She thought of the past several weeks—nights out with groups, sure, or with Jeff and Javi, but frequently just the two of them going for a “tour planning” dinner. His arms wrapped around her and his fingers looped around her pinky and his palms tucked into the smooth denim of her pockets. The safe, heady feeling of being with him. Her hands running through the flow, his laugh lighting up her blood, the warmth of the tiled alley walls when he pressed her into them to kiss her just because, his hands curling into the pockets of her jackets and ghosting along her hips, promises of later. She had thought Japan would felt like relief after CSOI, convinced herself it was a sanctuary, their anonymous nights both silky and sacred.

She had convinced herself that they had been totally alone.

“Doing what, in Kobe?” Scott asked carefully. She kept frantically searching, swiping for something, until she gave up, tightening her fingers around her phone. Quelling the urge to throw it. “Were people just … following us?”

“I have no idea,” she finally admitted, agitated. Fuck fuck fuck. He was going to kill her. “Nobody’s posted the video. They’re just bragging about having seen the video.” He rose suddenly to sit beside her, and the look on his face—angry and bewildered and betrayed, like how she felt internally—scared her into action. She launched into Overprotective Damage Control mode. “Baby, it’s OK. I mean it’s not great, not at all … but it’s not like there’s a sex tape floating around.” She was exhausted—had been for weeks, really. The comedown of the Games was still coming in waves, cresting along with panic about her future as they worked like crazy, because they simply knew nothing else. And the expectations—of her, of them, of how they should feel and act and treat each other—felt close, pressurized, anxiety-provoking in a way they hadn’t in years. Being present felt harder than ever, even with Scott. She should be happy, she should be excited, she should be cute and in love and handling everything perfectly—and mostly she thought she was, except for moments
like now, when she mostly wanted to cry. A nap sounded perfect.

“No,” he agreed, and she hated how she could see how upset with her he was behind his anger and disgust and concern. He would try and claim otherwise, but she could read him. He’d wanted to be out with everything months ago, and she had promised him the attention would go away with a denial. “But goddamnit, Tess. It’s not right.” He was leaning into concerned about her, not angry at her, which almost felt worse.

She turned from his gaze and he lurched upward, started to pace. She studied the phone a few times again, then calmly threw it on the floor, hard. She couldn’t fucking hunt for this anymore—she’d text Kat, she decided, and have her work on it. But it wasn’t a healthy rabbit hole for them right now. “Come here,” she said. “I don’t enjoy this either.”

“I know,” he said. “Fuck, Tess. Nobody would like this kind of stuff.” She could practically hear his brain clicking into Protect Tessa Overdrive. “If we had confirmed in January, it would have been ten times worse, right?”

“Possibly,” she said. She had been so scared this would happen, this picking-apart of her privacy and her relationship and her life, and she had made a choice. Convinced him to go along with her, just like how she’d once convinced him to do the show. “I’m not sure, anymore. At the beginning, I think so, but maybe not by now.” She tried to breathe deeply as he flopped alongside her, head on her stomach. He slipped his fingers under her oversized Jays shirt, scratching along her abs, and she twisted her fingers into his hair. “You should use less gel,” she said, voice shaky as she tried for levity.

“I’m sorry,” he said, half-automatically.

“It’s fine, it’s just gel.”

“Not about that,” he said. “If I didn’t have to keep it long for my demanding partner I wouldn’t have to use the gel.” She poked his thigh with her toe and giggled, and he tickled her briefly before sobering. “If I … had stopped talking back in January, or stuck to a script, we’d be fine.”

She burst out laughing. “Scott, it didn’t start with gorgeous green eyes.” She’d been warning him for years, and she’d been not caring personally for years—and secretly pleased professionally—and all of that felt so naive and blase, now.

“Right. It was the ‘restless in bed.’ And the ‘doing it with your partner.’ Basically, I’m always putting you in these situations, and I should never talk ever, and you were right.”

She pulled him up and kissed him lightly. “You do not put me in situations, mister.” She thumbed his cheekbone. “I like those comments, they make me laugh. And feel wanted.” And were good for their career, honestly. “This is other people.” She huffed. “But yeah, this sort of scrutiny is what I didn’t want.”

She thought of PyeongChang again—she thought about it often, the overwhelming, perfect feelings, but also the quick realization she had had after the most beautiful and heart-filling skate of their lives, after the recognition that this, this was the culmination of twenty years of choices and sacrifice and work: As they stared at each other, Scott screaming and skating away from her so he wouldn’t crush her in a kiss, as she curtsied to the audience, she had had a sudden understanding that everyone was looking at them and they were looking at everyone else. The two of them shared a vantage point, and it was entirely different from the rest of the world’s. The best parts, and the worst parts, were theirs and theirs alone.
“We should have Julia issue a statement,” he suggested. “And then you should just stop posting on social media. You don’t deserve this, Tess.”

She snorted bleakly. “A statement saying what? Hey internet, stop being assholes? We’re not telling anyone, we’re not turning twenty-one years of work and three Olympics into a human interest story.” It was too late now, anyways.

“And I don’t want to turn our very normal relationship into something that’s entirely hidden by our career.” He was mad, she could tell, but not at her anymore, just this neverending limbo. He had gained, through the entire thing, a bit more of an awareness and even an appreciation for their platform and how it could be used—but she knew he, just like her, would probably never be comfortable with interest in his personal life.

Still, she felt like a fish caught on a line. “Confirming won’t make anything die down. Not any more than it would have in January.”

“Even a ‘we’re together, so stop hounding us, jagweeds’?”

“Even that.” She looked away, up at the ceiling. She was fed up with feeling hounded, of listening to absurd justification like “bandmates,” of trying not to upset fans or potential investors or Scott, but she’d developed the strategy and they now had to live with it. “Besides. we don’t even know what’s on the video. It could just be holding hands or something. Nothing to overreact to.”

“Or it could be me kissing ice cream off your nose,” he pointed out, because that had happened two nights earlier.

She covered her hands with her face. “If we don’t know, we can’t respond,” she said after a minute. “And any response just generates more interest. We don’t give in to this. We don’t let it impact us.”

She realized she was crying, a little. God, she was tired.

“So we don’t say anything?” he asked, dumbfounded, gently wiping away her tears. “This isn’t right. Tess, you’re crazy stressed. You hate feeling this way, and you’ve been running yourself ragged for months. I hate feeling this way. It’s not worth it.”

She took a deep breath. Scott could be temperamental, but underneath it was a bedrock of emotional sturdiness. He didn’t doubt who he was, as a person or a skater or as a partner. He was the stem in a lift, and in her life as well.

She envied that Ildertonian clarity of purpose. For her first sixteen years in the sport, skating had made her feel like she was not enough. And she had let it. Part of the reason she had come back was to prove that wrong, and she, they, had done it better than she ever could have imagined. Still, it was difficult, now, to imagine pouring herself back into the sport that had treated her so carelessly.

But skating had also always made her want more. More medals, more work, more talent, more drive. She suspected that it would be better for her life—which was going to be with Scott—if she found that more in a different place, moving forward.

She had new plans, a new vision. She’d been thinking it through since the last year of the comeback, and had discussed it with Scott a little, dancing around in his unfinished house. But her future was sketchy on details compared to his, assured since he was the princeling of the Ilderton Curling and Skating Club. Being a coach one day—a great one—was simply who he was.

She knew what her career wasn’t—it wasn’t social media influencing, much as everyone seemed to
think she was Canada’s answer to Nastia Liukin. That would require too much of herself, and frankly, she was smarter than that. But until she was exactly sure what more was, she needed to do it —to keep doors open, keep the money come in because one day it would not, and she was not stupid enough to pass those opportunities up. She was too driven, too good, to not succeed, long-term, she truly knew that in her bones. She just needed the time. And while she’d love to be one of those girls who posted the cute shit her boyfriend did—seriously, Scott did some cute shit—but she was there for professional reasons, not to overshare, and he was still her career, too. She’d rather err on the side of being too private with their relationship than not public enough with their business partnership.

Nearly everything could be commoditized, but this. She just needed to explain that to Scott somehow.

“Maybe it’s not worth it for you,” she said, with a nod. “You’re gonna roll up to Gadbois and Patch will hand you the keys. Any club in Canada would die to have you teach a masterclass. You have the show. And all that’s great, because that’s what you want, and you’ve worked hard, and you’re brilliant, and I’m so happy for you. But for me? For my career? Yeah, staying in the public eye is worth it.” She looked at him, willing him to see that she could handle this.

“Tess. This is killing you. Like, actually. You’re not you.”

“I don’t like it, but I can live with it,” she said, before quickly amending, “the normal stuff, not this. This is a small, small minority. The press, social media, is normal. Sometimes it’s even fun.” Scott loved meeting fans, was genuinely touched by them. "It is," she said to his snort, then amended, “I have to play the game, Scott. And we still need it, too.”

“We’re done with ice dance,” he said. His tone was insistent, patient, and a little exasperated, the blend it took when he thought she was being too nitpicky about a lift and he was ready to go home.

“We need it for the tour, for Canada, for the sport, hell, even for the ninety-nine percent of fans who aren’t assholes. We need to be out there for them,” she countered, her voice dull and careful. She had pretty good sense of exactly how famous they were and the answer was not very, honestly. But it was a transition, to a bigger stage than they were used to. And she did want that something bigger, wanted to prove herself outside of ice skating. She wanted to define success on her own terms. “For ourselves,” she swallowed. “I know it doesn’t matter for your career, but the connections and the exposure do help me, in the long run. So … please?”

“Of course, Tess,” he said. “I want you to succeed.”

“I mean, we still get to be us and have our privacy. Change nothing, confirm nothing, right? I think we just need to be kind of … be a little more circumspect. And curated.” Social media had once been fun and silly but had slowly started to feel too demanding, the weight of unfulfilled demands taking her back sometimes to the Canton days and Marina’s disdainful snort every Monday when she stepped on a scale. Tess could dial back, focus on the professional obligations, only put energy into it when she actually felt like it. She’d let her people-pleasing tendencies creep back in, but she had a finite amount of fucks to give and a tour to plan. “I’ll just post professional stuff, OK? Less with you. It’s chum. And maybe let’s talk to Julia and the tour people, because I don’t want these questions all fall with the book and the show. We don’t need to tell them what’s up, just that we want to deflect these questions better. People are always going to talk, I’ve always said that. But maybe … maybe we just give them less, for now. I know it doesn’t feel very honest—”

“Fucking videotaping us without permission isn’t very honest either.” He was still agitated.

“No, it’s not.” She stared ahead of her, at the generic watercolor of Mt. Fuji on the wall.
“Is this — when you talk about comments, I thought it was … you know, you got a nose job, post more photos with Scott, is he dancing with some Leafs girl, are you guys dating. It’s this stuff, too? Stalker-type stuff?” He sat up, ran his hands through his hair. She knew she couldn’t avoid anymore.

“I mean … Not always. But yeah. Sometimes.” She chewed her lip. “It’s not that bad, honestly. We have a platform— “

“Tess.”

“Sorry!”

“You need to tell me this shit, T. I’m serious. I said I was here, and I know I don’t like it, but I can’t be here when it matters if you don’t talk to me.”

“I’m sorry. Really. I just—I can handle it, and I need it, and I thought I had it under control.” She looked him straight in the eye. “Seriously. And I dragged you into this. Don’t bullshit me.”

“Yeah, no. This isn’t your load to carry alone. I’m there. Look, let me take some hits. I’m better at lying anyways.”

(He wasn’t.)

“You are?” He was literally unable to keep his mouth shut.

“Yeah. Of course. I play poker. I can focus here.”

(He couldn’t.)

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Let me in, Tess.” His mouth was a tight line. She was just as worried about him as he appeared about her. It sort of made her sad, and she made a note to make sure he didn’t lose his essential Scott-ness, that perennial optimism and openness, his ease with and enjoyment of people, his magnetism and magnanimity. His sense of humor and self. She was more than OK with him never twirling a fan around on Instagram ever again, but she had fallen in love with him for a reason. Well, many. And one of those was that he was super gregarious. “Are you OK?” he was asking.

“Yes. But I’ve always been comfortable building walls between myself and others. You haven’t.”

She stared at him, the tiredness and hope and sturdiness of him. She missed the easy, lowkey days of the comeback. It had been stressful, sure, the daily obsession over the timing of a wrist flick or whether she was getting enough grams of protein, but they had created a closed system; in retrospect, they were lucky, because it built a foundation strong enough to weather what had turned into an unbelievable level of attention. And they had done it, and still couldn’t believe it, but there were days when she knew Scott might almost— almost— trade the medal for November of 2017, with the normal level of polite Canadian media and his fixation on taking no more than 7200 steps a day outside of workouts and the ability to go out to dinner or brunch without checking social media after and ability to be goofy in public without getting hounded. He genuinely worried it would change him, change them, and she knew he only did some of these things because he loved her.

He really fucking loved her.

"That wasn't—" he stopped, then started again. "That wasn't what I was asking. More checking. That you don't ... Need that break."

Oh.
The out she'd had on ice—that she'd forgotten about—for two years. The hedge because she didn't know what came After, what she would want

She'd reserved it for a reason. And there was still something terrifying about everything that awaited them around the corner of the new year. But, she was beginning to realize, withstanding the crucible of public opinion was making the relationship feel more real. They weren’t out publicly, but they were in the world now. The connection they were protecting was personal. The thing they were building together wasn’t a gold-medal performance. The bullshit they faced, they faced together.

She didn't know exactly what she wanted, except for Scott.

"Four years ago I would have," she answered frankly. "But—no. I don't. I want to be in this together. I'm mostly worried that you're just going along with this because I asked and because you love me." And I'm worried I don't deserve that, entirely. "I don't want this to twist us up again, with the guilt, and everything. This goes both ways."

“I’m—” He rubbed a hand over his face. “Yeah. I’m fine. I'm good.” She raised an eyebrow. “I mean, yes, I think it's bullshit, but if this is going to keep us sane and work for your career longer-term—I want you to succeed, and be happy, Tess, and if this is how, I'm there for you.”

“Thank you,” she said, reaching up with for a kiss.

"I do think you should post less. It can't be healthy."

“Deal,” she leaned back against him. “We’ll be at the cabin in three weeks. Just us.” He'd be in and out, planning with Cara in Ilderton, but god she was looking forward to it.

“And your entire family,” he teased.

She laughed, and burrowed into his side. “Please. They love you. You’re totally Kate’s favorite child at this point.”

His laugh rumbled in her chest. “How many bikinis have you bought online?”

“Four,” she smirked, pressing a kiss up to the corner of his mouth. “Anyways. Kat’s gonna be here, and I want to spend time with her. And Miki. You’re not gonna see Javi for a while, so you’ll want to hang out with him. And then—we just lie low.”

“Whatever you need me to say … I’m there,” he said. “Whatever you need. We’re a team.”

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x.Two Years After Today, Scott

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Scott’s world is silent but for a cry.

He tumbles out of the chair before he’s even awake, hoping to pick The Baby up before she wakes T, who needs sleep. But it’s a stupid, exhausted urge—The Baby will probably need Tessa, anyways.

It doesn’t matter—Tessa is already scooping her out of the plastic bassinet, making generic shushing coos. When she sees Scott, she shrugs. “I woke up right before she started crying, actually. It was the weirdest thing.”
“Mother’s instinct, maybe,” he says, curling around them both on the tiny hospital bed, and her eyes widen. She is a *mother*. He is a *father*.

He checks his watch in the grey light. Almost six thirty in the morning. But for the doctor and nurses, nobody actually knows they are a family of three yet—yesterday morning, he put the finishing touches on the nursery and they called their families to wish everyone a happy Canada Day, and then later they went over to Marie-France and Patch’s for the annual Gadbois barbecue. They socialized until seven, when he noticed the sweat around her strained eyes and assumed the heat finally got the best of Tessa’s thirty-six-week pregnant state. He suggested they leave and she agreed, but as soon as they were in the car calmly announced that instead of going home they should maybe call the doctor and head to St. Mary’s, thanks. Things moved in a blur after that.

Baby Girl Virtue Moir was born at 12:17 AM, and he is too in love with her to lament that they *just* missed getting a Canada Day baby.

And now it’s them on the bed, totally alone. He’ll call their families soon, once everyone is up; he suspects Kate and Alma and Marie and Patch and even Chiddy and Jeff might make it out by the end of the day.

For now their daughter, love transfigured into life, snuggles between them.

“You know, she must’ve known we finished the room yesterday and got tired of waiting,” Tessa yawns, as she tries to adjust The Baby against her chest. “You think she’s hungry? Can you get the nurse? The lactation consultant isn’t coming until nine and I don’t want to screw it up.”

He wants to tell her she can’t screw it up, but then The Baby squirms anxiously and he knows he needs to move before she starts to cry. “Gee, wonder where she got *those* impatient genes,” he teases before planting a kiss on her forehead and hopping off the bed. Somewhere deep in his marrow he knows they’ll be squabbling about this for the next sixty years, whenever anyone asks about how their firstborn arrived.

After the nurse assures Tessa she’s got this, they’re alone again; stunned and sleepy, he watches her. “I can’t believe she’s here,” she says, and he kisses her ear, because words are stupid. Then she adds, “So we definitely need to figure out a name.”

They’d kept the sex a surprise, an out-of-character choice, but they figured it was a good first parenting curveball for two control freaks. And while the boy’s name had been set from the new year and they had easily chosen a girl’s middle name by February, a first name remained elusive. Tessa either liked strong unisex names, like Finley, or ornate trendy names, like Elodie, and he preferred something traditional like Hannah or Olivia.

“You liked Max,” he ventures, since it’s the one unisex name he likes.

“Yeah but I decided Max Moir sounds like a gangster,” she counters, which is true.

“Cameron.” She had loved that.

“You hated that,” she replies. “We should both love her name.” She’s quiet for a second. “What about Grace?”

He thinks of will and determination, of strength and fidelity. He thinks of Tessa, tired and beautiful at six AM, laughing and crying on Olympic podiums, stressed and burning the midnight oil studying, sleepy and rumpled on a Sunday. He thinks of hope and commitment, of sweat and faith, of dances and second chances.
“It’s perfect,” he breathes out, because it is.

“Grace Victoria Virtue Moir,” she whispers. “Welcome to the world.”

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xi. Two Years Before Today, Tessa

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Fuck.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

She’d made it through the medal ceremony, made it through the press conference—her nails digging into Scott’s hand under the table the entire time and she didn’t even fucking care—and made it through a debrief with Marie and Patch and the team back in Montreal. She’d swallowed anxiety, swallowed pettiness, swallowed the gnawing sense of panic. Even then, she’d appeared cool and focused, Scott’s thumb worrying across the racing pulse point in her wrist the only sign that maybe she wasn’t entirely OK. Scott had argued in favor of changing the ending of the dance, and Marie agreed with the assessment—not enough magic —though Tessa and Patch wanted to watch the tape before making any decisions. Tess needed Scott to confirm where they’d lost the levels first. She had calmly nodded as Scott, his own eyes still a bit haunted, bottom lip still twisted between his teeth, reminded everyone that the goal was winning the Olympics, not the Grand Prix, which was an entirely cursed event anyways. It was better to get the glitches out earlier rather than later. Basically, this was all part of the Two-Year Plan, really, if you thought about it.

And they hadn’t been lying when they said they were proud of their performance. Of course they were. They had worked too hard not to be.

But under her Botticelli mask, the what if whispers were back. She’d fought to Stay Present and ground herself, tethering wisps of anxiety to rational thought and the undulations of her diaphragm and Scott, but she could feel the spiral tightening infinitely inward. Scott knew, could feel it in the squeeze of her fingertips, could feel her mind vibrating. Just like how, while he could be perfectly collected in front of their coaches and the press, she could see the disappointment in the clench of his jaw and the anger in the cord of his neck, the way a scratch of his ear meant the scores felt low to him.

What if they had invested all this time in the comeback and each other, and it wasn’t enough?

What if no matter how hard they worked to dare the judges not to give them the gold, it was fixed anyways?

What if the narrative had moved on, truly?

And they’d never been good at this part, the losing.

When they were finally left to their own devices, when she pushed the door to her room shut and he immediately went to wrap his hands around her waist, it felt like 2012 all over it again. Banging it out and not talking about it, losing themselves in each other when they lost, fingers and tongue and teeth leaving their bodies rough and their souls raw and their minds running. Never communicating, never confronting, never processing. She could feel the bile and desperation rising, could feel the fear and fury coiling in her abdomen. She couldn’t do it this time, because she couldn’t lose him this time. “Space, Scott,” she said tightly. “God.”
Stunned, he removed his hands as if they were radioactive and she realized that no, he did not want to bang it out, just wanted her. Disheveled and momentarily lost, he said, “Alright. Um. I’m gonna … go see if Luca wants to get a drink or something.” Fuck.

The *fucking* Final.

She caged her fingers over her skull, closing her eyes, her mind back in London on the hood of Scott’s old car. “Scott,” she said, “I’m sorry.” She tried to think of something that would work for both of them. “Take a bath with me?” she finally suggested. “Just … no talking, though.” She’d get her quiet, he could touch her as much as he wanted, and hopefully they’d both relax. At this point, time with him was energy-in as much as finishing *The Empathy Exams* and drinking tea was.

She just wanted *him*, too.

He nodded. “I’ll run the water,” he said, patting her hip and kissing her temple as he walked past her. He rubbed his nose along her ear for the briefest of moments. Sap.

She grabbed robes out of the closet and a bath bomb out of her suitcase, left her warmups in a sweaty pile on the floor. She pressed a hand to her stomach, centering herself. Tried to stop herself from bending the last two years down to this one moment, this one result. Reminded herself this wasn’t 2013. Gabi and Gui weren’t Charlie and Meryl, and Patch and Marie-France were not Marina. She and Scott were not those brittle, scared kids.

They were different, they were stronger, they were better, they were more.

Scott’s clothes were already on the floor as he stood in the tub, adjusting the temperature. She scooped his stuff up and placed it on the toilet seat, along with both robes, then held out the bath bomb. “Lavender. For relaxation.” A peace offering.

“We’ll need that,” he agreed, plonking it in with a small splash and a hiss. “Alright. This is good. Come on.” He sat down before holding out his hand, and she climbed in, still focused on calming her body down, regaining her focus. Mindlessly, he tucked her ponytail into a messy bun so she wouldn’t get her hair wet, then knocked his head against the ledge of the soaker tub. She settled between his legs, head on his chest, and he wrapped an arm around her to keep her from sliding down.

They closed their eyes.

It took awhile, but eventually—as the lavender wound its way into her senses, as Scott’s hands started to massage her upper arms, as their heartbeats synced—she felt the fear and frustration dissipate. The day felt heavy, but no longer devastating.

“So,” she said, sitting up. Scott grunted behind her and she realized he was halfway to a nap even as he continued to work the knot of out her neck. She turned so they were facing each other, careful not to slosh water over the side. “We lost.” She rearranged some bubbles in front of her so he wouldn’t get distracted. Business meeting, after all.

“We lost,” he confirmed, face pained. The words still made her flinch.

“I kinda forgot how it felt,” she admitted. She hadn’t meant to be superstitious in the comeback—she hadn’t even arrayed her guards just so on the boards, not even at practice, thank you very much—but superstitions were more than just heirloom necklaces and safety pins.

“Same.” He scratched the nape of his neck. “Don’t really love the feeling. Anyways. How are you feeling, T?”
“I … I’m trying not to freak out,” she said. “You?”

His face was blank. “I feel like I let you down,” he said eventually.

“What—how?” At least at Worlds last year, he’d tripped. Had something to fixate on.

“You didn’t win, babe,” he said, voice plain. He felt like he let her down. He always took her losses harder than his.

She nodded. “I mean … We made all the right choices, did everything perfectly and … and we’re still here. I feel like I let you down.”

“So we both hate losing, personally and professionally, and we both feel like we made the other person feel this way,” he summarized, running his big toe along the jut of her hip. “JF would say that’s a classic trap. What’s our next move, Virtch?”

“Personally or professionally?”

“Let’s start personally.”

She considered. “I like that we’re talking,” she settled on. “And this. This is calming.” She ran a foot up the outside of his thigh; it listed to the side and knocked against the ceramic tub. “You?”

“Thank you for not making me go drink with Luca. He’d probably bring his kid anyways.” She reached out and rubbed her other hand along his calf as well.

“You’re welcome.” She took a deep breath. “I want—I want to do this, together. We don’t want to lose. Which means we need to talk about how we lost today. And we need to fix it.” They were a team, but more importantly, they were in charge of this effort. The change started with them.

“The short score was too low.” He’d been modest about their performance in front of the press; he’d been bullshitting. “We could off the judges,” he said, very seriously. He’d hated judges since they were novices but this was the first time he’d offer to off one for her, so she chuckled. It felt good, like the glass breaking in her chest.

“True. And you know, this event might be cursed. Can’t fix curses.”

“Going back to old superstitions?” he teased before sobering.

“We can’t fix judges, we can’t fix curses, but we can make our programs stronger. You and Patch will check the levels. There’s probably something there.”

“We will,” he promised, then paused. “I think we do need to think about the ending of the free, kiddo.”

She pursed her lips. Once upon a time, before Sochi, they had chewed through choreography, desperately in search of something better, always trying to outrun any volatility in their partnership with a grinding mentality of more. One of the comeback rules was sticking to the vision.

As if reading her mind, he said, “There’s a difference between changing it because it’s the smart thing to do and because you’re scared.” He raised an eyebrow.

She had choreographed it with Marie; she was too close. It appealed deeply to the romantic theatre kid at her core. But they needed the right story to win. “What do you think? Really.”

“I mean, it’s beautiful T. It’s romantic, it’s tender, it’s beautiful. It’ll make people cry.”
“But.”

“But I think the … energy could do a better job of staying where it is during *Roxanne*. Different feeling, same level. We move people all the way to heartbroken, but I’m not sure we want to get them bummed out and then expect them to give us a gold medal.”

She could see the new ending, the same way she had seen the jumpsuit last season and their comeback altogether, even when nobody else could. Dying in his arms—but boldly, dramatically, in a way that meant the love was worth it in the end. “Let’s try re-cutting the music,” she agreed. “We can work in the Prince lift, maybe.”

He nodded. “It’s a good one. So we’ll talk to Marie and Patch in the morning?”

“Yeah,” she agreed, feeling tired but sure. “And we’re going to win at the Olympics.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely.” He stood and shook out his hair before wrapping one of the robes around himself. “Today was a setback. We’re gonna get through this, T.”

“We are,” she said, believing herself for the first time. He reached a hand out to her, and she let him help her up and swaddle her in the smaller robe. She reached up and kissed him briefly. “And no matter what—not that it’s gonna matter, because we’re winning the Olympics—we’re still partners.” She ran a thumb along his jaw.

“So we have fewer GPF wins than Kaitlyn and Andrew,” he said, and she snorted. God, this day. He kissed her again. “You know, I know you think we lost today—and I’m not going to settle for this result in two months, we’re going to win this, T, I promise—but it’s kind of a victory, too. We lost and … we’re still here. Together.” He lifted her out of the tub. “We did it, kiddo.”

And she realized he was exactly right.

His forehead tipped down to meet hers, his hands skinned down her body and she clutched his face, folded her arms around his neck. Laughed, out of relief and exhaustion and joy and sadness, her emotions bursting like a balloon as she kissed him.

They’d lost, but they’d won. They were solid, together, real and ready.

Come what may.

Chapter End Notes

I totally didn’t intend for this one to be so long, but it was a really important section that was close to me, and I wanted to get it right. On one hand a lot of it highlights the balance issues I struggled with—the closer we got to the “present” the more Opinions and knowledge I had. Obviously this one couldn’t be finalized until post-July 2018 and I went back and forth on how close to reality I should hew esp when I was thinking about this as so distinct from reality.

On the other hand, though, it was important for me, after we got through “commitment” and before we got to “triumphant”, to discuss conflict and to highlight how stuff that used to tear them apart now strengthens them because they have the same goal, and
work on communication, and focus on affirming and supporting each other. It was the through-the-mirror version of the first four chapters. There’s a super-tiny cue in the Ellen scene, which is when he reaches out to rub her shoulder and it’s tense. Right before the car hood fight, he did the same thing. And I finally got the chance, via JF, to say the whole thing about dramatically different approaches to the same conclusion. I tried other ways of subtly emphasizing their different perspectives too—for instance, I tried to have Scott say ‘the skating community’ when talking about whom they owe; and Tessa more likely to say ‘fans.’ Subtly different audiences, and mindsets. They need to communicate.

Having Manque around to read over was tremendously helpful here, as I was oversympathizing with Tessa and that led to a) the conflict being a lot more dramatic and would lead to unintended consequences as well as, logically, actual fights; and b) just a lot less interesting than if they both had thoughtful, realistic orientations. I was also trying to foreshadow a bit of Scott’s change-of-heart around narrative—and the maturation in his thinking about his own bullshit—and this streamlined version works a lot better.

I tripped myself up trying to make it perfectly fit with reality. The urge was pure vanity about being “right” about what might be happening in the future. Reality had never been a *huge* goal of mine—I always wanted this to be a behind-the-scenes what-if; and that means when you throw the observable, public stuff like press conferences in, you get contradictions, which was sometimes intentional (because as with all public figures—and, frankly, people—there is a ton of bullshitting, and fibbing, and smoothing over complications for the sake of simplicity) and I wanted that to get across. But with a lot of the incidents here, there was both a lot of thematic resonance and a lot of material since it was post-awareness being raised at PC, and I got tempted.

This is emblematic of something I struggled with throughout: how *much* content was provided and I’m still pretty convinced 215k is pretty *short* for a 22 year journey. Like, we never mentioned the mouthwash incident! Or Suzanne! Or when at Worlds 2012 Scott was like “Tessa and I have a romantic weekend getaway to Monaco planned next” (though that was the foundation for the Nice Incident.)! We barely spend time on ice, or at competitions, with their families, or SOs. These were all conscious choices but left a lot on the table, a lot I just hoped people used a filter through which to view this story.

Beyond that, it was fun to introduce the final “loop” that I’d been holding onto featuring Grace Victoria Virtue Moir and eventually Trick and Gigi too (anyone catch The Hip reference in the Grace-is-born scene?). Once I committed to breaking the format with flash forwards (which happened around writing 4 and 5) I really intuitively gravitated to three kids to mirror three games and three relationship restarts, like discussed. What they would be doing in the future came pretty naturally—one early germ to write this story came as my cousin and I, who are both marathon/yoga/hiking junkies, were watching the Opening Ceremonies and she complained “it’s so unfair that Canada could have Lululemon if they chose.” So there are a lot of early nods about Tessa wanting to redesign Team Canada uniforms (as far back as Sochi), and I liked the idea of her basically running Lulu—it seemed a little more reasonable than her going straight to the top at Adidas since that’s such an enormous company.

There was something intangible and lovely about putting them in Vancouver. I liked the subtlety of the fact that Lulu’s HQ in Vancouver meant that Scott willingly moved to BC, far away from everyone, to follow her career. (One bit of headcanon I never
worked in was that Marie made Tessa promise to send her kids to the French Lycee, so that factored into some quick research about what neighborhood in Vancouver they would live in.) Starting with this interview allowed some great exposition as we build out our knowledge of each new development over the final three chapters.
tell the world that we finally got it all right

Chapter Notes

Well, ahem, hello. Shameful author here. And long author's note, too :) 

First off, I am SO SORRY this update took so long. Life, man. Reality bites. Etc etc. But it is here, and the next chapter has a draft that's complete-ish and I'm mostly-probably-pretty-close to OK with having manquebusiness look over. My goal is to have it done before we see them in person on TTYCT in case I have some huge shame moment or something. At any rate, I plan on finishing this. I promise. And I hope you forgive me, because this chapter BRINGS YOU A TON OF CHIDDY. CHIDDY FINDS OUT, Y'ALL. HE HAS WORDS AND THOUGHTS. (And on that note, I *am* going to the show, so I've sworn off social-media about the show so ..... there might be some references in the next 2 sections that are, sigh, inaccurate. And that drives me nuts, but I really want to have an amazing pure experience there.)

Second, I locked, but have unlocked this. I don't know if I'm just in need of serious affirmation (which: I usually am) but the view count and reviews seriously took a hit last chapter, which makes me think people did want to read it but couldn't when it was locked. So it's still open, but I do ask (politely, Canadian-ly) to please keep it out of hashtags on Twitter. I hope you all read and love it though (and tell me what you loved and what is awful!).

Third, I wanted to get the post-final-chapter plan out there, so you all can dive into the final chapter w/ abandon when I post: I'm planning on going through and making some edits to the published text. There's only one major one, where I swap out a character in a conversation with Tessa early on. As I went along, it just didn't fit (This sounds all mysterious, but it's not: There's an early scene over manis that will be Jeff, eventually, not Kaitlyn. There, I said it. I am eh on Kaitlyn being inner-circle.). There are also def some tightening-up things I want to take care of — so far my punch list is about 100 items, where I want to put in new asides or there was a typo or I used a reference to "chapter 9" in their book when it didn't exist. Once all that's done I'll plan on posting a chronological user's guide as chapter 16, to serve as reference, since a lot of people have asked about it. (This is not, as I have been teased, a ploy to have the longest fic on the site. I am whelmed that I got here, ya'll.) My *one* pretty-pretty-please is that you don't use this to judge the piece/comment that X scene doesn't work because it actually comes after Y. This crazy-mixed-up order was the order I did intend for stuff to be read, and while I'm reasonably confident the timeline holds, please don't use it to be mean.

Fourth, during that editing phase, I'd totally be down for adding additional stuff — I've toyed with sharing the playlist and the book list through this piece in the reference chapter (about 82 songs on the playlist so far, between references and comp/exh songs and stuff I cut from the text — stuff actually got cut from this piece, I swear), for instance. But I would also be happy to share other background stuff/write authorial responses about the process behind this fic in the notes, if anyone is interested. I get mad when JK Rowling comes out with new HP stuff, though, so will only plan on doing this sort of stuff if there's interest. Let me know!

Fifth, as we wind down, I would love to hear what your favorite sections or lines in the entire thing are! Will totally tell you mine in the comments if you share yours — they're
not what you'd expect, I think :) And if you haven't said hello in a while, please do!
We're almost at the end. Let's hang together, guys.

Sixth, I cannot thank manquebusiness enough. Seriously, ya'll. I would not have
finished the last four chapters had she not tracked me down, said "sure I'll just glance it
over," prodded, encouraged, left thousands of comments, rei(g)ned in my semicolon
habit, etc. Her eye has made these last four chapters great, and also an actual product.
She's now blogging at sartorialscott.tumblr.com, so if you a.) like this piece or b.) like
funny commentary on Scott's clothes (they are sometimes transcripts of our chats; the
thing about Zach Donahue is me) follow her there.

Seventh, here we go! This chapter is has possibly the most straightforward title and
theme — this is all about the triumphant moments behind the moments they share with
the world, as their public and private lives blend. Title is from the amazing Sara
Bareilles song (backup song for this is "The Story" by Brandi Carlile, just FYI). I bring
you the 2018 Olympics, and CHIDDY, and Jordan Virtue, and some pretty awesome
moments. I really really love it, and am so excited to keep writing and sharing, and hope
you love it too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

i. Today, Tessa

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Trust Jordan, after three days of speeches that make them sound like the second coming of Elizabeth
and Darcy, to set the record straight.

Thank God.

“Now, some of you might have heard, once or twice, about how Tessa and Scott met,” she starts, her
opener memorized for maximum effect. She’s glamorous as a Middleton sister. She sassily flips her
straight hair over the red halter of her dress as she swings around what appears to be a very full gin
and tonic, but Tessa notices that her grip on her speech—printed and folded neatly—is sweaty and
tight. JJ clears her throat and darts her eyes around the assembled crowd.

The guests are all a little distracted but easy, indulgent after hours of indulging. Most people are
looking at Jordan, but there’s still a low, busy din throughout the hall: Kat and Midori are snapping
selfies several seats down from Tess; Jesse and Mick are laughing loudly with Babsy; Tessa Two,
Nicole, Melissa, and Michelle are toasting, probably to the existence of the kids’ table and JF, who is
currently doing card tricks for the mini Moirs and baby Virtues and Billie-Rose. A few seats down
from the sisters-in-law, Alma, Kate, and Carol—all wet-eyed after splitting at least two bottles of
wine—are looking at photos on someone’s phone and laughing, probably at Tessa’s past hairdos.
Twenty feet away Tanith and Tati, both pregnant again, look like they’re laughing at Zach’s jokes
only because they can’t cry or drink; nearby, Charlie and Max are trying to see if they can still toss
and catch cocktail nuts in their mouths. A few seats over, Gabby Daleman is still hitting on Javi.
Tessa’s pretty sure Scott’s Ilderton buddies came to the wedding hungover, and they didn’t waste
much time before availing themselves of the hair of several dogs. The cacophony is to be forgiven:
Jordan’s toast is the last of nine, since they’re bad at saying no to friends and family with way too
many stories to go around, and everyone is restless and merry and probably on their fourth glass of
champagne.
But the setting is perfect, exactly as Tessa dreamed and specified. Their three hundred twenty guests—insane, yes, but he wanted to invite everyone and she wanted to throw an amazing party and it wasn’t like a wedding was hard to plan, compared to a multi-city skating tour—sit at eight long tables, family mingling with Team Canada, Toronto elites talking with an international cast of skaters, Montreal creatives laughing with Ilderton natives. Candlelight warms the brick walls and reflects off the gold chargers, which look perfect, like medals, exactly as she argued they would in that stupid fight. The centerpieces are fabulous and fragrant, towering mounds of red and pink and white ranunculus, peonies, roses, dahlias, and scabiosa. Tessa’s still in her first dress of the day, a lacy confection, creamy and dreamy, that straddles the line between classic and modern with a structured lace top and piles of silk in the skirt. After the first dance, she’ll change into the party dress, with a deep V of silver sequins and a fun, floor-length fringed skirt—with pockets!—that Matthieu designed with her. Kelly will help her let her hair down, and she’ll dance the night away.

“Hey now,” Jordan calls, trying to get everyone to settle. Next to Tess, Scott’s fidgety and itching to move, his fingers tapping against her thigh as he makes faces at Max and the rest of the Arkells, who are hanging out by the stage. She pokes his thigh to get him to pay attention. His laugh is bright and neverending as he says something to his brothers, and she truly doesn’t think she’s ever seen him this happy, not in Vancouver, not when he proposed, not even in PyeongChang. She’s pretty sure he has been waiting his entire life to tear up the dance floor at his own wedding.

After a smile from Tess and a nod to herself, Jo starts again, hand on her hip to project confidence. “Hey! As I was saying. You might have heard some stories about how Tessa and Scott met. You might have heard that they are Canada’s sweethearts. The definition of destiny, in fact.” She rolls her eyes for effect, then surveys her audience, finally managing to stare them down the way she does juries and judges. “I am here to tell you that is utter bullshit.” With that line, everyone’s eyes are finally on her.

With a triumphant smile she turns to Scott and Tessa, unfolding her speech carefully so she doesn’t spill her drink, and starts to read. “I love you two both so, so much. I like to take enormous credit for this entire wedding—it’s all me and Cara, basically.” Five seats to the right of Tessa, Cara whoops. “But this destiny narrative? Total trash. I am a lawyer, and this toast was going to be my case against destiny. However, unlike the Brothers Moir and Patrick and Jeff, I googled ‘how to deliver a good toast’, and rule number one, according to the internet, is to be nice to the bride and groom—” there’s a ripple of laughter at this; Danny and Charlie’s speech had some fun stories, to say the least—“so this isn’t a roast to correct the record. In fact, if I do what the the internet says I’m supposed to, it’s going to end up sounding like a case for destiny. First, I’m supposed to start with a story about when I knew that Tessa had found The One. But I can’t, because I was eleven. I will say, I think I knew Scott was probably something special when you stopped putting on the white tutus and making me play Ballerina Bride after school, and started putting on a skating dress and making me play Olympics with you instead. I am so happy that the man you did all those roles with—dancer and Olympic champion and wife—is the kid formerly known as Scottie. So maybe that’s one point in the ‘destiny’ column.” Jo gives them a look, and Tessa’s filled with love for this darling, wise, wonderful sister.

Wife.

That means Scott is her husband.

Holy god.

“And Scott,” JJ continues reading, with a crinkling smile, “maybe it’s another point in the ‘destiny’ column that I can’t even say ‘welcome to the family,’ like the internet suggests, because you have been family since I was in junior high. You’re the younger brother I never had, who exploded stink
bombs in my mom’s car, and ate all the Oreos in my kitchen. You tried and failed to grill my boyfriends, mostly because you were like, prepubescent until you were seventeen, and annoyed me with the nickname Danny Two — still in circulation, by the way; some things don’t change.” The original Danny, on Scott’s other side, laughs and claps him on the back. “Today, you’re my favorite euchre partner and the person I call when I really want to be cheered up and my grilled cheese maestro and my most trusted car mechanic, even though you live five hours away, which can be a problem.” Her tone is warm and fond, and Scott beams at her. “And Tessa, I can’t tell a story about you that Scott doesn’t already know, which is another Internet suggestion. Apparently, the Internet is not equipped to deal with your relationship.” Somewhere, the Stars cast bursts into laughter. “Scott — and everyone else here—knows that you’re unfailingly loyal and incredibly kind. I can say you’re the best little sister I could ask for—you’re always up for an adventure, unless it means you might not get eight hours of sleep.” That line and accompanying wink are both clearly angling for a reaction, and feel a bit forced compared to the rest of the speech, though people humor it with a chuckle. But Tessa loves it, her bark startling Scott a little, who snorts in response.

Jordan shifts a little, emotional as she focuses solely on Tessa. Her voice speeds up and cracks as she continues. “You’ve been there whenever I’ve needed it, Tessie, from driving to Toronto from Michigan and taking me dancing after a breakup or reorganizing my closets when I was in high school or being the best maid of honor when I got married. Whether we’re lip syncing to the Spice Girls on my bed or getting manicures before Worlds or Skyping from Canada to Australia or traveling together, you just make everything more fun. You have an incredible, joyous, generous spirit. And since you were seven and took that outgoing Moir boy’s hand and vehemently denied that you thought he was cute, you have taught me more about love and commitment and relationships than anyone else I know.”

Scott squeezes her shoulder tightly. Kate catches her eye and blows her a kiss. Next to her, Alma and Joe are grinning and raise a glass preemptively. The crush of their family—their weird, wonderful, supportive, huge family—is overwhelming. Tessa begins to tear up, and when Scott notices, he presses a kiss into her updo. “Laugh-crying only today, babe,” he murmurs.

“Everything’s allowed today,” she whispers back.

Jordan turns back to her audience, taking a drink before going on. “But even though all that would seem pro-destiny, I have two main arguments in my case against it. First, there’s the sheer improbability of Scott and Tessa. As kids, one of them could have decided to pursue another sport; teenagers, Tess could have easily outgrown Scottie. Tessa’s legs could have retired them permanently, before Vancouver; they could have decided one medal was enough in 2010; they could have stayed retired in 2014. And they’ve always been so completely different off ice. It was only when they put on their skates that you went, ‘oh hey, they fit.’ Given those differences, given how difficult their personal relationship could get, because of how important the working professional relationship was, they had every chance in the world of falling in love with other people. Things like sunsets and taxes are inevitable, but this marriage hardly was. That’s part of what makes it so incredibly special, and so my first toast is to the specialness of tonight.”

“Hear hear!” Danny yells, and everyone follows and drinks.

Jordan waits till everyone settles again before continuing. “My other argument is that saying that Tessa and Scott are destined to be together ignores the incredible amount of work that the two of them bring into this marriage. Scott’s been Tessa’s everything. Everything that could have weakened the two of them ended up eventually making them stronger together. And truly, he’s the best person to her, but—as you all probably know—it’s been kind of hard to put a label on what they are to each other. And there have definitely been a lot of phases where different labels seemed appropriate. Who here hasn’t had a moment where they asked ‘So … what’s going on with them?’ On behalf of their
families—I thank all of you here for sticking it out with them. A toast to you all, for dealing with their shenanigans.”

“Hear hear!” Charlie, this time, and everyone drinks again.

Tessa remembers Jordan the know-it-all big sister yelling at her for sleeping with Scott when she was eighteen; Jordan bringing her wine at the lake and needling her about whether Scott was it; Jordan in a hospital corridor, scolding her for buying Scott a ballerina bear—now stowed somewhere in a closet, waiting for a nursery, Tess suspects. Jordan has always seen them for who they are, has always supported them—sometimes even in spite of that knowledge—has loved them fiercely and endlessly both together and individually. Her toast is an unexpected, tender benediction Tessa didn’t know she craved.

“Still, even with all that ambiguity in their pasts, I started to feel like something was changing again when they decided to do the comeback. Call it a big sister sense. It was a little scary—wanting to win the Olympics is a big enough deal—and so at first I was concerned. I love you both so much, and the stakes were so high. I didn’t want to see either of you get hurt, or have your dreams crushed. But right around that same time, I came across this column in the New York Times called ‘The Wedding Toast I’ll Never Give.’” Tessa’s heart catches again, knowing what’s coming. She remembers the harsh sunlight, Scott’s squint and bit lip, her promise and confession in a rink parking lot three years ago. “And it was this really lovely piece by this woman who got married really, really young young, and how she’s going to all these weddings now where the toasts are these big, romantic pronouncements of everlasting love, and she’s thinking, that’s not marriage. Marriage is hard: sharing your space with someone and sacrificing for them; it’s exhausting: being vulnerable and intimate and open; it’s selfless: listening to and responding to your partner’s feelings and just plain old caring about them every day, even when they’re complicated and imperfect or irritating. And yet, you still love them. And yet, you keep turning to them. And yet, you make it work. When I read that, I thought it was good meditation on love and life, so I sent it to Tess. But of course, she knew all those things already. Because the next time I spoke with her, I somehow knew: she and Scott were together, however they chose to define it. And it was going to stick.”

“So even though it’s called ‘The Wedding Toast I’ll Never Give,’” it’s the toast I’m giving here. Scott and Tess know what the work is like. They could have been with someone else, been alone, kept the illusion that love is an old-fashioned fairy tale, but they chose to be with each other. Scott knows deeply how cranky Tessa is before three cups of coffee; he knows that even though she pretends to be this organized neat-freak, he has a Monica Gellar Closet of Shame where she stashes everything; he even knows that she doesn’t know who Monica Gellar is and never will.” Tessa can’t even roll her eyes, because it’s completely true. A murmur of laughter runs through the crowd.

Jordan smiles, clearly thrilled at her speech’s reception. “Tessa knows that Scott will always come home with only eighty percent of the grocery list; that he unfortunately knows all the lyrics to every Weird Al song ever; that his bar for when hockey gear needs to go into the wash is disgustingly high. He knows Tessa’s stubbornness; she knows his impulsiveness. They know what the other is like mean, angry, sad, depressed, irritated, overly sensitive. They know they won’t change the other. And yet, they love each other anyways. And yet, they love each other anyways. And yet, they know they make each other better. And yet, we’re still here, hopeful and awed and excited for what their future holds. When you think about it, two people who have been in a relationship as close and as tight as Tessa and Scott’s for twenty-two years still deciding that they want to be together and they want to be married? That’s not inevitable. That’s something really beautiful. So my next toast, is to your past. To all that work. To the Heidi braids and cowboy hats and the mesh tank tops and that photoshoot where you sat in a lake—”

Jordan had actually presented them with a blown-up version as an engagement present “— and the hours on the ice and in PT and on the road; the missed birthdays and Christmases; the pain and the doubts; the sacrifices you made and the sacrifices you required of each other; the insanely oblivious
interviews; the incredibly dirty routines you made our mothers sit through. As a team, you have produced greatness. As individuals, you are way too kind and thoughtful and fun and smart and funny for how stupidly talented and beautiful and successful you are. And as a couple, indivisible, you take my breath away. So to that history, I raise my glass a third time.”

“Hear hear!” everyone calls back. Jordan takes a big sip.

“But finally—Tess and Scottie. Most of the marriage advice I have, I got from you—how to communicate, how to disagree, how to forgive. But here are my and yet’s for you.” Her eyes, once mirthful, turn deadly serious; Scott’s hand squeezes gently at the cord in her neck. She leans in even further. “You know each other so well, and yet I hope you never stop learning new things. You two are going into this eyes open, and yet I hope marriage surprises you. You are so well prepared, and yet I hope you still find challenges to meet and rise to together. You’re the best team I know, and yet I hope I get to see you accomplish and grow even more. So let’s raise one final glass to Tessa and Scott, and the extraordinary future they have yet to discover.”

“Hear hear!”

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[ii. Three Years Before Today, Scott]

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Chiddy was the first to find out officially, in a way that Scott regretted in retrospect.

(Mind out of gutter. Gross.)

No, they weren’t having sex. They were, however, watching a movie in his and Chiddy’s room pre-Skate Canada 2016, just three weeks after Tessa’s confession at ACI. Chiddy had promised he wasn’t getting in until much later that evening, but when the lock turned, Scott had time to remove his hand from under her shirt and his mouth from her neck, but barely.

“Hey Chiddy,” Tessa called, rolling out from under him and straightening her hair before he got out of the hallway. “I’m here. Just, you know, chilling out. Watching a movie.”

“Oh cool. Hey, what movie?”

“Bridesmaids, it was on TV.” She scooted over, still nervously playing with her hair. “How was the drive?”

“Good. Got in early.”

“Clearly,” Scott drawled, unimpressed. Tess nudged him, and he tried to sit up straighter.

Chiddy’s head popped into the main room. “What are you guys up to tonight?”

“Um …” Scott said, stalling. They had plans.

“I think there was a bar we heard about we were going to check out, then a quick bite to eat,” Tessa turned to him, an expectant look in her eyes—the evening’s agenda was entirely his surprise to her. Once she had gotten over her weird aversion to dates, his enjoyment of planning them turned out to perfectly match her enjoyment of getting spoiled, so when he had suggested that they have a nice, quiet-ish night in Toronto before locking into practice-and-performance mode for the next week, she hadn’t been hard to convince.
He nodded. “Yeah, nothing too crazy, just a drink and a bite to eat,” he downplayed.

Chiddy brightened. “Leaving the hotel. Hey-o! Let’s do it.”

Now it was Tessa’s turn to be unimpressed. She leaned back on the couch, eyes appraising. “I’m going to go change, then,” she announced, leaning over to kiss Scott’s cheek. “Ditch him,” she breathed.

Forty minutes later, when he knocked on her room in dark-wash jeans and a nice blazer and a shirt he knew she liked, she looked both fantastic and utterly unsurprised to see Chiddy next to him.

“Besties’ night out!” she enthused, subtly glaring at Scott before leading the way to the elevator. Only Tessa could glare subtly. Shitshitshitshitshit. He really had tried.

He slipped an arm around her shoulder, very platonically running a thumb under the strap. “You look pretty,” he apologized, and she did, dammit—the dress looked like a simple sleeveless navy thing from the front, but the U of the back dipped all the way down to her tailbone, highlighting the fact that she definitely wasn’t wearing a bra, and she had on the pointy red shoes he really liked.

“Oh I know,” she said back, staring ahead, her tone still short. He planted a kiss on her ear in apology.

When he turned, Chiddy was shaking his head and sighing.

“The Drake Hotel is your casual drink?” he asked skeptically when they stepped out of the Uber. “The well gin and tonic is like, twenty-two dollars.”

“It has a really nice view,” Scott said weakly. “I came here for a TIFF party a couple of years ago and really liked it.”

“You remembered?” she smiled. It had been six months post Sochi. They’d barely been speaking.

“Well, yeah,” he said. “You talked about it for forty minutes.”

She looked at him with a lust-filled look that he really wanted to kiss off.

Fuck you, Chiddy. Fuck you for forever.

He’d reserved a high top and arranged for a bouquet of purple and yellow flowers from her favorite Toronto florist to be waiting for them—thank you, Jordan, for the name and lack of shit-giving—and Chiddy immediately laughed. “What the fuck did you do this time, Moir?” he asked.

“Rough practice week,” Scott muttered, red-faced, as he handed Tessa the flowers. She inhaled the bouquet of peonies and dahlias, her eyes smoldering irresistibly.

“These are absolutely lovely. And Scott’s being way too hard on himself. These are … Let’s call them Welcome Back to the Grand Prix flowers.” She squeezed his hand, not breaking eye contact.

“God, partnered skaters remain the weirdest,” Chiddy laughed again. “Though at least we’re no longer in the Sexagon days, eh? All right. What do you want to drink? First round’s on me.”

Luckily, lecturing Chiddy on his decision to be coached by Marina kept the conversation in safe—and very animated; Tess was pissed— territory, and Scott was surprised when he checked his watch. “We should get going if we’re going to make our reservation,” he said.

“Great! I’m starving. Where are we going?” Chiddy asked, curious.
Goddamnit, Chiddy, go home.

“Harbord Room,” he said reluctantly.

Tess’s eyes lit up. “Really?” she exclaimed. She knew the chef through Jess and loved the burger, though it was a salad with grilled chicken kind of night. “They’re closing soon, aren’t they?”

“This week,” he confirmed. He’d been lucky to get a reservation.

“Scott, you’re amazing.”

“Yeah, Scott, you’re amazing,” Chiddy echoed. “When’s the reservation? Let’s go!”

“Twenty minutes.” Was there a special term for friend murder? Bro-icide? Bud-icide?

(Homie-cide ended up being Chiddy’s brilliant suggestion.)

“Once he and Marina flame out,” Tessa said, very very casually, as Scott handed her her purse and Chiddy sauntered to the door, whistling, “why don’t you just suggest he come to Montreal and move in with you?”

Dinner was exactly what he would have expected, though Tessa did let him discreetly put his hand on her thigh for most of it. Chiddy, the poor sap, didn’t notice. When Chiddy went to the bathroom, she started nonchalantly palming Scott through his jeans. “Tess,” he warned. “Come on.” He shifted uncomfortably as her fingers traced along his inseam.

“That,” she said, very calmly, fingers still wandering, eyes scanning the room with a polite smile, “is for bringing him.” She removed her hand just before any serious discomfort arose and Chiddy returned. Scott had forgotten how evil and conniving she could be when she wasn’t getting her way.

It was (still) pretty hot.

They all had early practice, so they headed back to the hotel not long after. She was on the seventh floor and he and Chiddy were on the eleventh, so when the elevator stopped, he and Tess stared at each other for a while until he said, “Hey man, I’m just going to walk her to her room and say goodnight. I’ll be up in a sec.”

And somehow—after either five hours or fifteen years of third-wheeling—that was what finally did it. Chiddy broke. Chiddy broke hard. “Oh. My. Gooooooood,” he exclaimed with a gasp, flinging an arm out to stop the closing elevator door as comprehension dawned across his face. “Hoooooooooly shit. This was a date. I just crashed your date!”

They turned to face him, jaws agape. Tessa recovered first. “We’re not dating, Chiddy,” she said, her voice that low and deadly tone that roughly translated to I’m beautiful and you should be scared of me.

(That tone kept literally every figure skater who saw anything sketchy on lock for the next two years, even fucking smartasses like Alex Shibutani and Adam Rippon, so Scott definitely appreciated it.)

“Right, but this was a date, as in a planned romantic evening between two people who are fucking, and that’s totally the fifty-second-thousandth edition of the Tessa and Scott Romantic Semantic Olympics right there, Virtue. ‘That’s not a date’—bullshit. I have seen this movie! I have been to this rodeo!” His cackle was loud, merry with wine, and he was goddamned clapping and fucking jumping up and down like a lunatic, and Kaetlyn and Alaine’s room was twelve feet away. “You two are dating!”
Scott looked over at Tessa, who nodded insistently, and quickly grabbed Chiddy to haul him toward her room, slapping a hand over his loud trash mouth. Tess had informed Skate Canada in no uncertain terms that she would be rooming by herself for the duration of their comeback, thank you very much, and they had said OK. Because of The Tone.

Only when they were safely inside with the door closed did Scott take his hand off Chiddy’s mouth. “I knew it!” he yelped, flipping backwards onto the king-sized bed and bouncing a little. “You devious little shit. When did this begin?” He rubbed his palms together before popping his chin onto his hands and leaning forward on his elbows like a gossiping teenage girl.

“Since February,” Tessa said at the same time Scott said, “Since ACI.” She side-eyed him.

“Figures,” Chiddy muttered. “But you’re—”

“Yes.”

“And you’re—”

“Very.”

“And you’re definitely not—”

“Nope, not Skate Canada or the media or anyone. So keep your trap shut, OK?”

“Well then,” Chiddy grinned. “I am so happy for you. And since I have a decade worth of embarrassing shit to hang over your heads, let’s go over the extortion terms for you two jagweeds.”

“Patrick—”

“Listen, Tess, assuming you’re not confirming anything before Korea, this is going to be at least two years of sneaking around and trying to swap rooms and Scott fucking up massively in interviews and you two having sex in at least one ice rink that’s crawling with officials and the press like it’s Worlds 2008 all over again. I know this and you know this.” He looked between the two of them. “And I can be very helpful.”

Tessa and Chiddy stared at each other, arms crossed, then both looked back at Scott. “Fine. Give us your terms,” he relented. Tess scoffed.

“Well, first off, coffee every morning that I have to cover for your ass. ‘Where’s Scott? Sleeping in. Yes, we did go out to a bar last night. He danced with a fan because he’s very very single. It was a great time.’”

“Scott’s always late for practice, and also always dancing with fans,” countered Tessa. “That’s not something you’ll need to cover for him for.” Chiddy looked at her, eyebrow cocked. She caved. “Fine. Coffee?”

“Yeah. And not Scott’s grande-black-no-milk. Whatever fancy-ass drink you’re swilling, Ms. Virtue. Actually, just walk on in and request the most expensive latte on the menu. Minimum eight dollars. Three shots of espresso. I’ll need the receipts.”

“Drip coffee, got it.” Scott rolled his eyes. “Anything else?”

“Dinner, once a week, on tour and at competitions, for all these dirty dirty lies I’m going to be telling on your behalf. You need someone to confirm that yes, Tessa has a headache? Or that you two have a dinner with a sponsor and can’t join the group? I’m your guy. For food. Weekly. Not fast food.
Good takeout, or something homemade. From Scott, obviously, not you, Firestarter.”

“That seems fair,” Tessa said, voice tart and lips tight. Then, as if she couldn’t help it, “Also, that was once.”

“I liked those dish towels without the burn marks, thanks,” Chiddy sassed right back, getting them dangerously close to a full-on Terrifying Tessa moment. “Now, finally, for all the secrets that I have kept over the years and will continue to keep, as your most loyal friend in skating, I get a totally uncensored toast at your wedding, at least five minutes. I have many stories and they deserved to be shared. For instance, the Nice Incident—”

“Oh come on,” Tessa finally exclaimed, finally losing it. “Chiddy! This is brand new.”

(In the end he and Buttle were given five minutes but took fifteen, and their joint toast—which they dedicated to Ellen deGeneres—was mostly a photo slideshow accompanied by their shitty, witty commentary; following each photo, the guests voted on whether Tessa and Scott were dating, “dating,” or not dating at the time the photo was taken. Jeff was laughing so hard he barely got through his part.)

Patrick stood. “I will remind you of this at some point in 2018. Until then, have a great night. Remember my fancy latte in the morning.” He clapped Scott on the back and kissed Tessa’s cheek. “By the way, I’m incredibly happy you two figured your shit out.”

(And he kept their secret for two whole years. Even when it got well past the point of obviousness to those they shared hotel floors and tour buses and Olympic Village suites with, Chiddy said nothing.)

They stared at the shutting door. “Did you have any idea he’d be so good at extortion?” Scott asked, stunned.

Tessa laughed. “Scott, are you serious? He’s terrible. David Lease would pay money to know this. Social media and the message boards would actually have a mini-meltdown. And all we have to do in exchange for his help and silence is … buy him a latte every once in a while?” She smiled. “Though he’s your best friend, so he’s your problem. You’re paying for those.”

“Well,” Scott smirked, putting his hands on her hips. Being extorted felt surprisingly good. A first step out into the open, toward something concrete. “You know what that means, though?”

She looked up at him. “What?”

“I can stay here tonight,” he kissed her neck lightly. “And any night I’m rooming with him during the next two years of competitions. That is, unless you’d prefer I just hang with him, you know, and save some energy for the competition …”

She pushed him backwards toward the bed. “I think we need to practice our lifts, actually,” she said, very seriously, before covering his mouth in a kiss.

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**iii. Two Years Before Today**

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The Final could have been a devastating blow, a stiletto stomp on their dreams that cracked them and sent both of them into separate tailspins. Instead, they turned inward, toward each other, and together
were strong enough to withstand the hit. Indeed, while they would never say that they were happy with second, losing-and-getting-through-it ended up deflating the lingering pressure and brittle anxieties. They were OK. They had made it.

Together.

And now they knew that losing a competition didn’t mean losing for real.

They flew down the hill of the rest of the year without pause or consideration, feet beating faster and faster underneath them, accelerating to an internal drumbeat. If Tessa had believed in luck anymore, she would have said it had taken a turn, but the fact that they made the corrections to the free reminded her that their choices had power. Her bones and spirit felt sure and supple as they got ready to storm the Games.

They’d entered the bubble the moment they decided to start the comeback, pulled it tighter around them the night they decided to be together and keep it quiet. But after the Final, it sealed around them hermetically. Even the most minor decisions decision they made—whether they should walk to the corner store, or have sex, or go to a movie—were decided in the service of the Games. Their days were trancelike and intentional. She put the music on in the shower, visualized the program three times before she even had coffee. He spent twenty minutes a night analyzing their heart rate and caloric-burn data. They stayed late at the rink, alone but not lonely in the dark Montreal December, poring over the program, pouring themselves into it. It was the last time that they would hone competitive programs together, they knew, and there was a powerful synchronicity, a rightness of energy and electricity that they had never felt before. They deconstructed the programs with the consideration of a scholar reading the Talmud. They were Beethovens with the Ninth itching under their fingertips, modern Michelangelos painting six inches under the Sistine Chapel.

Everyone had always told her that she could read Scott’s mind. She had always thought that it was more that she could read his body but simply had learned his mind, memorized it like a habit after so many years. Now, though, it was like she could feel his mind.

She wasn’t superstitious, not anymore, but she just had a really good sense about this.

They spent New Year’s Eve day on ice and then at the gym, ate a dinner of cauliflower rice and Peruvian chicken and broccoli at his place, an extra side of spinach for her because they were worried about her iron levels. As he prepped, she looped her arms around his waist, moving with him around the kitchen and kissing his neck whenever she felt like it and absolutely slowing down his “process.” Finally, he swung her in front of him and started dancing as Maybe I’m Amazed — Paul McCartney’s version only for him—came on. The chicken nearly burned. Afterwards, she piled her feet in his lap as she read over the Nivea contract and he reviewed tape of a pair of juniors his mom had emailed him.

“She needs to work on her lines,” Tessa said without looking up from her paperwork. “She’s expressive, but she’s gotta point her toes more to match his.”

“Yeah. Extra ballet?” He chewed his pen cap, shuffling it around with his tongue as he scratched out notes.

“Yeah.” She twisted her neck to watch the replay again. “Don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” he agreed, writing it down. “Should see how much off-ice ballroom they’re getting, too.”

“Jenn’s not there but the studio in London is still good, Alma can take them.” She kicked her feet around in his lap. “This is nice.”
“Yeah.” His hand curved around the arch in her right foot and his thumb stroked her big toe. “You wanna watch the ball drop?”

“Did you record Hong Kong?”

“Sydney.” His grin was happy and sure.

(This time, when he promised to take her dancing in a year, she knew they would go, and they did.)

January felt less like running down a hill and more like kicking into flight, Scott’s hand in hers. Their attention remained solely on the Games, but they began to squint into the dim flashbulbs of media interest again (nothing like what was to come, of course), a forced reckoning of their legacy and relationship and whether or not the sum total of twenty years was Worth It (yes, obviously, always). After three Games it was a familiar narrative—friendship, partnership, destiny—that they were perfectly happy to brush off. Their future—and their real story—was dark shadows beyond the bright lights. She supposed they would have to talk about that, and soon. But they were synced and purposeful, free and certain, in their present.

He began to get verklempt for the first time in their career, nostalgic about all the Last Time s—last Monday with a full workout; last Sunday yoga class followed by the Tessa Special of poached eggs and smoked salmon unpeeled from waxy cardboard; last time Sam told Scott be sexy you so sexy! — but for Tessa, it was a first time: she began to feel centered and even joyful, unadulterated by fear or anxiety like never before. When he described their connection as a funny little relationship , his voice hoarse with emotions they’d never fully express on camera, she couldn’t agree more with the assessment. It was weird but glorious, it was small but overflowing, it was so so strong, it was theirs.

Nats wasn’t exactly going to be a tough competition, but she thought back to the last major competition in Vancouver, thought of who she was then—a kid, skinny and hopeful and naive, alternately overflowing with promise and pain—and thought: how far we’ve come.

Scott had described the revamped choreo as “magical” during practice—it was the term he used when he knew she didn’t want to hear “destined”—but she felt the rightness of the program changes as soon as she heard the crowd’s roar of applause. Knew it as soon as Scott cupped his palm over her ear, dragged her body along his, and whispered, voice raw, “You and me, baby, always. I love you so goddamn much.” She was so happy, she felt like there were starbursts exploding out of her chest. The perfect score was gravy.

Mike Slipchuk appeared suddenly in their change room after the press conference and a shower, right as Scott was gently taking her suitcase and she was making sure that they’d gathered all their stuff. “You need to tell us we officially qualified?” Scott asked, eyebrow raised. Their first conversation with Mike had been during his first season as HPC director and their first Canadian season as seniors, when he had informed them they weren’t going to Torino. It had set a tone, and they’d been wary of him ever since.

“Congrats, you’re going to Korea,” Mike said, wry. “No, but I actually do have another announcement you might be interested to hear.”

When they heard the words joint flagbearers , she could tell it took all of Scott’s willpower not to kiss her right then and there. Hell, her own high lasted so long that the next day, when he whispered you were worth the wait after their gala performance, she could only pant and smile, not even caring that he maybe should have cupped his hand over her ear again. She was overwhelmed at the glorious crescendo of their career, the messy tangle of the last two decades smoothing out into something that, from the outside, probably looked a lot like inevitability. In the end, all their breaks looked like lucky
ones.

(They knew better, of course.)

And in February, they soared. Literally—they left for Korea on the fifth—but also figuratively; from the time they took off from Trudeau until they were back, Tessa’s feet didn’t touch the ground. She floated through the Opening Ceremony, a blur of red and blue and green and yellow, the wind whipping the flag she grasped; floated through a brief hello with Yuna after; floated through photos with every Canadian athlete. Without Scott’s hand grounding her, she would have simply floated away.

“Did you ever think we’d get here?” she laughed, gloved hand running down the arm of his coat. She needed to shout so he could hear, but her voice disappeared on the wind before anyone else could.

He laughed back, stepped closer. Tried to push her hair out of her face as a cool wind whipped around them. “You asked me that once before,” he reminded her, and she remembered a conversation in Osaka, when they were just beginning to heal, to hope. “Answer’s still no. Even in my wildest dreams, T. This is … pretty extraordinary. You’re pretty extraordinary.”

Everything that was extraordinary about her life was only because of him. He couldn’t kiss her then either, but she knew he damn well wanted to.

But they had come to win. Their career was the thing that they had built together for twenty years and—while they wanted to suck as much marrow as possible about the moment, to make their mark as Canadians and to remember the experience as athletes—they weren’t going to drop it now. They’d discussed with JF and Patch how to balance everything in their drive to do it all, suck as much marrow as possible out of their moment. The answer was clear: the bubble. Before leaving Montreal they had handed their smartphones over to their moms and handed out the burners’ numbers to a short list comprised of Patch and Marie, JF and the b2ten crew, the rest of the Team Canada skaters and select Skate Canada staff, and their families. The press tossed them questions about their relationship, but they didn’t permeate; Scott answered them cavalierly, almost carelessly, as Tessa’s attention stayed focused where it should be. She had never felt more prepared for anything. And once they crushed the team event and crashed in the king-sized bed in Seoul, the bubble got even tighter.

(They didn’t hear the chatter of questions turn into a crescendo of conjecture, didn’t know that the straightforward articles about them changing up the cunniliftus had turned into rampant speculation about whether they might be cunnilifting, didn’t see the GIFs of her passing his hand from her right to her left after the flower ceremony or photos of him kissing her temple at the medal ceremony. Didn’t notice the number of her Instagram followers surging, didn’t catch how stories about them went from being mostly written by Canadian outlets to mostly not. Didn’t think anything of how the shift in media interest reframed their answers to relationship questions, the confident, taunting, airy deflections they’d been using for years to mash truth with privacy.)

They were the only two people in the world, safe and locked into each other.

Twice before, she had built her life around those heady seven minutes on ice, twice before, she had felt the white-knuckled intoxication of this is your moment. This was why she had done what she had done, every day for the last two years, the last twenty. Every choice, from coming back to committing to Scott to her morning coffee order, had been one sure step on the road to here.

And this time, they knew it was the last. She’d thought that twice before, but this time, there was a sepia-toned finality. She’d spend every moment she could with Scott, being present, making it
special, making it count.

They set the world record in the short and had a quick moment of giddiness—it was theirs to celebrate—but they were recentered by the next morning. After stretching and talking to JF, they got ready side by side in the Village, Scott gelling back his hair, Tessa in one of his oversized flannel Canada shirts as she carefully touched up the falsies she’d applied yesterday.

“I got you something,” Scott said, leaning against the counter, after he packed and triple-checked his bag.

“Yeah?” She couldn’t imagine when he would have the time to find anything. And it wasn’t like there was an Alice & Olivia boutique in the Village.

“Yeah.” He unfolded his fingers, revealing a tiny silver safety pin and a penny in his palm. “For old times’ sake.”

She took them from him gently. “Thank you,” she said, flipping the small things between two fingers. “But I don’t need luck. I have you. And we’ve got this.” She meant it. She was fully her own person and half of something transcendent with him, and nobody else could make her feel both at once.

He hugged her—not the hug, that would come later, but something real and tethering and true all the same. He smelled of musky aftershave and mint gum and sweat and hair gel. “I love you, you know that?” he whispered into her hair.

“I love you too,” she whispered back, fiercely.

(She meant it in a million different ways, was still uncovering new ones. Knew she would spend her life uncovering even more.)

She tucked the penny into the side of her bag, pinned the safety pin—head up, because why not—onto the inside sleeve of her team jacket, and cast one final look around the suite before they headed to the bus.

The noise of the crowds made it feel like the ice was quaking when they stepped out onto it. She looked over at Scott, stayed present.

She had known since she was eight that eleven laps around a rink was equal to a mile. As they took the final lap before striking their opening pose, she wondered how many miles, over twenty years, the two of them had skated.

Most likely, she realized, they had skated to the moon and back together.

She thought, improbably, inopportuneuly, momentarily, of binary stars and black holes; dueling orbits collapsing into negative energy. But as she inhaled, steadying herself, her mind flashed to another long-buried astronomy lesson. Kilonovas, the rare and cosmic collision of two neutron stars, the impact so powerful it sent ripples of energy millions of light years in every direction. Two objects arcing toward each other and fusing, creating something so powerful that it changed the fundamental shape of the universe.

She locked in on Scott. The only man in the universe. The only man in her universe.

And the music started.

Afterwards, the feelings crested over her in waves so fast she couldn’t identify each emotion. She
was usually so stripped down, so curated, that the bursts of feeling—joy, mostly joy, but nostalgia and adrenaline and accomplishment and a deep oneness with Scott, too—were liable to override her system.

But as she looked up at the crowd, her hand brushed her ear, and she was surprised to find that her earring was dangling far too loosely, the earring back barely in place, just a millimeter away from falling off and bouncing onto the ice.

It would have been a one-point deduction.

She wasn’t sure what score they needed to win—had no idea, even, what Gabi and Gui had scored—but she suspected it was going to be close. Plenty of people in the sport, particularly the judges, respected but did not love her and Scott, not the way they had in 2010. They saw them as spoiled spoilers, selfishly stomping back for more after their turn was up. That much was clear from how tight the scores had been in the short, despite Gabi’s rough edges and stiff hips, despite their lack of Latin heat, despite how her costume coming undone had thrown off everything from their rhythm to their twizzles.

Gabi’s costume had come undone. And Tessa’s earring had stayed, magically, in place.

Scott skated to her, hazel eyes wide, and wrapped her in a hug. Took her hand, the way he had done once when she was seven and he was nine and the only thing in front of them was a blank sheet of ice to play on.

The beauty was in the choices, the work, the commitment. She still believed that, would always believe that. But the magic of him, of them, of their story, of what they had accomplished … that was pretty breathtaking too, she thought, rubbing at the earring like a worry stone.

They weren’t inevitable, but she let herself savor, just for a second, that her destiny wasn’t to win Olympic medals or to be one of the best ice dancers in history or to change the future of the sport.

Her destiny was to do it all with Scott.

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iv. One Year Before Today, Scott

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Scott had long known that his tolerance for a public narrative was finite, that this, to Tessa, was one of his least-lovable qualities—right up there with forgets to text when hockey games go into overtime and stashes straws from Tim Horton’s in his car just to chew and fidgets compulsively during interviews. He had always understood playing the game was just what you did, and had always been a too-natural performer, but had also always suspected—without evidence to the contrary—that their superior skill on ice could carry itself. The game might help, sure, but they didn’t need to do the hug in the mixed zone; they didn’t need to do a wedding-themed shoot; hell, they probably didn’t even need to choose programs that dripped with sex and romance. It was bullshit that the collective boner for Gabi and Gui meant that he and Tessa needed to be foot-perfect in every skate in order to win—to dare the judges to put them second, as Tess always put it—but they could do it, they had done it consistently for two years, because they were the better skaters. The ISU loved its narrative, which was probably why he was always insisting that the narrative was all bullshit, but they didn’t have to play along. They were the better performers, definitely funnier and more personable; just by being themselves, they had accidentally out-ISU’ed the ISU.
And Scott also knew that he was a delirious walking disaster by the time he and Tessa showed up to the CBC studios. He was probably running a fever. He had definitely lost his voice. His eyes were permanently bloodshot. He was pretty sure he was unraveling in real time on TV and Facebook Live and basically any time someone shoved a camera in his face—which was often—but he was too drunk on sleep deprivation and adrenaline and Tessa’s collarbone and winning the fucking Olympics and his first actual beer in months to fully think things through, even as his brain went why are you still talking? The Olympics were like really good sex, the kind that required a recovery period, some time to cuddle and process and come down from the high before you said something stupid.

He had said a lot of incredibly stupid things.

For instance—“None of your business?” Tessa had laughed after the umpteenth press conference. She’d been pretty slaphappy herself. “And what was this?” She had mimed a little z-snap.

“I said that?” he had asked, astonished. “Did I do that?”

“Oh yeah,” she had said, still laughing. “And then you said we’d retire to open up that side of our lives. I think? What does that mean, even?” She had leaned against the cinderblock to catch her breath.

Scott hadn’t remembered saying that, but he had had no reason to doubt her. Everything had been Olympics and ice dance for months, and he hadn’t hated the idea of shifting the percentage of business in their relationship to something a little lower than eighty, it had been a while since they discussed—

Tessa had seemed to sense his train of thought and broke in quickly. “Oh my god, Scott, no. You can’t accidentally propose to me on the podium or in an interview, mister, you hear me? David Lease would never shut up.”

He laughed that off, like his runaway mouth wasn’t making that a real possibility. It was definitely raising questions—Cara had mentioned some stuff, Marie and JF had mentioned some stuff, Tessa had said a quiet whoa when she got her phone back from Jordan and started reading her news alerts. The bubble had burst, and while he’d been cognizant of the attention he and Tessa received from fans and the skating community since Vancouver—and always felt a responsibility about it—this was a whole new level.

Hell, he was still shaking his head about the fact that People magazine had called Alma to inquire about their relationship status as he got ready for the CBC interview, searching for the appropriate Canada sweatshirts in their Village suite closet while half-watching the men’s curling final. Three feet away, Tessa made a startled noise. “What is it, babe?” He finally found the errant items of clothing, lost in a sea of red and black and white, and looked up.

She was brushing her hair while—again—futzing around on her phone. “I … don’t even know,” she replied. “But look.” She handed him her phone in exchange for her zip-up.

“Thank you Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir for agreeing—holy shit, T. Deadpool tweeted at us!”

“I know!” she exclaimed, giggling again. He kissed her, this freest and happiest version of Tessa, drinking her and this insane moment in.

And that was his sleep-deprived, emotional state when they ended up in front of the CBC, his stomach still getting hit with undulations of holy fuck, skating with T has been my whole life since I was nine and now that’s done.
And he just fucking lost it.

He knew he should rein it in. Next to him, Tessa had begun to frost over. She was media-trained, composed, quiet. On to the fact that everyone everywhere seemed to be talking about them.

But as she began to ossify, he began to overflow. Sitting there in the CBC studio, watching clips of two little kids who had no idea what was coming skate around his mother’s rink, he finally began to understand it. Something about the two of them had captivated the rest of the world, something that they had been building since he was just the boy of her dreams and she was just the girl out of his league and they’d been outrunning ruin, failing just one fewer time than they were succeeding. They had come back for themselves and they had won on merit—of course they had—but they had created a moment, private truths and public narrative colliding on the Olympic stage and under the Klieg lights of international media, and he finally understood what Tessa had been saying all along, that that moment mattered.

And it hit him, straight in the solar plexus: a deep appreciation for the vastness of him and Tessa, the improbability of them.

It wasn’t perfect. Love and perfection couldn’t coexist. Love demanded so much, expected so much, warped and shaped you in its crucible. He’d traded time with family and friends for his love of skating; ordinary relationships for his love of Tessa; an easy path for their love of their career. It’d been a price he was willing to pay, every time, because love was nothing without loss.

And this perspective was something more optimistic and open-ended than Tessa’s fierce choice choice choice mantra from the last several years, but deeper and more nuanced than her starry-eyed pre-Sochi outlook. He’d known how lucky they were to have found each other and for each chance they hadn’t deserved, known to be humbled by it even though most of the time, it didn’t feel special, just constant. But it was also something that they had created, vast and hopeful and awesome.

It used to scare him, the fact that Tessa was always going to be the biggest part of his life, would always be the best of him, their partnership his most important achievement. He’d sabotaged it more times than he could count, let himself get twisted into a vortex, settled because he was too scared of failure to be honest with himself. His parents were fantastic, his brothers were role models, his friends were amazing, but Tessa and their fleet-footed dance between childhood and now—that was the reason he was the man he was.

It was real. Always.

So yeah, he got a little teary.

Afterwards, the cameras off and the lights dimmed and the microphones returned, Tessa reached out and swiped her thumb along his cheekbone. “This is big, yeah?” she asked, like everything was sinking in for her too.

“Yeah,” he said. “We are.”

They got home and they went on Ellen and they argued and they did media and they got jerseys and they had some pretty great sex and they didn’t sleep much. They laughed a lot and fucked up occasionally. Tessa said how lucky are we a lot, and got mad at him about the publicity a little. Everything was new and change was disorienting, but they were old enough and self-aware enough to realize the specialness of the circumstances, to try and respond with grace even through the crazy.

(Most of the time. But even the hard parts were extraordinary.)
By the time they made it to CSOI, the tension and attention had been punctured a little, though the crowds and the fans and the attention were still a little unreal. They'd always played it up on ice, but everyone having their own opinions about them now was weirdly freeing. There were some growing pains—there were always some growing pains—as they adjusted, but he got to feel her up in every major media market in Canada and she faux-proposed to him and they canoodled in Brussels and golfed in Japan and met Drake and she looked amazing in Vogue and they turned down Dancing with the Stars and it was all a wild, giddy, stupid, hilarious, entirely fucked-up ride. And like everything with Tessa by his side, it was fun, special, better.

He decided it was this, forever.

(As if it had never not been the case.)

It still felt like May but suddenly it was July, and they needed to head home for haircuts and tour planning and house-hunting for a place that had a kitchen for her to redo but never use and a room where he could park a pool table.

And he had something else he needed to buy too.

Their final night in Tokyo, after they finished packing, Tessa sat cross-legged on the bed, her pens and planners and computer arrayed in front of her as she tried to wrangle the next four months of their lives onto paper. He stretched out next to her, glasses on, as he reviewed the rainbow of colors on his screen.

“So on the Google calendar,” she said, “I made cottage days are blue, for the lake; tour promotion is lime green, tour planning meetings are dark green, party planning is salmon, book stuff is teal—”

“Our schedule is so packed we’re down to teal?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Yes. My France itinerary is all there, too—I actually created a special, Provence-blue tag, different from the cottage-blue—and your coaching and master classes are in red. For Canada. I’m also taking the GMAT in January, so I’ve started leaving two-hour blocks for studying. That’s in neon yellow. Sponsor meetings and promotional obligations are the Tiffany blue. My photoshoots are that cute hot pink. And I’ve highlighted in orange some optimal times to block out for house-hunting—you need to meet with Marie’s realtor when I’m gone, OK? I set a reminder —”

“Tess.” He kissed her lightly. “I managed to make it to practice on time for twenty years. I’ll be good.”

“I know,” she grinned. “You just know how excited color-coding makes me.” He really did. She started to twist a finger through her topknot. “And, you know, not all business—what do you think about maybe planning a real vacation next year for after Stars, before GKP? We have a week. I’m thinking the Mediterranean. And then—”

“And then I want to marry you,” he blurted out, right in the middle of her List. He hadn’t said the word about it in more than two years, had protested when his brothers or Chiddy or Marie implied it was in their future. But it, that, her, every day, as long as they both shall live. “Tour, house, book, yes. But … that’s what I want to do next.” Marry her.

Tour, house, book. Today, tomorrow, the rest of his life, Tessa by his side.

She immediately shut up and went pink as the color-coded tag for photoshoots. “Uh, yeah. Yeah, I do. I mean, you did tell me you wanted me to have your babies right before we—” She started
laughing, that thrilled and almost hysterical sound that preceded the laugh-cry, hand pressed over her mouth, wonder in her eyes.

He shifted forward, his head curving inwards towards hers. He felt pretty good about his chances. “What do you want next, Tess?”

She smiled, gripping his face with both hands. The planner slid out of her lap. “You, forever. And never having to answer another reporter’s fucking question again. And a really good GMAT score. And solid tour sales,” she teased. “But mostly it’s the ‘you, forever’ part that I’m really into.” She shifted her fingers back, dug them into his hair. “Not—not yet. We have the tour, the house, the book. First. But. Soon.”

Soon.

Soon.

He couldn’t wait.

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v. Seven Years After Today, Tessa

She doesn’t bring either Grace or Patrick to watch the team competition—they’re having entirely too much fun at Uncle Danny’s, where the basement has been turned into a tent city for the duration of the Games. The dozen or so cousins between two and twelve are camped out down there, watching every Disney movie ever created, while upstairs, fifteen-year-old Charlotte hosts the teens in Club Moir, her attic bedroom that she’s bedecked in sheer red curtains and a lot of lava lamps. Tessa suspects there’s a handle of vodka and a bag of joints there, courtesy of Leanne’s oldest, but that is firmly Danny and Tessa Two’s problem.

The week has been absolute nightmare. On top of everything she has come to expect from three Games as an athlete and one as a WAG/commentator, she has Lulu commitments this time around, ranging from scouting athletes for campaigns to hosting brand parties at COH, Japan House, and USA House; from interviews promoting Lulu’s sponsorship to meeting with Team Canada officials to lock down the LA 2028 deal. Scott took his teams back to Vancouver in between the team and individual events, which was a shrewd coaching decision but left her a pregnant, overwhelmed, overcommitted single mother living half out of Danny’s and half out of a hotel suite. Sure, she has her in-laws, her parents, his aunt and uncle, all her siblings, all his siblings and cousins, and their collective nine spouses, but—did she mention she is gestating a Moir child? It’s exhausting.

But Tessa wants Grace to see Alex and Addison compete in the evening individual event. Trick is too young, so Cara volunteers to watch him. She and five-year-old Caroline arrive to a scene of barely controlled chaos in the hotel, as a nauseated Tess struggles to get Grace to sit still long enough for the maple leaf tattoos—Scott’s request—to dry against her cheeks, and Patrick works out his inherited fear of mascots by using his new, signed, kid-sized, very official Team Canada hockey stick to spike plushies all over the room. Cara scoops up strewn toys and distracts Grace and collects Tessa’s coat and tuque and creds so Tessa can kiss Trick about a thousand times and shuts the door behind them less than five minutes after she arrived.

“Mummy, can I skate, just once, on the ‘Lympic ice? Just once. I’ll make my bed tomorrow, no whining,” Grace begs a half-hour later as she skips up the arena stairs, keeping pace with Tessa’s strides as they look for their family. Besides the temporary tattoos, she’s decked out in a tuque, maple
print tights, a Canada sweater, a white sequined tutu, red sparkly Uggs, a Canada scarf, and her Canada mittens; if Scott’s affinity for Team Canada gear counts for anything, people should be able to guess who Grace belongs to just by looking at her. Tessa can tell that she knows, peripherally, that the Olympics are important, but mostly it’s just another one of Daddy’s competitions, and Daddy’s competitions mean staying up late and getting spoiled by everyone —family, skaters, media, Marie-France, the concession attendants.

“If Addison and Alexander make it. “There’s dance and then the women.” Grace brightens; she is far more interested in the women’s program, which alternately scares and reassures Tessa. Scares her because if her daughter really does fall in love with skating, singles is lonely and hard and full of anorexic Russian girls doing quads at the cost of their knees and self-esteem. Reassures her, though, that Grace wouldn’t be caught in the crosshairs of her parents’ legacy.

“Maybe during the Gala rehearsals. Eight sleeps, kiddo. It’s not for a while.” If Addison and Alexander make it. “There’s dance and then the women.” Grace brightens; she is far more interested in the women’s program, which alternately scares and reassures Tessa. Scares her because if her daughter really does fall in love with skating, singles is lonely and hard and full of anorexic Russian girls doing quads at the cost of their knees and self-esteem. Reassures her, though, that Grace wouldn’t be caught in the crosshairs of her parents’ legacy.

Plus, it blows Tessa’s mind to think of her daughter and her tenuous grasp on the alphabet meeting her eventual husband in just two years’ time. Getting swept up in her life’s biggest story before she’s even reading chapter books.

“I see Amma and Mimi!” Grace shrieks as they exist the tunnel into the stands. Heads turn towards them, and Tessa clutches her hand tighter. At some point tonight, cameras will find them and the Canadian (and probably many other) networks will flash to them, albeit briefly. She hopes to god that Grace chooses a different moment to throw her inevitable tantrum.

“Grace Moir, calm down,” she scolds, but then Grace breaks away from Tessa and dashes toward the four rows their extended family is occupying, directly above the Kiss and Cry. Tessa jogs after her, trying not to roll her eyes.

Kate deftly scoops Grace up, cooing over her tights and tutu, and Alma envelops Tessa in a hug, her eyes already misty. There are going to be a lot of Alma tears tonight. “How special is this?” she says tremulously, scooting over to make room, and Tessa feels an enormous wave of affection.

Next to Alma, Kate is sparkling with the excitement. “You know, in Vancouver, I didn’t think I could be prouder. And then Sochi, and Korea … But now, with your careers, and ten medals hanging in the home you’ve built, and Grace and Patrick and the new little one—“

“Mum, don’t make me cry, I’m already on the Jumbotron,” Tessa points out, because she doesn’t trust her hormones and of course they’ve been spotted. The chyron identifies her as Tessa Virtue-Moir—which is not her name, but whatever—Five-Time Olympic Medalist, Eight-Time Canadian National Champion, prompting a roar from the Calgary crowd. She gives a light wave. “And don’t mention the you-know-what,” she cautions through a frozen smile as she wiggles her fingers.

Behind the boards, Scott is with his Romanian team, two twentysomethings who are merely thrilled to be there. He turns at the sound of the crowd, spots her, waves, blows a kiss. She catches it and clutches it to her chest as Grace, spotting him on the screen, waves with both hands.

The crowd really goes wild then, and Tessa laughs.

She stays in the stands for the first five groups, pointing out moves and giving Grace the backstory of the songs couples have chosen. Charlie and Danny entertain the assorted nieces and nephews with stories of Olympics past. Below them Scott is constantly in motion, moving between skaters and coaches and officials as he cycles through his Romanian and German and Chinese and American team jackets. He’s gregarious but focused, intensely physical with everyone, as always, clapping backs and hugging and doling out high-fives. He’s only still when his teams are skating, his eyes sharp and his arms crossed. She resists the urge to text him to spit out his gum, which he’s positively
gnawing on. As the last group hits the ice and she sees him slip on the Team Canada jacket she willed into existence, Tessa decides to go down to watch with him. It would be weird not to.

As she passes through the mixed zone, Tanith, who’s doing the behind-the-scenes commentary for NBC, spots her immediately. “Tess!” she calls. “Going to Scott?”

She hugs her old rinkmate warmly. Scott sees her a decent amount on the circuit, but Tessa hasn’t in—at least a year? Certainly not since she, Charlie, and their three boys moved to Colorado Springs after Charlie took the job as USFSA’s high performance director. Tessa wants to say so many things—maybe even ask after Fedor and Meryl, who live in Switzerland now, where Meryl choreographs for European tours—but she starts with, “Yeah. He gets almost as nervous as a coach as he did skating.” She flinches; Tanith is the media, does that mean that comment is on the record?

“Oh, god, I bet. How awesome is this for him, though?” Tanith gets a good look at her and double takes. “Oh my god.” She leans forward and whispers like they’re back gossiping about rink hookups over yogurt and oranges in the Arctic Ice breakroom. “Are you pregnant again?”

Tessa crosses her arms. She’s in Lulu leggings, flat suede boots, and a chunky white Team Canada sweater underneath a down coat. It’s not exactly noticeable.

“Off the record? Yes, about eight weeks,” she said.

“Oh my god! Congrats! I can’t believe nobody noticed when you lit the Torch.”

Honestly, neither can Tessa—she’d watched the footage and wondered if the entire country simply thought she’d gotten fat—though she’s perfectly happy not to get yelled at online about how skating can put a fetus in danger by mommybloggers with zero Olympic medals. She shrugs. “I can’t believe you noticed now.”

“Sweetheart, I shared a change room with you for five years. I know what you look like naked.”

“Fair.”

“Anyways, want to chat about what you’re seeing so far? No questions on that.” Tanith gestures toward the nonexistent bump.

“Sure, but I do need to get to Scott.” Tessa pulls off her jacket and badge, swipes gloss across her lips, fluffs her hair. “Ask about the clothes.”

“Deal.” Tanith talks into her headset, then listens before saying “OK, Tara and Johnny are throwing to us now.” Tessa nods and faces the camera. “Alright, thank you Johnny, I’m here with Tessa Virtue, one half of the most decorated figure skating team in Olympic history, the home ice gold medalist last time the Games were in Canada sixteen years ago, and once upon a time, the shy new freshman just starting to train at the my rink in Michigan. How are you, Tess?”

“Great,” Tessa smiles, slipping into familiar press mode. She waves a little at the camera before directing her attention back to Tanith. “Thanks for having me.”

“Now I have to point out to new ice dance fans that you and your skating partner of twenty-plus years, Scott Moir—now your husband and a coach here at the Games—trained under the same coaches with me and my partner, Ben Agosto, as well as my husband, Charlie White, and his partner, Meryl Davis. You two took gold in 2010, Meryl and Charlie won in 2014, and then of course you and Scott got gold again in 2018, but throughout that rivalry, the four of you really redefined ice dance.”
God, they sounded like a clusterfuck, and Tanith hadn’t even mentioned Fedor.

“Well, you and Ben had a lot to do with that too, of course!” Tessa says. “But it was a really healthy, competitive rivalry and friendship.” She can see Tanith fighting to keep from raising her eyebrows. Tessa doesn’t blame her; it’s amazing how easy it is to sum up those years of toil and tears in a glossy little NBC-approved package. “Scott and I always said that it was such an asset to be training with our biggest competition, the way we would push each other, and that it made our sport better. It’s so wonderful to see how these new teams have taken what we all did, and moved the sport even further.”

Tanith nods in agreement. “But you and Scott are still considered legends in the sport—I’m on the record calling you the greatest of all time—and the two of you got to light the torch last week. What was that like?”

“Oh, gosh, such a proud moment,” Tessa responds. “Representing our country was definitely the highlight of our skating careers. And while my skates were a little rusty, to come back and get to do that again for Canada—that was really amazing and beautiful. We were just so honored to be asked.”

“Scott now coaches,” Tanith transitions, “and he’s got the U.S. bronze medalists, the Brown siblings, who just skated, as well as one of the most talked about teams, Canadians Addison McLean and Alexandre Demarcheille, who are up in this last group. And he’s worked with them for years. What’s more nerve-wracking, coaching or skating?”

“Oh, I imagine they’re scary in different ways, so I think you’ll have to ask Scott! He’s actually got five of the thirty-six teams here. Oona and Gage are such great skaters and natural performers, and they really did amazing things this season—the podium at Nationals was such a strong finish. And yes, Addison and Alex are generating quite a bit of attention. Nothing compares to the intensity of being out there skating over the Rings, but as you know, he’s been working with this team since 2019, right after we retired. These guys were his first team, in many ways. So his heart will be in his throat, a bit, for them—like it is for every team, really—and he’ll whooping and hollering it up at the boards.”

Tanith’s expression freezes, and Tessa knows what the producer has just asked her to do. With a nearly unnoticeable sympathetic wince, she continues. “Now, during your career, you and Scott were known as ‘Canada’s Sweethearts’ for your connection and romantic performances. You got married about eighteen months after the 2018 Games—”

“Yeah, you were there!” Tessa cuts in, though she knows she won’t be able to deflect for long. “What a night, cutting up the dance floor like old times.”

Tanith’s smile flashes genuine with the memory. “So then, Addison and Alex—are they the next generation? The new Canadian Sweethearts?”

Tessa’s not sure who is pushing this storyline so hard—it’s certainly not the coach this time around—but the constant questioning about these two kids got old a long time ago. “They’re the next generation of incredible Canadian talent. What more can you ask for?”

With that answer, Tanith can drop the subject, to both of their reliefs. “Do you ever help coach? Or skate together with Scott still?”

Tessa chuckles, two quick bursts that sound fake to her ears. “Well, I’m heading there now to tell them all good luck—I think they’re still warming up?—and, you know, if Scott comes home and is working through what the choreographer is laying down, I’ll dance it through with him. And yeah, on Saturdays we’ll head to the rink with as a family and we’ll mess around with our old stuff. But
you know, we have kids, we have two dogs and a cat, we have jobs, we have friends and family who keep our lives really humming—it’s not all ice dance all the time. It’s ice dance maybe two percent of the time.”

“You mentioned your work—you’re now the global executive vice president of brand and marketing at Lululemon, a major presence at these Games.”

Thank you, Tanith! “Yes, Lululemon really aligns with everything I love and want to amplify about sport—it’s a great Canadian company helping women become empowered and strong and confident and compassionate towards themselves. I’m incredibly grateful to work at a company that’s all about helping people feel comfortable and motivated to be the best self they can be.”

“Now, Lulu designed all of the official clothing for the Canadian team. Was that you?”

“Our fantastic design team, yeah! That’s been a huge goal of mine, getting to bring Lulu to Team Canada, especially at a home Games. I’m so excited I got the chance to help provide the next generation of Canadian athletes with comfortable and stylish performance wear.”

“Right, absolutely, and that Canada sweater you’re wearing is gorgeous.” Tanith gestures Vanna White-style at Tessa’s outfit for the benefit of the camera. “Now I know who you’re rooting for, but who are you betting on?”

“There’s a ton of great competitors here, so really, this is all a win.” It was a stacked field, that was for damn sure: Marie and Patch were coaching Anthony and Christina, as well as the Japanese and Russian champions. She loved their former coaches—now Grace’s godparents—and she dearly wanted Addie and Alex to beat their asses. “But you know, after more than two decades of being a skating team and business partners and best friends, plus six years of marriage, two kids, and multiple kitchen renovations, I’m still gonna bet on Scott, always.”

Tanith laughs. NBC should be happy with that soundbite. “I’m not even sure why I even asked!” she says. “Alright, the warm up is ending, so thank you, Tessa Virtue, five-time Olympic ice dance medalist. Back to you, Johnny and Tara.” She poses for the camera, waiting until she’s clear, then turns back to Tessa, professional demeanor melting away. “That was so great,” she giggles. “It was wonderful to run into you. Maybe dinner after the gala?”

“Yeah, that’d be wonderful. If you have the boys around, feel free to bring them to play with the Moirs. There are literally twenty-five kids sleeping at Danny’s, they’ll have a blast.”

“Oh my god. It’s a total zoo isn’t it?”

“Absolutely. At least one ER trip by the end of this week.”

“Wouldn’t be the Moirs if there wasn’t!”

“Just make sure they don’t wear any Team USA gear to the house before the hockey final,” Tessa warns.

“They root for Team Canada whenever Charlie’s traveling,” Tanith says with a conspiratorial wink. Tessa always knew she liked her.

Tessa pushes through to the athletes’ zone, spots Scott talking to Addy and Alex at the boards before they come off the ice. She hangs back and watches him talking animatedly with his hands, making Addison—who is, god, still barely twenty-one—laugh. Resting her head on a pillar, she pauses, just for a moment.
Takes it all in.

Alex notices her first, yells, “Tess!” Addison and Scott look up, a wave of relief crashing over Addison’s face.

Tessa’s aware that cameras will likely find her soon, if they haven’t already, so she’s both smiley and circumspect as she kisses her husband’s cheek, hugs Alex, gushes at Addison’s dress. It’s dark blue velvet with a deep V that flows beautifully as they skate to an Amy Winehouse medley, sultry and sexy for the R&B, but Tessa prefers tomorrow’s *Pride and Prejudice* dance, as well as Addie’s white-and-gold costume, which she helped design and will look perfect on the podium. “You’re going to do great,” she says, hugging her tightly. Sure enough, the hug gets picked up on the Jumbotron and the crowd goes wild, again; she hopes Grace, somewhere above them, is watching. She makes a mental note to get a photo with Grace and Addy and Billie and Marie-France at some point—generations of strong Canadian ice dancing women.

Addison is shaking and laughing at the same time. “What even am I doing here?” Her voice is half-awed, half-panicking.

Tessa clutches her face and brings her close. “You are here because you have worked toward this goal for the last decade, and you have sacrificed, and you have pushed yourself. You are here because you have earned this, and you are amazing, and we are all here with you because we are so, so proud of you.” She ghosts her thumbs along Addy’s cheekbones. “You hear me?”

Addison nods.

“Good.” Tessa looks up to make sure that the cameras aren’t trained on her, and says, low and competitive and sure, “Now kick some ass here, OK?”

Addison beams.

Alex finishes talking to Scott and takes Addie’s hand, and the kids head back to the warm up area.

Scott watches after them, and when he turns to her, she can feel the energy vibrating off his body. His motions are precise, his eyes wide, his breathing sharp and fast. At some point, he must have finally spit out his gum—or, more likely, swallowed it, because of all his old disgusting teenage habits, *that* one lasted. Nobody else would notice, but he’s as endearingly nervous as he was when they were competing. Tessa’s stomach flips a little.

“Hey,” she says. Before he can say anything stupid, like *I hope to god they win* — there are cameras everywhere—he wraps him in a hug, arms hooking under and around his armpits. His heart is beating so, so fast. She runs a hand through his flow, neatly gelled back because he’s a professional.

Scott sinks into her, his body sagging as her thumbs press into his shoulder blades. Their heartbeats even out. “Hey,” he sighs back. “How are you doing?” The extra stress on the “you” clearly refers to her pregnancy. “I’m sorry I haven’t been around much.”

“No, don’t start. We’re great. Tired, but great. Everyone’s been helping.”

“How’s Gracie-girl liking the competition? Trick OK staying home?”

“He’s ducky. And Danny and Charlie have been keeping Grace pretty entertained with impersonations of your greatest falls.”

A laugh shakes through his body. “Did they mention—”
“Thanksgiving 2002? Oh yeah.”

“Assholes. Influencing my daughter.”

“You know you’re overdue, after all the stories you’ve told their kids.” She presses a thumb down his collar to straighten it. It does feel like she hasn’t seen him in days, and it’s absurd but fitting that their first moment alone is in front of dozens of cameras and the scrum of judges and officials and competitors. “I miss you.”

“It’s a little weird being here and not—” He doesn’t need to finish the sentence.

“Yeah,” she agrees, because it is. But— “Pretty freaking great though, right?”

“So fucking amazing.” He looks over at her with a smile, that same smile he used to convince her to be friends after her surgery and to keep going after Vancouver and to date after her parents’ split and to come back after Sochi and to get a dog and to get married and—point is, it’s a smile to which she’s highly susceptible. “Our lives … they’re pretty epic, yeah?”


He needs to go talk to the kids and she should text to make sure their mothers haven’t completely sugared up their kid. But they stare out across the ice together, just for a second. The flashbulbs look the same. The vantage point is the same. The feeling is completely different.

He reaches over and takes her hand.

His hand in hers, always.

She squeezes back, always.

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vi. Two Months Before Today, Scott

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The dusky view from the AirBnB’s deck was even fuzzier with cigar smoke. Across the poker table from Scott, Javi gleefully counted out the three hundred dollars he just won off a pouting Patrick. Jeff giggled next to them, sipping one of the very pink drinks that Kevin had been doling out earlier. Zach and Baker, a dozen feet away, were loudly debating whether they were sober enough to try surfing (the obvious answer was no). On the beach, a drunken game of Frisbee tag led by Cara’s boyfriend was sure to end with someone’s nose broken.

It was a pretty perfect bachelor party.

“Moir,” Mick said, interrupting Scott’s reverie. “Phone just rang. Looks like your girl called.” He tossed the iPhone at Scott before grabbing an empty chip bowl and heading inside.

“Bring more guac,” Scott called after him, catching the phone. Tessa had texted as she boarded the plane to Miami and when she landed, but other than that, he wasn’t expecting to hear from her during her stagette weekend. Then he realized what she was calling about and grinned. He kicked his feet up and pressed play on the message.
“Hey,” she exclaimed through the phone, her voice high and excited and a little slurry. “Just wanted to let you know we arrived to the resort—this bungalow is amazing, we have our own pool and everything, oh, and Jordan rented a fleet of blue convertibles for the weekend, and Kat has, like, a fish tank of mimosas. How’s Mexico? Anyways—” He could practically see her eyes narrow as she got to the purpose of the call. “Scott Moir. I was unpacking, and you know what I found?” A letter, he mouthed along. “A letter—” Drunkish Phone Message Tessa continued. “A letter from my fiance. Who has been writing me letters since I was ten. And I have saved every one—No, Joannie, I’m talking to Scott! It’s important.” There was some shuffling on the other end. “Did you know that, that I’ve saved every single one?” He did; there was a box under the bed in their new house. “But this one was the best yet. Anyways.” He heard her swallow, and her voice took on a tremulous lilt. “You have always been worthy. And this, us—even when it was awful, when we were over—you have always been worth it. And damn—” She started to cry a little. “I love being your partner. But I’m really excited to be your wife in two months. You’re just—” There was some mumbling on the other end. “You’re going to be the best husband. I’m so lucky. And so proud of us. I can’t wait.” Her voice was soft, curling over the words reverently. “We got it right, Scott.”

On her end, the noises got closer, and he heard Jordan cut in clearly with a you cannot spend your stagette party leaving doopy messages on Scott’s voicemail.


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vii. Three Months Before Today, Tessa

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The date of the wedding leaked.

(Tessa temporarily freaked out about press showing up until Scott reminded her that this was why they hired people; then she worried about photos, until Scott reminded her that they had banned phones; then she was inclined to blame the wide-eyed florist’s assistant, but not so inclined to prosecute for breaking the NDA.)

Half of Canada immediately started swooning because it was October, and that meant it was twenty-two years after they first started skating together. Full circle. Fairy tale. Canada’s Sweethearts.

Tessa was tempted to point out that they had really chosen the date because it was her fall break and the JGP circuit ended two weeks prior and they were worried about Montreal being frigid or under three feet of snow if they pushed it any later.

But she decided to let Canada have this one.

It was an awfully cute story, after all.

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viii. One Year Before Today, Scott

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The roar of the crowd was enormous, deafening, the loudest noise Scott had ever heard. The entire arena was on their feet, red and white and Olympic rings blurring together. He thought he could hear
Danny and Charlie over the crowd, but honestly wasn’t sure. He could see Alma and Kate crying, Joe and Paul clapping. Next to him, Tessa trembled, tiny and overcome, eyes brimming with tears and mouth bubbling with laughter.

Scott buried his face in her collarbone, shaking as he tried to contain himself, tried to remember JF’s breathing techniques. The feelings kept building, though, until he was either going to scream or cry or crush her into a kiss, and so he pushed himself away from her. Everything was just so unbelievably right. He shouted a long yes, finally, but it got swallowed in the noise.

When he was almost sure he could touch her without making out with her, he skated back close, squeezed out a low woo under his breath, and scooped her up into another hug, listening to her laugh-cry in his ear. He wooed again, and high fived her, and hugged her again, and kissed her (on the cheek only), and then they took a thousand and two bows, hands over hearts. He slid their hands out of dance hold, slipped his index finger around her thumb, finding her pulse point. Her heart was beating so so fast.

As they slowly glided toward the boards, over the Rings for the last time. Tessa leaned into him. It was their last time on competitive ice. He tried to comprehend it, tried to savor what they had, what they had done. He made a note to come out and kiss the ice at some point; was positive he might forget anyways.

He nudged Tessa’s shoulder, twirled her back to face the crowds again. Memorized the sights, the sounds. “Any regrets?” he checked, one last time. Tessa and her choices.

Under the roar of the crowd, he could hear her breath catch as she looked around, mesmerized, lights reflecting like stars in her eyes. He knew she wasn’t just thinking about the last four minutes. “Not one.”

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viii. Seven Months Before Today, Tessa

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Officially telling their families was easy and exciting, a big Sunday dinner at the rink with thirty-plus people, exactly zero of whom were surprised by the news after receiving the hey we’re in town next week, you busy mass text. Without asking—and Scott swore nobody knew about the ring, not even his brothers—Alma had bought gold balloons and a cake from Loblaw’s.

(Long after the toasts and celebratory skating, after Scott wrapped his arms around her waist and spun her around, after Danny and Charlie assured her you’ve always been family, Tutu, after Jordan started to cry, after Cara said I better be in the wedding, bitch, after her dad shook Scott’s hand—after all that, Tessa found Alma in the office, sipping a sangria wine cooler and staring at old photos of the two of them, of Charlie and Cara, of Sheri and Danny. Wordlessly, Tessa slipped in next to her, fitted her head onto her mother-in-law’s shoulder. “Even then, I knew the two of you were something special,” Alma finally said, staring at a photo from Junior Worlds. “I’m just so grateful it finally worked out.” Alma released a breath that she had been holding, probably for a decade, and grasped at Tessa’s hand. “The secret to a good marriage is the same as a good skating partnership, Tessie. You just keep going. It’s good, it’s bad, it’s ugly, it’s beautiful. In the end, you’re no less married than any other married couple.”

Tessa laughed. “I’m not sure I know how to do marriage,” she admitted, “but I know I can be Scott’s partner.”
They stayed like that for a long time.

They tried to ask the non-family wedding party members in person—visiting Liz and Midori and Paul and Baker when they were home; grabbing dinner with Jeff and drinks with Kat in Toronto; a post-yoga brunch with Joannie back in Montreal—but they had to settle for Skyping Chiddy, who reminded them that he was owed a toast. They sent a mass text to the C$OI cast, complete with an incredibly goofy photo of her making a surprised face and him making finger guns. And, of course, they had gone to Marie-France and Patrice’s when they landed, even before going home, ate pancakes as Marie babbled on about le grande amour and Billie asked too-personal questions about when they were going to have kids.

After the people who needed to know knew, Tessa still studied and cleaned and attended photoshoots, and Scott still coached and cooked and filmed his show, and they started sorting through the rest of their lives. It was alternately a quiet-and-awed time and a crazy-stressed time, and they dove into wedding planning with the same gusto they brought to plotting out a season or a thank-you tour. It was straightforward with friends and family; there was gentle ribbing and teasing, but mostly just simple, genuine joy.

But figuring out how to tell the world was harder. It wasn’t a priority, exactly—she didn’t call ET Canada as soon as they descended the Eiffel Tower—but it was something now, the something to say for which they’d been waiting to say anything. Tessa was excited, even a little relieved, to be fully public, though she knew that the announcement would feature on CBC Sports Night and there would be nosy fans on tour and Buzzfeed would use the word cumililtus a lot. And she could hear the rumors starting online, wasn’t looking forward to constant breakup speculation whenever Radford wedged between them in a group shot or Scott posed for a photo with Carolina. She’d been so wary, since Japan. So she was at an utter loss as to how to make the announcement graciously and gracefully and strategically, to acknowledge what was real without sharing anything real. However they chose to share—especially since they had never been forthcoming about their relationship—it would cement the public story.

There wasn’t a huge rush—Scott would follow her lead (would follow it anywhere, always, off a cliff, and while this used to scare her it just comforted her now), and he told her to take her time. “Everyone who’s important knows, and they’ve been good about keeping this on lock and following the script for so long,” he reminded her one evening as they were doing the dishes, after she apologized for being moody and indecisive about the damn thing.

“But except us,” she couldn’t help but tease.

He slid his hands into her back jeans pockets and nipped her lip playfully. “Don’t know about you, but being around you has always made me a little stupid.”

Still, Stars was looming. They needed to make a call. Kate suggested a traditional engagement announcement in the London paper and Joe suggested they wait until the wedding and Danny suggested they release a sex tape and Jordan suggested they somehow incorporate Audrey since everybody loved dogs, and would therefore forgive their year(s) of shadiness.

In the end, they went simple, quiet and classic: three photos, shot in black and white by Greg at the old Ilderton rink, because there was no other way or other place (Greg cried a lot when he realized he wasn’t being summoned for a magazine shoot). They both wore all black, from his cashmere sweater to her leg warmers. The first was a wide shot: the two of them silhouetted on center ice, his hands on her hips, their heads dipped together to form a heart of negative space as they gazed at each other. The only thing that set it apart from past promotional shots was, of course, the ring, a faraway but clearly visible sparkle in the darkness. The second was the mandatory closeup of the rock,
sparkling starkly and brilliantly against his dark sweater, their enormous smiles just slightly out of focus in the background. The third, which Scott planned to post, was also his personal favorite—an action shot of them mid-glide, her leg thrown over his thigh as he slid into a lunge, her hand and ring against his cheek as their lips brushed close for a kiss.

Her spring break fell right after Scott’s teams competed at Junior Worlds, and they flew to Vancouver for a week at Chiddy’s, the amorphous plan crystallizing into yes, definitely, put the photos on social media, let stuff die down before we head home. When Tessa woke in Chiddy’s tiny Vancouver-sized guest room the next day, Scott’s arm was snaked around her waist and his breath hot on her spine and his hipbones curved around her ass. It felt right.

She looked at the time—5:30 AM—and shook him awake. “Hey. Hey.”

He shifted. “Mmmm.” He leaned forward to kiss her forehead. “Hey yourself.”

“I think we should post them. Now. And then turn off our phones and go back to sleep and then just live the rest of our lives.” Her tone was determined. Their futures, tantalizing and hopeful, stretched before them, beyond this announcement. She’d built it up into something so, so big, but the sum total of what was waiting dwarfed it now.

Scott yawned, hands dragging along his cheekbones as he brushed the sleep from his eyes. “You sure?”

“Positive. What’s your caption?”

“Asked a pretty girl for a dance. She said yes.” He grinned, proud at his social media skills, and she knew that he’d been holding onto that one for a while. “You?”

“Nuh uh. You’ll see.” She kissed him again. “Don’t forget to tag to Ilderton. On three?”

“One, two, three.”

She slid the photos into the frame and typed out Partners Forever with three heart-emojis, before reposted it on Twitter. Then she texted Julia. Scott and I got engaged last month in Paris and just posted some photos on Instagram. Fyi. We’re not doing interviews but you can say we are very happy to move on to the next phase of our lives together. Turned off her phone, and turned back over.

(When she finally turned it back on, the text from Julia read How long have you two been fucking dating?)

Scott was still looking at his phone, watching a steady stream of messages make it blink so rapidly it looked like it was having a seizure. “Sixty messages in the last minute,” he observed, then hit the power button. “Done.”

He reached for her and she curved back into him.

They retreated back into The Bubble, the only way they’d ever dealt with stress (or not). Julia tracked them down by calling her mother and then Chiddy, but after doing her duty to remind them of all the great press they were leaving on the table, she begrudgingly and steadfastly refused media interviews. The articles and lists and news segments were happening anyway, and Tessa felt bad; they’d been such terrible clients all along, and now were letting their biggest PR moment just pass them by.

(But everything could be commodified, except this.)
Once a day, Tessa read a packet from Kate with the top reactions from around the Internet (Buzzfeed.ca ran a headline “Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir Confirm That Love Does Exist,” which she did like) and did a quick search of the tags and online mentions. Alma sent them photos of the signs around Ilderton. Apparently, the diner had renamed eggs and bacon—“the perfect pair”—the Scott and Tessa breakfast.

On social media, debates raged on as her motives behind the last four years of Instagram and Twitter posts were analyzed. They were spotted in Montreal and London and Toronto and even a few bars in Ilderton. In reality and in British Columbia and in sweatpants, they went hiking with Audrey. They wandered around Granville Island testing macarons and buying candles. They flew with Liz and Chiddy on a tiny mail plane to Victoria and had tea at the Fairmount. It was glorious, quiet, private. Theirs.

Eventually they had to go back to Montreal. Class beckoned, as did coaching and tour choreography and wedding planning and all the regular Life Things that engaged people in their late twenties and early thirties did. Before leaving, the four of them schlepped down to the old Olympic flame. A complaining but compliant Chiddy took the photo she art-directed—the two of them side by side, heads tilting together in coordinating tuques, her hand on Scott’s chest to highlight the ring. But then Scott started goofing around and teasing her, and of course she ended up liking a candid a lot better: Scott’s arms wrapped around her neck as he kissed her temple as she laughed, a silly, exaggerated look of adoration in his eyes, her hands over his forearms so the ring was visible.

Once settled into their seats on the flight, she posted the image to Instagram. *In love, and feeling the love!* she captioned it. *A massive thank you from Vancouver, which holds so many special memories for us. Scott and I are incredibly excited to start the new phase of our incredible twenty-two year long journey. We’re humbled and in awe of the support we’ve received over the last week, and are deeply grateful for the good wishes.* It was sappy and a little pretentious, even to her ears, but it got the message across. She added a bunch of Canada flags and hearts and brides for good measure, and while she tagged Scott, she didn’t bother showing him the caption. It would make him worry; technically, several of the memories from Vancouver were … not great. But this wasn’t her creating a narrative; this was accepting those memories for what they were. Good, bad, painful, glorious. Theirs.

It received more than four thousand likes in the five minutes before they took off.

“Ready?” asked Scott, as she stared at the alerts streaming in. Her eye twitched to the teenager across the aisle from them in seat 2D. Had she just taken a photo? No, she was just Snapchatting or something.

“Ready,” she confirmed. Tessa picked up her book and leaned back against Scott. He placed a distracted kiss into her hair, started reading something on his Kindle. She made it two chapters through *Educated* before she drifted off and slept the entire flight back to Montreal.

It was the first time she had felt completely comfortable sleeping on his shoulder in public since they’d started up together.

She was still feeling peaceful and sleepy when they landed at YUL, grabbed their bags and went to get coffee. As they waited in line, she kissed him, just because. Wandered out into the bright sunlight hand in hand.

A glint of her ring caught her eye, and she smiled.
So much of this chapter and the next were written or drafted out pretty early—partly because they were the fun stuff and partly so I knew what I was writing toward—that one of the big challenges was making it all actually fit. We will get to the Jordan speech later and why it was problematic, but the Chiddy section especially was just crazy-fun to write and I am stupidly pleased at how it turned out. Shout out to Manque for the homie-code add (Also, fun fact—the restaurant they go to was run by Meghan Markle’s ex because the Royal interest goes that deep.) and a couple other pushes, like around the ending, to make it as funny as possible.

They don’t quiiiite overlap (and Tessa’s starts in 2017 for my own internal logic rules) but I put the two major sections from Korea back to back because during these Games, they are so fully on the same page. I wanted Tessa to finally make peace with destiny/choice, and Scott with narrative/reality, in this chapter; then talk about both together the next chapter in the ‘vows’ section. It was a little tricky since we have clues in the post-PC era (Tessa almost admits that it’s a destiny thing at the proposal; Scott is OK with the story for Ellen), I also wanted to spin back out from some of the smaller 2018 incidents in the last chapter, because on balance it’s an amazing, phenomenal year that they got to experience together. I really loved (and looked hard for) the astronomy metaphor Tessa uses, given the whole black-holes thing from years and chapters earlier. It’s interesting to write about the ‘Seven Years After Today’ right now since I just got done watching the Scott Hamilton show, where DW/VM reunited briefly (and they just voted down Calgary 2026, boooooo). I wanted to catch us up on this world, warm us into what the future looked like. I don’t think I quite needed the Tanith/Tessa exchange (we knew the friendship was in a warm place already) but I wanted to have Tessa do an interview and have to do some Press Conference Face again, and Tanith was the perfect person for the interview—plus, she could guess that Tessa was pregnant. I did also like the continued theme of, if not exactly ‘water under the bridge,’ a complicated, empathetic relationship that did have good in it, at the end of the day. Making peace with that was important thematically for the rest of the piece. The calm is reflected in the short exchange between Scott/Tessa, as they simply look out on the ice. Always.

Last note on that section, I decided to reveal one kid’s name per chapter for the last bit, and had settled on a ‘Patrick’ almost as soon as I picked Grace, but the nickname was a late, late add—he was Pat for a while. It was thoroughly mediocre, but Trick was absolutely perfect, and I got super obsessed. I am sure he’s an absolute hellion and his grandmothers spoil him entirely.

Before the last section, Jordan’s wedding toast. I initially—well before I started thinking stuff through—saw the wedding and wedding planning as having a much bigger role in the story. I thought through readings and bridal party (that made it in) and first dances with their parents and how the twenty-two tables would have a photo of the two of them from each year of their partnership and whatever. Eventually that all got sliced and I decided to go with shards of the day from a bajillion different angles, mostly not offering a full picture. Jordan’s toast was initially a lot more of a roast, as well, and just kind of hammered home stuff that had already been said, but in less interesting ways. Reframing it as a proper toast was super helpful, and made connections to the ACI section explicit.

Determining how to do the relationship reveal—and when—was a topic of some
thought. One other possibility was to wait until after the wedding, but I decided the photo opportunities were too catnip-like to resist for someone who likes attention as much as she likes guarding her privacy. It got tweaked a little after chapter 13, but mostly stuck to the original vision. It was also another chance to be conscious of the construction of narrative, and it all led to the really nice moment of her just taking his hand. I wanted a really gentle finish, knowing that we were heading into a quiet, full-circle final chapter.
well worth the wait

Chapter Notes

Oh man, where to begin with this final note? As always, first acknowledgement has to be a huge thanks to manquebusiness, who is, in addition to a fantastic editor and g-chatter and sherpa into the OTHER VM (Veronica Mars), is also a fabulous person to watch the TTYCT show with + have in your corner when a Toronto-based car rental place is The Worst and you're worried you might miss the first number of the London show. The last four chapters in particular benefited enormously from her input; I'm pretty sure I would not have finished otherwise. Even though she hates Aaron Sorkin (who is *clearly* influential on my writing style, despite his obvious problematic status) she's pretty great to have in your corner, and I and this fic are extremely indebted to her wisdom.

Second (very sheepish) acknowledgement has to be to the real people involved. Especially you, Tessa Two. This fic was the first place that nickname was used, and I'm sorry about that. Hopefully if any of ya'll involved ever stumble into this corner of the internet you laugh because none of this is remotely true, but was written with empathy and deep admiration.

And finally to you all, either readers who have stuck by for the *six* months I took to write this, or those who waited till everything was published and then dove in *knowing* that it was going to be 200k+ words long. You have been great, and fun and funny, and encouraging. I've been really touched by the interest, interaction, and support. I know it's a challenging narrative, so I appreciate you taking the time to dedicate to it. I hope it's turned out to be worthy of the investment.

I started this piece at a particularly crazy and overwhelming time in my own life, and as you can probably tell from the posting schedule, stuff has really changed in the last four months, which is pretty great. But this fic has really been a companion that I've enjoyed getting to know. Having you all here, and continuing to engage in this piece, really did help keep me invested and get it over the finish line. So thank you, for being you, and for bearing with the extended posting schedule and the extreme missed deadlines.

As promised, I'll be back in a week or two with the timeline (it is, perhaps unsurprisingly, 4-5 pages already) as well as the playlist recs. I'll also annotate each chapter with a few notes, so if you had questions beyond what you've shared in comments (I already wrote an explainer on the outlining process that I'll share) please let me know! I'm super excited to talk process, always. Part of the delay this time around was the time it took to go through the last fourteen chapters and update them, so consider what is posted the "definitive" fic. There may be some copy editing and formatting errors (mine alone) and I'm hoping to do one final cleanup in a week or so, once my eyes and brain are fresh.

Writing this took a lot of time and mental energy that I'm excited to dedicate to some other pursuits in the here & now, but I do have two pieces (one-shots! I'm not crazy) in my drafts folder, so who knows, hopefully I'll be back sooner rather than later. Please say hi one last time—would love to keep talking about this—and thanks again for your kindness in reading this.

Without further ado ...
An honorable human relationship — that is, one in which two people have the right to use the word “love” — is a process, delicate, violent, often terrifying to both persons involved, a process of refining the truths they can tell each other. — Adrienne Rich

i. Thirteen Years Before Today, Scott

The engine in Danny’s old truck stalled with a heave and a whinny, probably waking the neighbors. Scott knocked his neck back on the headrest, then scraped the key out of the ignition, sighing to himself.

What was he doing here? He’d had to give Samantha Perry a fucking *hug* goodnight after the movie when he got Kate’s voicemail, had had to leave her with a *gotta go* as soon as her mom was on her way. Sam was the hottest junior at Medway, and between her competitive cheer tournaments and his training schedule down in Canton, the date had taken forever to schedule.

But Kate’s message had said *I think Tessa needs you*. So yeah, this was just cause and effect, a law of the universe as constant and comfortable and consistent as gravity. Tessa needed him, so he’d be there.

Some days, this was the only thing in the goddamn world that made sense.

The house was dark but for the light in T’s room. He’d gotten a key when they moved to Michigan, but knocked anyway. Carefully wiped his feet on the mat with the Virtues’ crest on it. Kate had had it specially made via catalog three years ago, had once chided Casey for wiping his feet on it *too much*.

After a few seconds, the lights in the foyer flipped on. Tessa, messy hair tamed by a toothy-looking headband, opened the door. Her wild eyes went dramatically wide, and he got why Kate called—she was still pretty keyed up. “*Scott,***” she said, shocked, then a little suspicious. “What are you doing here?”

They’d watched the compulsories over a terrible Italian livestream in Canton earlier with the rest of the left-behind losers. He had driven her back to London in total silence, and they both had assumed that would be that.

Now he very quickly realized it would be a terrible idea to mention that he had been called in because she basically hadn’t taken off the Destination Torino shirt since they’d watched the Opening Ceremonies a week ago that evening, sniffing and feeling sorry for themselves the entire time. The shirt even had a *stain* on it, maybe strawberry jelly. When Tessa committed, even to wallowing, she committed. “I thought … we could watch a movie,” he finally suggested. “One of your dance ones. Get some pointers for next season’s tango and all.”

Tessa raised an eyebrow, always onto his bullshit. “I already returned *Chicago*. And I’m not in the mood for *Last Tango in Paris*.” But she leaned her head against the door and smiled at him. “You wanna come in?”
“Uh, yeah? That’s why I’m here,” he said. “It’s Friday. You got any of your grandma’s lasagna left over?”

“I’ll heat you up a plate,” she said, walking back toward the kitchen, still a little flitty. “But we need to go upstairs. Mom and Dad are asleep. Shut the door, will you?”

“Sure thing,” he said, following her inside and slipping off his shoes.

“How was the date?” she asked when they got upstairs, him carefully cradling a warm plate of Mary Eleanor’s home cooking. Tess’s room was the same as always, pale pink walls covered in dance posters and fuzzy pictures of Victorian heroines with quotes scrawled on them. Her vision board for the year hung over the white wood desk Mary Eleanor had given her for her thirteenth birthday, the Olympic Rings looming large in the center. Looking for Alaska sat on the desk, a bookmark with photos of her and Jordan neatly marking her page. Tess was the only person he knew who never cracked the spine of a book or thumbed down a corner to mark a page. A frilly white bedspread was lined up perfectly on a bed piled high with a confectionary of lavender and pink pillows. It was comforting in its innocent girlishness, its contrast to the blue-and-green-and-Maple-Leafs style of his room. A reminder of how young she was, how different they were. “Sam’s pretty. Popular, too. Everyone likes her,” she sniffed wistfully.

“It was … fine,” Scott said carefully. He’d gotten his hand up her shirt as they made out, which he was not telling Tessa. “We saw Munich.”

“Seriously?” She rolled her eyes. “You watched a movie about a terrorist attack at the Olympics?”

“It was the Summer Games!” he argued. Tessa could be so much sometimes. “Are you seriously getting superstitious about that?”

“No! I meant … It’s kind of a shitty choice for a date, Scottie. Girls like romance. Flowers. Big gestures.”

He frowned. “I’ll keep that in mind, OK, Tutu?”

She grimaced at that. “Scott.”

“T.” They nodded at each other, truce struck.

“Anyways,” she said. “I’m sorry my mom or your mom or whoever called and that you’re not getting laid right now or whatever.”

He shifted uncomfortably, her savvy prickling the base of his neck. She smiled, a bit of a self-effacing simper, and he shoved his hands in his pockets, nodding in acknowledgement that she’d called it. “S’ok,” he said, and it was: he’d goddamned cried when Mike told them they weren’t going to Torino, and everything had been less fun since, no matter what he told himself and everyone else. Tessa was the only person who both knew and understood. He cleared his throat. “But, kiddo, you’ve got to change shirts. That one has to smell.”

Tessa laughed. “I thought it was motivational.”

Scott rolled his eyes and crossed to her dresser, digging around for a T-shirt. “Is this—Is this my Eminem shirt?” He had thought he had lost it.

She smirked. “Yeah … I was pissed that you and Charlie went without me.”

He shook his head, but grinned. “Smell less, T.”
She crossed her arms at her waist and lifted the dirty T-shirt off, revealing two triangles of white fabric dotted with tiny pink hearts and lined with hot pink lace. He cast his eyes upwards, forcing himself to run through the Leafs starting lineup.

When they’d moved to Michigan, Danny had said *You get that she’s pretty right?* and he hadn’t then, not really, but sometime in the last year …

Christ, yeah, he knew she was pretty.

“Scott?” She asked, and he startled. “The shirt?” Hands on hips. Breasts still out. Dammit. He threw it at her, because she no longer had pigtails for him to pull. “Whaddaya wanna watch? Astaire/Rogers?” They’d watched *Dirty Dancing* last time and it had been one of the most uncomfortable experiences of his life, so something PG was definitely in order.

She knelt to examine her tiny shelf of DVDs—she barely watched movies, and she’d taken a lot of hers to Michigan including, he guessed, *Top Hat*, their shared favorite. “*Shall We Dance?*” she asked. “Or *Swing Time?*”

“*Shall We Dance*,” he said. He loved the waltz in *Swing Time*, but he was feeling some bad-ass tap dancing tonight.

She stuck it in the player and they curled together loosely on her bed, no words needed. They’d been doing that lately, since Kitchener, since Michigan, since Can Nats, since their lives and lifts started getting more acrobatic.

Scott leaned back, hands in armpits, as Fred Astaire argued with Edward Everett Horton about what was art and what wasn’t in ballet. Mindlessly traced his fingers around Tessa’s shoulder as Fred hatched his plan to meet Ginger Rogers, the incandescent tap dancer of his dreams. By the time Fred and Ginger were deep into their phony romance, Tessa had tucked her head into Scott’s shoulder. Relaxed completely as the dancers start to recognize and resist their feelings for each other. Fred stood on the ocean liner’s deck and sang to Ginger, professing his love even as his heart broke. A ridiculous plotline, Scott reminded himself with an eyeroll, shifting uncomfortably.

Tessa smiled, though. She knew what was coming.

Once Ginger ditched her rich jerk boyfriend and showed up to Fred’s showcase, and they fox-trotted off into happily ever after, Tessa burrowed into his chest with a satisfied sigh. Ginger and Fred always put her in a good mood. A moment later, though, reality returned, and she stiffened and sighed again, this time less satisfied. “We should watch Marie and Patch tomorrow. Be supportive,” she ruminated, cheek on his shirt but eyes distant. “Unless you have to make up your date with Samantha.”

“She’s in Mississauga for a cheer competition,” said Scott. His arm was still wrapped around her shoulders. “Come on.” He tugged her up, then crossed to the sparkly teal boombox she’d inherited from Jordan. He sifted through her burned CDs while she watched, a puzzled look on her face and hands on her hips, then popped one in and toggled to track nine. Fred Astaire’s croon filled the room.

Tessa tilted her head. “This isn’t a mambo, Scott. Or a tango.” This and next year’s compulsories might be some of the dirtiest dances in the repertoire, but the fact that they were required somehow made them safer than dancing just for fun.

He unfolded her arms, pulling her into a close hold. He didn’t like dancing off ice that much, even; it made him wary, doing it out in the world. But— “It’s just dancing,” he informed her, twirling her out
as the orchestra swelled behind Fred’s voice. With the shake of her head and a smile, she twirled back in, fitted herself to his body, and started to move. Finally. There they go. “You know what they say about Ginger Rogers, right?” he asked.

“That she did everything Astaire did, just backwards and in heels?” she mumbled into his chest, voice just a touch sassy. “She’s amazing. They were amazing.”

“You know too much, you know?” he groaned into her collarbone. She smelled nice there. He turned her, then twirled her so her back was to his chest. “I was just trying to share some information about one of the best dancers in history, jeez, T.” But she giggled as he sang the way your smile just beams/the way you sing off key/the way you haunt my dreams/no, they can’t take that away from me. We may never …

His voice trailed off, but the music kept going.

He swallowed. His throat felt dry. Tess’s hand felt soft.

They kept dancing.

There wasn’t any choreography, eventually there wasn’t any music even, just the two of them spinning and swaying to something only they could hear and feel. No spotlights, no judges, no media, no coaches, no parents, no fans. They might’ve taken away Torino, the rest of their season, but this—this was theirs.

Her voice cracked the silence. “You think we’ll make Vancouver?” He pulled back to look at her. Her eyes were clear, unflinching. Searching, hoping.

“Yes,” he said vehemently, because there was simply no other option. “Don’t you?”

“I …,” she started. “I really, really want to.”

“You will,” he assured her, tightening her into his grip again. Burying his face in her hair. “And even if … Christ, even if we don’t, T, you know you’re going to just have an epic life, right?” Because that was really what Tessa wanted—a wild, fulfilling, rollicking, dreamy life, romantic and big like one of their dance movies. “Like, I know it doesn’t always feel that way sometimes, but … you will. OK?”

Tessa yearned, hoped, craved, wanted, in a purer way than anyone else he knew: emotions and hopes and dreams and thoughts oozed out of her every pore. She wanted Can Nats and the Olympics, she wanted her family to be whole and happy, she wanted some fancy college degree and a lawyer job, probably. She wanted to dance, she wanted a big stage, she wanted to make a difference in the world. She wanted to be worthy and worthwhile, she wanted to be less awkward, she wanted to get algebra. She wanted Jordan’s Burberry jacket, she wanted chocolate milk to have zero calories. She wanted Marina to stop weighing her, she wanted Junior Worlds. She wanted, wanted, wanted.

But Tessa doubted, more than anyone else he knew.

And Tessa deserved, more than anyone else he knew.

“It doesn’t ever really feel that way,” she admitted, quiet and contemplative. “It’s just … There’s so much, Scott. I just want it … so much. And … what if it doesn’t happen?”

“We’re going to go. And we’re going to win.”
“Scott—”

“Really, Tess. But even then, the life stuff … Don’t you ever think sometimes, the best moments aren’t the crazy Olympic ones? It’s not the epic ones, it’s all the small, in-between ones that just … add up? Like, would being in Turin right now, getting ready for our short dance tomorrow, really be any better than being here, watching Fred and Ginger and dancing to no music?”

He was joking. Not being at the Olympics was brutal.

And then suddenly he wasn’t.

There was nothing better in the world than dancing with Tessa. No matter where the fuck they were.

She stopped their dancing and looked at him. The smallness and bigness of them filled the room.

“This is really nice, Scott,” she said.

He felt so insignificant, really, standing there in his skating partner’s bedroom in a forgotten pocket of Canada, the entire world, vast and expectant and treacherous and amazing, waiting for them outside. He shifted, gripping her close enough that their noses and foreheads brushed. Close enough that if she blinked he could feel her eyelashes. He didn’t quite know what he was doing. She just smelled really nice, or something.

And then she kissed him.

(Trust Tess to make the first move, though she would later insist he laid all the groundwork.)

He was too surprised to respond, freezing where her lips touched his. Too surprised to feel much more than the coolness of her kiwi Lip Smackers, to think about how kissing should be objectively weird. Then she arched her back, just a bit and probably involuntarily, as she strained on her tiptoes to reach him better. His mouth slanted forward, finding hers more firmly, and—yeah, this was really fucking nice.

Because it was Tessa, warm and normal and fun Tessa, Tessa who was somehow a constant in a world with exactly zero constants. He pressed his palm wide on her narrow back, tangled the other hand in the hair at the nape of her neck. Pushed forward gently, bringing more depth into the kiss. She was responsive in a way he wasn’t expecting, in a whoa sort of way: Tessa was a fucking girl, desirable and intriguing and exotic. A frisson of electricity passed through their lips, and she wrapped both arms around his neck, her chest was pushing against his chest and—holy shit, he was fucking making out with Tessa and it was fucking amazing.

He moved the hand from her hair to her cheek and from her back up to the side of her breast, and she started slowly walking them to the bed. The kiss had started out innocent, tentative and exploratory, but he could feel them both pushing for something deeper, something a little dirtier, something they wouldn’t be able to articulate or walk back. Her hands grazed the plane of his abdomen, her fingers mischievous along the waistband of his jeans. His skated back down her side, tickled at the hemline of her—his—T-shirt.

As the backs of his knees grazed the comforter, though, he pulled away. “Tess.” She looked up at him, sure as the sun rising, flushed and a little fuzzy around the margins and very thoroughly kissed.

“We … should stop.” She was a virgin, and Danny’s lecture rang in his ears, and they were both too sensitized today with the Olympics, and it would ruin everything.

(And obviously everything did get ruined, eventually, but they fixed it, eventually. Built, unbuilt,
rebuilt—the cycle would keep carrying them forward. They just didn’t know yet that that was the way it was supposed to be.)

Tessa looked hopeful, then crumpled, then absolutely poised, all in under a second. “Yeah,” she agreed, tucking her hair behind her ear. “You’re right. That’s very smart.”

“Yeah, I can’t believe I just said that,” he admitted. He started running Leafs stats through his head once more. “OK.” He kissed her one last time, because she was right and he was right and also he was a needy bastard. It was meant to be a quick kiss of reassurance, but then she bit his lips, and he needed to get out of her room, immediately. He broke apart, leaned his forehead against hers. “I’m gonna go. I promise, though.”

“Promise what?” Her brow furrowed.

“Whatever it takes. Tessa Jane McCormick Virtue, you’re gonna have an epic life.”

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**ii. Eight Months Before Today, Tessa**

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Next to her, Scott dozed fitfully; below her, the Atlantic spread inky and endless. It was late by Montreal’s standards, much later by Paris’s. She would regret not sleeping in the morning.

Tessa smiled, though. She knew what was coming.

Scott was many, many things. A diehard romantic was first among them. A keeper of secrets was not.

He was going to propose. And she was going to say yes.

She tightened her sweater around her. She should feel nervous, scared, fluttery. She had never really seen herself getting married, never allowed that she was built for happiness, never felt capable of a long-term adult relationship.

Never thought any of that could or should happen with Scott, of all people.

She didn’t have the time or emotional bandwidth; she didn’t like giving up the control; she had passions and projects that were easier than the wild, weedy work of building a life with someone else. Four years ago, she’d convinced herself it was enough. She was happy enough. Content enough. Loved enough.

And now … Everything about Scott, Scott-and-her, was unruly to the point of absurd, off-kilter and a little reckless—that feeling when your edge was too deep, or you took a lift to the ice for the first time, the white-knuckled adrenaline rush before a critical competition. But the most difficult things were also the simplest. There were no guarantees in life, and while those on the outside might look at them and think this was the easy, safe, inevitable choice—they had no idea.

He had been everything to her, since before she could fully process it—she still couldn’t, not really; there was no objectivity on the inside. Her world before she knew her mind, what she had wanted from before the time she knew what she needed. A push, a pull. A touch, a look. A challenge and a solution. A question and an answer. A step forward and a step back. No boundaries or limits. They could burn the world down around them, or harness that fire to create magic.
And yet …
Scott spun her through the air daily, and yet he never dropped her. He was the man of her childhood dreams, and yet he had grown as those dreams had grown. She had planned for every contingency, and yet she was happier than she could ever have imagined.

This was the least safe decision she could make. Her entire life had been building toward the possibility, and they were so much risk.

And yet.

They were so much reward.

She turned back to the Atlantic Ocean with a smile.

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iii. Yesterday, Scott

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Between the booze, the excitement, and, oh yeah, the fucking nerves, Scott knew sleep wasn’t going to come easy. After unsuccessfully trying to doze off to the highlights from the game, he finally grabbed his phone from the nightstand and tapped out *I can’t sleep t can u sleep?*

It felt stupid, even a little pathetic. He knew that on the eighth floor of the hotel, in the suite where she and Jordan and Cara and Joannie and Liz and Midori and Kat would get ready tomorrow—and to which the two of them would return after the wedding ceremony, holy *fuck* they were getting married—Tessa and Jordan were having one final sisters’ sleepover. After the rehearsal dinner, the hours of bawdy toasts, Tessa’s fingernails digging half moons into his thighs as she fake-laughed at some of the anecdotes, his fiancée had kissed him goodnight for what was supposed to be the last time. Informed him of her plans to watch *The Princess Bride* and fall asleep by the time Billy Crystal showed up.

But she typed back quickly. *Not at all. Jordan fell asleep five minutes into the movie. I had to remove her mud mask without waking her up. Hopefully no dry spots tomorrow.* Then a bunch of emojis, the ones that he wasn’t sure meant laughing or crying or both.

But he smirked at the visual. Jordan could sleep through anything. *haha. wanna get a drink? Or is that violating a rule?*

The dots appeared, disappeared, came back. *Not until midnight. We’ve got an hour. Bar?*

He pulled on jeans and a faded black TTYCT hoodie, but as he approached the hotel bar he realized this was a *terrible* idea—his family, half of Ilderton, and most of Team Canada was in there. He could hear singing. Turning, he spotted a busboy, and said quickly, “Hey! I will pay you—” He pulled out his wallet, fishing around until he found two twenties “—this, if you buy me a bottle of Veuve and bring it out here. Charge to 605. No questions asked.”

“Why can’t you just buy it?” the kid asked, immediately violating the one stipulation.

He sighed. “See, I’m getting married tomorrow, and I’m supposed to be resting and not hanging out with my beautiful bride, and half that bar is our guests.” He found another ten. “OK, fifty. Do this for me?”
“Scott?” Tessa asked from behind him, bewildered. “What’s happening?”

Earlier that evening she’d been in a lacy skirt-and-top combo that flashed a sliver of her abs—“I’m not going to have these forever, Scott”—that was ladylike and filigreed and so silver it was almost blue. Her hair had been twirled into perfect bouncing coils, a slash of very pink lipstick on her mouth and her eyes big and lined. Now she was in red leggings and a black sweatshirt that read Dancing in the Moonlight in highlighter-white script, her hair tangled around her shoulders, the makeup swiped from her face and pea green mud mask still smudged under her ear.

God, she was so pretty.

“Hey.” He raised his eyebrows and tilted his head toward the bar. “Ilderton moved in there.”

“Oh.” She scanned the lobby, catching on immediately.

“This nice kid was about to go buy me a bottle of champagne. Oh, and bring glasses.”

“Aren’t you guys …”

“We appreciate your help,” Tessa cut in with a smile. “It’s really so kind of you.”

Ten minutes later, they’d wandered into the courtyard, dark and abandoned and stacked with patio furniture hibernating for the winter. He uncovered and dislodged two slouching armchairs, but Tessa looked almost offended at the second, and crawled into his lap instead. The shouts of their friends and family in the bar were but distant echoes, and the quiet was almost disorientingly loud. But it was nice, the privacy. He realized suddenly this was why he had needed to see her. Personalized as the ceremony was, excited as they were, tomorrow was for everyone else.

“This is a lot better than trying to write my vows,” Tessa giggled, shrieking as he awkwardly popped the cork with his arms wrapped around her. She leaned back against him, took the bottle and glasses to pour them each one. “I might be winging them tomorrow.” She handed him a flute.

He pressed a kiss to her temple. “T, you’ve never winged anything in your life.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. Still couldn’t tell you what I was thinking the first time I kissed you,” she said mildly.

He thought back to that pink bedroom, those hopeful and hungry kids. “Well, if this was the result, I’d say you’re one hundred percent successful at winging it.” He held out his glass and she clinked it. Cheers.

She laughed, still like she couldn’t quite believe it. “Those speeches today, though. My god.” She wrinkled her nose as she took a sip.

“You didn’t like everyone from Stars decided to get into when they knew we would make it?” That part of the dinner had definitely been a deviation from Jacqueline the Wedding Planner’s airtight tick-tock of the evening. He leaned back, closed his eyes, ran his finger down her spine.

She snuggled into his side with a sigh, also winding down. “Poje was full of shit,” she murmured. “Clearly he knew jack during Carmen.” Nobody had gotten it entirely right. Not even Chiddy and Jeff.

“It was nice to hear, though. It’s a good story,” he reminded her. Everyone cared so deeply about them. It was humbling.
“Yeah, I keep meaning to ask—what’s with you liking narratives now?” she snorted, sliding a little so her butt was flat against one side of the chair and her legs were thrown over his lap to rest on the other armrest. He shifted a bit to support her. “And it’s still not a story. It’s stuff that happens, that we did, that happened to us. CTV can rearrange everything in retrospect, but there’s no arc or good or evil or right or wrong. The happy ending wasn’t guaranteed.” She cocked an eyebrow as she looked at him. "It's still not. This isn't an ending. This is a beginning."

He nudged her with his shoulder, making her giggle again. There was something very very ordinary, about the moment. They should be amped up for tomorrow, or drunk, or crying with happiness, but it was just a … little check-in before the end of their days. If b2ten were to come around with their heart rate monitors, he was pretty sure they’d both register their usual forty-four. “Yeah, it's nowhere close to a fairy tale. But the fact that we’ve never had to \textit{force} the good, or fake it—that’s something.” He shrugged. “And it \textit{is} a good story. Everything that had to go right, to get us here? Every competition, every fight, every obstacle, every ISU judge. You stayed short. I grew, eventually. We should appreciate that.”

She thumbed his lip in wonder. “It is pretty … magical. How it all fit together.”

Ha, she finally admitted it. “Twenty-two years ago you took my hand, and you never let go.” Tomorrow, Nicole was going to read a poem Little Kaetlyn had tucked into an engagement present back in the spring: \textit{way before we know what this was all about, i chose you & you chose me.} It was, he thought, the only way of really explaining what they were, who they are, how they had made it these twenty-two years. How they would make it the next eighty.

(Tessa thought he was insane for thinking they’d live that long. He knew how special they were.)

“And here we are.” She shifted. “Sometimes—it’s just … bigger than us. Still.” She stared at the stars, eyes wide and awed. “I kind of love that.”

He kissed her, a squish first again at her browline, then a peck on her nose, then a press at the corner of lip before she finally tilted her head up to kiss him comfortably on the mouth. “You think it’ll be any different?” he asked. He had simply \textit{known}, since that February day she’d snuck into his place to hang a jersey, that this was where he wanted them to end up. That this was just what came next. Maybe the clarity came from the comfort of the label change—\textit{partners} and \textit{team} was for the two people whose relationship orbited skating; \textit{spouse} and \textit{married} for everything else. But that didn’t explain it entirely, he didn’t think.

“Marriage? You mean, different than the last twenty-two years?”

“Yeah.”

“I hope so, but I have no idea,” she said with wonder. She laughed a little. “Isn’t that exciting?”

“We’re going to rock this,” he informed her, serious and confident. He’d never been more sure of anything.

She laughed again. “Am I? Neither of us have written our vows, and it’s almost midnight. We’re entering our wedding day as rulebreaking slackers.”

“Not the vows.” He reconsidered. “Well, hopefully the vows.” And they’d never been ones for the rules. “But I mean, we’re going to rock \textit{this}. Today. Tomorrow. And tomorrow. The rest of our lives.”

“Sex and laughter and dancing, today, tomorrow and tomorrow,” she repeated.
“You want those to be my vows?” he said, grinning.

“They can be, if you want,” she shrugged, but her eyes were serious. “There’s nothing you can vow to me that you haven’t already lived out, time and time again.”

True, but he thought they were probably still important. “What are you—what are you gonna say?” He swallowed, lifting a strand of hair off her neck.

She leaned back just a little, the better to see him. “I don’t know. Jordan and Charlie and Danny were arguing about this earlier, you know—Jo thought that we would just stand up front and giggle at each other in incomplete sentences, and Danny thought we’d go for some, like, over-the-top joint rhyming thing, and Charlie said we’d just get crazy-competitive and try and out-vow each other. Gold-medal vows. He snorted. “You wanna do any of those?”

“No,” she said, with a deep cleansing exhale. “But you know your vows are going to kick my vow’s ass, you know that, right? I know you always act I’m like the word nerd, but then you just stand in the middle of my kitchen and speak from the heart and convince me to make the best decisions in the world …” She trailed off.

“What about, like, vowing to not burn the new dishware and to put up with my bad taste in music?” he offered.

“No,” she said, certain. “I’ll probably skip the cutesy stuff. But. I’m not sure what I can say.” She looked at him, straight on now, deadly serious. “You know it all.”

He laughed, and kissed her. She started to tear up, a little. “You can’t start crying now,” he murmured around another kiss.

“You’re totally gonna cry first, tomorrow.”

“Probably.”

“Definitely,” she chuckled, and wiped a finger under her eye. “But I’ll probably start with how foundational and fundamental you are to me, how you make me brave and better, how everything good in my life has flowed from this partnership. But also that you do know all the important stuff anyways. A dance metaphor, probably. Seems fitting, right?”

“People will expect it. I get skating comparisons, then.”

“Deal. So probably—” she chewed her lip for a second, before continuing, with a nod, “—How love, like life, is a dance, and they’re not the same, moment to moment. And that’s what I’m looking forward to the most—knowing that it’s the two of us, moving together in this dance. The total trust that it takes to move together, not always touching, but knowing that we’re in the same rhythm, that our movements line up to create something bigger. And it's freeing and wonderful and ... And you’ll know I know you already know it, and it won’t be new or earth-shattering or anything that we haven’t shown each other a thousand times or heard in a hundred wedding speeches, but you’ll cry anyway. Before me!” She smirked up at him, but then her eyes softened. “Because it’s us, this time. Because you're everything to me. Because it’s real.”

His throat went dry at her words, his heart lurched toward her. She ran her thumb along the ridge of his hand, folded against hers. “Your turn. What are you saying?”

He shifted, pulling her more fully into his lap, and considered. Ran his fingers through her hair. “Something you already know, I guess, too.” He kissed her shoulder, and wrapped an arm around
her stomach. “How I’m so lucky I can’t wrap my head around it most days. How you changed my
life—changed me—when you skated into it twenty-two years ago. How three years ago, I was so
terrified, standing in your kitchen and trying to casually ask you to say yes to us. I was pretty sure
you would shut me down, since we had the Olympics in our crosshairs and that was too important,
but I literally, physically, could not stop wanting you. All of you. Always, you. Only, you. Forever,
you. As long as we both shall live. And you said yes, then. How you’ve always made my life better and I promise to make you laugh as much as possible, because fuck if it isn’t my favorite sound in the world, truly. All the sappy stuff I say all the time anyway.” He stuck
out his tongue at her, and she laughed, again.

“And then a skating metaphor,” she prompted, with a nudge of her shoulder.

“Yes! Right, the skating metaphor. We learned how to fall. And then something about work we’ve
put in. The rice we have. The team we’ve built. And how I promise to not stop caring, to not stop
trying, to not stop putting in the work. Throguh the hard shit, the exciting shit, the boring shit.” He
waited a beat, their silly exercise entirely serious through the prism of their solitude. “And then I’ll
cry, again, because it’s real.”

She smiled back softly, hand firm on his back. “And then I’ll cry. You know I’m easy.”

He smirked. ”You’re never easy, he said, then became earnest. “But you’re always worth it. I
promise.”

“And sex and laughter and dancing,” she reminded him, very seriously. “Every day. You promise
those, right?”

He laughed. Nuzzled her nose. “Every day. That’s what’ll make them the best days. All the sex and
laughter and dancing.”

The sound of trumpets burst from the bar, and Tessa Two’s favorite Ray LaMontagne song started
up. “Come on,” he said, shifting her hips off his lap. “We can even take care of two of those now.”

Her laugh as he dipped her was the only vow he needed.

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iv. One Year Before Today, Tessa

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The bed creaked loudly under her, and she cracked open an eye. “Babe?” she croaked, her voice
sandpapery from sleep and booze and screaming. Her eyes found the digital alarm clock in the dorm.

His movements were gawky and over-careful. “Shhh. Shit. I’m sorry, baby.” She’d left him and
Chiddy in Canada House around one before coming back to the three-bedroom suite that they were
sharing with Kaitlyn and Eric and Chiddy and Poje. The suite where they had conveniently
rearranged the sleeping assignments, to nobody’s surprise but many people’s eyerolls.

“S’ok,” she mumbled as he squeezed into the double bed with her. She stifled a giggle; this
somehow felt like being a teenager sneaking around back in Canton again. A leg slid between hers,
arms came around her back. She melted into him, nosed a soft kiss into his chest.

He sniffed her hair. “You smell good.”
“I took a shower,” she said, with a sniff of her own. “You smell like … booze and sweat.” And cigars, actually. A picture of what he and Chiddy had gotten up to was emerging.

He chuckled. “Victory booze and victory sweat.”

“Because we won.” She brushed his locks away from his eyes.

The comeback, the coming together, would have been been enough, worthy and worth it all on its own—but this was fucking unbelievable.

“We won,” he breathed, fingers digging through her hair to cup her skull. “You and me, Tess. Together. Always.”

(Together. Always.)

“I still can’t believe it,” she said. “That it happened.”

That it was over.

(But everything was fleeting, except for him.)

“I can,” he said fervently. “God, Tess—Tess, you were magnificent.”

She scooted back, propped an elbow on the pillow. “You were pretty amazing yourself, mister.” They’d done giddy earlier; it was quieter now. She ran a hand down his chest. “It’s … Scott, you made my dreams come true.” He snickered at the accidental quote—if he were less tired, or less drunk, she knew he’d come up with a good joke—but she was honest in her sleepiness, her sleep deprivation, her giddiness. He made all of her dreams come true, he had since she was seven. A warm, hazy, lazy feeling curled surely in her belly. With Scott she could do anything. These past two weeks had proved it.

“You know what I want to do next?” he said insistently. He was too excited to sleep, she could tell; could only hope he wouldn’t lose his voice in the middle of an interview.

(Famous last freaking words.)

“We have tour. And then Europe.” Traveling the world, him by her side. Golf and good food and chocolate and spas and a lot of sex. “And I think Julia said the publisher wanted to update the book.”

“Yeah, but after. The rest of our lives.”

“Scott—” She knew what he wanted to do next, thank you. She just didn’t want to rush. She wanted to be ready.

“Tess. No. The fall tour. I know we’ve talked about it … But I’m serious. You and me, kiddo. Let’s do it.”

“Across Canada?”

“A big thank-you thing. Produce the damn thing, run it our way. Our vision, our shots. We go to smaller communities, talk to kids. Do clinics. Give back to the skating community. The fans.”

“That sounds nice,” she murmured, heart catching. “I want confetti.” She really did love the idea. A culmination and a bridge and something entirely new. Something they made real with their hands and hearts and minds, together. Theirs.
“Good music.”

“Off-ice dancing. Hip-hop and ballet and contemporary, everything.”

“We can get Patrick and Little Kaet to join. Radford and Meg.”

“Let’s ask Elvis and Poje and Kaitlyn and Jeff and Joannie.” They’d probably say no, but still.

“Oh, and let’s throw a thank you party in Ilderton.”

“Obviously,” she laughed. “I want to start a foundation, or something. Not—not immediately. But eventually.” Making sure girls feel confident, that coaches don’t abuse their power

“Yes. God, you’re brilliant.” He kissed her nose, her cheeks, her lips, everywhere. “Plus school, commentating, touring, designing, taking over a company … Whatever you do next, the world is your fucking oyster, Tess. I can’t wait to see what you do.”

She snuggled down next to him. “Me neither. Because you’re going to be an amazing coach. One day.” The world was cracked wide again, so many things they could say yes to. Only this time, it was exhilarating instead of overwhelming.

“You think?” His voice was gravel.

“I know.” She couldn’t see the how, exactly, but she could see him with the younger teams, bringing all his brilliance and perseverance, his charisma and conviction. This wasn’t his last time at the Olympics, not even close.

And she would be right there at his side, their partnership evolving as they did.

“It’s gonna be an epic life, Tess. Whatever comes next.”

She remembered, briefly, his promise made years ago, in another bedroom a lifetime away. “It already is.” She shifted incrementally closer to him. “What else should we do next?”

And so they stayed up until morning had come for real, making a list of new dreams.

No, better.

They stayed up making a list of new plans.

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v. Today, Scott

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He’s chatting with Elvis and the b2ten crew when Miku starts belting out I Want It That Way, and in a flash the idea comes to him. His next gesture. He excuses himself, catches Max at the side of the stage and makes his request. It’s perfect. He searches for Tess.

She’s snapping a selfie with Nicole and Tessa Two and Michelle and Melissa. She’s positively glowing—he doesn’t think he’s seen her smile budge all night. Her hair is now down and curly, and her eyes are smudged with kohl for her sultry second look of the night. Weddings required at least as many outfits as a skating competition, she had reasoned sensibly.

“Babe!” he says as Anthony starts the opening chords. “Remember this?”
He slides his hand through his wife’s, twirling her into him as their sisters-in-law laugh. His wife’s. Jesus fuck, his life is amazing.

Max steps up to the mic, and a cymbal crash signifies that the early aughts have arrived again. “Um. Yeah?” Tessa says, with a smile. Her head twists at the melody, trying to figure out what he’s talking about.

“Come on. Let’s dance. Like in Kitchener.”

“What are you talking about?” Her brow creases. “We’ve been dancing all night.” Hell, he thinks they probably gave his mom a heart attack with their moves during Miku’s rendition of Partition.

Eh. Alma survived the Carmen season, she could survive his wedding.

“Kitchener? That winter formal dance, homecoming, whatever? Savage Garden?” She realized she was in love with him that night, she said. “I saved you from that awful douchebro, Dylan?” Dylan eventually broke her heart. In retaliation, Scott and Poje egged his house.

She laughs, but slides into a close hold and maneuvers them onto her gold dance floor. He sees Joannie wink at him. “First off, his name was Eric, and Scott, the song we danced to that night was I Knew I Loved You. This is Truly Madly Deeply. Right dreamy Australian pop duo, wrong cheesy song.”

“No way. It was this song.”

“Didn’t you place this memory in, like, Russia in the wrong year, once?”

It’s true that his prevailing memories of the night are drinking with Poje and Tess in a hot pink dress, but— “No way. This is the better song.” He hums I’ll be your dream, I’ll be your wish, I’ll be your fantasy, moving her hips with his hands. “I mean, they’re both bad. But this is the great bad one.”

“What?!? No.” She slings her arms around his shoulders, dips her forehead to his like they’re slow dancing outside a high school caf again. “You loved the other song. Seriously. You used to sing it in the car. It was the basis of many a love letter to Olivia from geometry class that year.”

“Yeah, who’s misremembering now? Olivia Owens and I had French together, not geometry.”

She squints. “Then it was a Katie or something, from geometry. Whatever. The song was the other Savage Garden song, Scott, I swear.”

He just kisses her, because they are married and this is a dumb, borderline hilarious fight, and he can, and he can’t wait for a lifetime of dumb, borderline hilarious fights. Twenty-two years growing side by side. A story written about in most major news outlets in North America. “How much stuff do you think we don’t remember the same?”

She cocks her head, his question catching her off guard. She’s thoughtful, a moment of quiet contemplation in the middle of a heady day. “Actually ...” Her tone is a little dumbstruck as she slides into dance hold, finally. “Probably a lot more than we think.”

He thinks of the countless mornings on the ice, the hundreds of hours laughing in the car, the competitions that were in Finland, but maybe they were in Sweden. The inside jokes that drive Buttle nuts, the decades of tours, the kitchen renos that already bleed together. The memories pile up, are washed away with time and new experience. The feelings stay.

And Tessa’s hand in his, always.
He gives her a twirl, and wonders.

vi. Seven Years After Today, Tessa

She breathes deeply, the cold sharp scent of the ice filling her lungs. She’s been in a rink recently, of course—Trick had his first hockey game earlier this fall, with Scott coaching (they won, Scott cried), and Grace had her first competition of the year just last week (she won, Scott cried). And obviously, Scott comes up with any excuse in the book to get her to come by at the end of the day.

But there is always something incredibly different about being on ice again after seven months.

She’s missed it.

“Mommy! You’re here! Are you gonna skate?” Their bright-eyed, amazing Grace bursts out of her skating lesson, dark hair flying out of the teal ribbon—perfectly matched to her skating outfit, because she is very much a Virtue woman despite the Moir coloring and jawline. Unsurprisingly, she is the tiniest in the class by a good six inches. “Watch this!” She tilts backwards into an impressive-for-anybody-let-alone-a-five-year-old layback spin.

“Wow, kiddo! That’s great.”

Liz Chan skates over and gives Tessa a tight hug. “Look at you! Is this your first time back on?”

“Yeah,” Tessa says, smiling. “Scott’s helping Trick get his skates on too. How’d she do today?”

Grace is already on the other end of the rink, showing off her spin to a group of middle schoolers there for public skate hours.

“Great. She’s landing the single salchow pretty consistently. And she was goofing around and just did a split jump. Have you been working on those with her?”

“Nope. Maybe Scott has.”

“Or she’s just crazy innately talented.” Liz holds up a hand at Tessa’s guarded, ambivalent look. “I know, I know—no pressure. But hey, she loves this. And she’s got a huge supportive skating family behind her. It’s not the worst thing.”

“Mommy, skate with me!” Grace streaks up to her and grabs her hand. “Bye Aunt Liz! Tell Uncle Chiddy and Sammy and Jake hi!”

Tessa laughs as she’s pulled away from Liz. “Alright, I’m being summoned. See you all for dinner tomorrow?” Now that they’re too far away for the big Moir family gatherings, they’ve started their own Sunday night tradition at their six-bedroom century house in Shaughnessy Heights. Kate, Jordan, and Cara all come, having migrated west over the last several years, as well as friends who count as family: the Chiddys, as Grace refers to the Chanfam; the Trankovs and their two kids; Kaetlyn and her husband; and Kaitlyn and her partner and daughter.

“Mommy, let’s go.”

Tessa takes Grace’s small gloved hand in hers to stroke laps. Her thighs tingle with a familiar burn through her leggings, and she smiles. “How was your lesson today?”
“Oh, my gosh, so fun, Mommy. Aunt Liz is working with me on my Wonder Woman dance. I think I want to wear my Diana costume, also Diana the best princess, because she’s a superhero too, which I told Tenley, but Tenley says Cinderella is better—” And her daughter is off, chattering a mile a minute about skating and school and whether or not a unicorn could be real, if a horse had a baby with a narwhal.

After a few laps, they come up on Scott telling Patrick, “Good job buddy! Bend those knees, you’ve got it,” as they work on backwards crossovers.

“Excuse me, sir.” Tessa breaks off from Grace, who grabs her brother to pull him forward, and carefully stops next to her husband, wrapping her arms around his waist. She tucks her gloved hands between his blue cardigan and chambray shirt for extra warmth. “You’re not allowed to have street shoes on the ice. It’s the rule.” She fixes him with a faux-serious look.

He nuzzles her neck until she breaks into laughter, then kisses her with a triumphant smile. “Well, ma’am, you probably don’t recognize me, but once I was a pretty big deal in ice skating. Once won an Olympic gold medal in this very city with a very pretty girl.”

“Oh really? Tell me this story.”

“It’s too long for right now. But the rink’s OK with it, I promise.” He kisses her again. “Besides, I’m a pretty big fan of getting my kids in skates early, but I do really think they need to learn how to sit up first.” He tugs lightly at one of Gigi’s besocked feet. “And this one’s got a couple of months to go.”

She peers into the Ergobaby, where Gigi—Ginger Marie Virtue Moir—is snoring slightly (Scott’s genes, not hers). She is eight weeks, ten pounds, their child most likely to look like a Virtue, and absolutely perfect. “Heyyy kitten,” Tessa croons, sifting her fingers through the strawberry blonde fuzz. Tessa always knew they’d be a family of five, ever since Scott’s speech in her kitchen more than a decade ago, even as the thought of children terrified her. But she and Scott have always been a team, and even then, he somehow made parenting and poop and diapers seem like an adventure and not a slog. Adding a third junior player to their team was a choice, but not really—not dissimilar to the decision to go to a third Games, or to give their relationship a third go.

But the truly stunning thing about Gigi—which she realized when Grace was born, and remembered again when Trick came along—is that everything is new again. The brute beauty of life slings itself forward, regenerated through the eyes and lives of children. Patch shared a poem with her when he met Grace for the first time on a humid morning in a tiny Montreal hospital room one July so many years ago. It is always, my darling, a matter of life and death, as I had forgotten. The words echo in her bones. She thinks about it with each birth, each new opportunity mixed and molded out of her and Scott, of their life’s work. Grace and Patrick and Gigi will experience love and laughter and heartbreak and hope and adversity and anguish, fall and fail and get back up again, all in new and achingly wondrous ways.

Endless variations on the same themes. The music goes on. The dance continues. The story starts over.

“You liking your first time on ice?” Tessa coos, running a finger along Gigi’s chubby cheek before turning to her husband. She’s been attracted to every Scott since he was nine, but there’s something extra delicious about this sleep-deprived, overcommitted, hockey-dad version, hair curling around his ears and cuts on his fingers from helping Patrick put on skates and a burn on his palm from making pancakes. He hasn’t shaved in days, and he has finally managed, at nearly forty, to grow a decent stubble; that plus a little gray patched in at his temples makes him almost distinguished looking. “You OK not skating today? Really?” she checks. She’s nearly his height in skates, and she dips her
forehead against his.

He snorts. “T, I get to skate every day. Go freaking enjoy this. You’re much less crabby after a good skate.” His eyes narrow into a smirk—obviously thinking of other ways to improve her mood—and she kisses him briefly, because she can.

With one final look, she pushes off alone, hears Scott ask Grace to do part of her Wonder Woman routine—“Are you gonna be a superhero just like Mommy?”—and picks up speed. She laps the rink a few times and weaves anonymously in and out of public hour skaters, then swings over to Trick when he falls on his bottom doing a shoot-the-duck.

“That was so good, sweetie,” she exclaims, kneeling next to him to help him stand. “Wanna practice again?”

He shakes his head. “I wanna dance, Mama,” he orders, lifting his arm up. Like Scott, he has always known what he wanted; also like Scott, he’s charming enough that he usually gets exactly that.

Tessa laughs and picks him up. Sets him against her hip and picks out the steps to a waltz, swinging him around as she does the footwork. “Right back outer cross-roll … Killian … Three turns … swoop,” she sing-songs through the golden waltz—this year’s pattern; she’s tried to relearn it to help Scott but it’s not her favorite—and Trick laughs at her exaggerated moves. She’s danced him around in his nursery since he was born, humming Hall & Oates badly, a ballerina bear and a hockey-player bear perched on his dresser. She’s done this with all three of them.

She never thought she’d love dancing with anybody but Scott, but she loves this.

“You know, you’re a little too short to partner with Mommy, Trick,” Scott says, sliding up beside them and removing Patrick from Tess’s side carefully, so as not to slice her. “You are the perfect size to chase Gracie around, though. Wanna go do that?”

“Yeah!” calls Trick, quickly spinning away from them. “Gracie! Dad says I can get ya!”

“Yeah, right,” Grace yells back, picking up her pace with a snort. Trick dashes after her.

“Um, Coach Moir.” Tess puts her hands on her hips. “You had a pretty important job, last I checked.”

“Relax. Liz’s got G.” Scott has transferred his propensity to nickname her fifteen ways to their kids, and poor Gigi is already, at two months, G and Ginny and Li’l G and kitten and sweetcheeks and who knows what else. He takes her hand in his, giving her one twirl before settling his arm around her waist. She raises her eyebrows; he must’ve gotten ahold of the stereo system while he was in the office, because whatever rap was playing earlier has now been swapped out for Gord. “I saw a pretty girl across the rink. Thought I’d ask her to skate with me. See if I had a chance. So?” He cocks his eyebrow, sixteen again and charming the pants off a rink bunny.

“Did you, now?” she laughs. “Well, you did say you won some competitions here once with a pretty girl.”

“Same girl,” he reassures her. “She was this strong-willed dynamite kid. Carried my ass, for sure. Powered through surgeries and coaches and a dick of a teenaged partner. But now she’s this stunning, strong woman. Birthed three beautiful kids. Basically runs a company. Burns meal kits every Thursday night when it’s her turn to cook. Still the best partner a guy could ask for.”

She squeezes his hand, a long road of memories unfurling. Sometimes she doesn’t recognize herself, or him, either. Their life is a completely different rhythm, still a challenge, still all she has ever
known, but with a quiet wholeness to it. It's not perfect, nowhere near it. There are endless negotiations, discussions, still that frisson reminding her that this is a choice. That everything still depends on them succeeding one more time than they fail. Only now it's catching up on emails in front of hockey replays and preschool carpools and tripping over Legos and dancing in yet another white marble kitchen. Things she never would have thought possible at sixteen or nineteen or twenty-four.

And it’s the talking and the laughter. Always, the talking and the laughter.

“Sounds like a pretty great story.”

Because that’s what it feels like, most days. Their Olympics, their career, their truths: they’re all memories that happened to other people, faded to the texture of Canadian flannel. She has to cross-check costumes with her mom and Jordan; Scott corrects her about which years they won Finlandia. Sometimes when she’s showing Grace videos of them, Grace straight-up doesn’t believe those kids turned into her parents.

It’s all real.

But they don’t need to talk about their past. She asks him about Oona and Gage’s routine; wonders out loud if Gigi will be big enough to fly to London for Easter; reminds him that they need to pick up dog food and snacks for Grace’s Girl Guides troop on their way home. He keeps an eye on their kids, gently calling out a calm down, kiddo to Gracie when she starts to torment her brother too much; double-checks with her that Sasha and Sveta can stay overnight on Max and Tati’s anniversary next week; surprises her with a few dips and twizzles. Her laugh reverberates against the ice and he pushes her into the boards for a stolen kiss, adding a second to her jaw when he’s pretty sure nobody is looking. He sings Hip lyrics to her, and she hums in contentment, wide-eyed and hopeful and determined and in love as the little girl who once turned down the national ballet to dance, on ice, with Scott.

They got friendship right. They grew where they were needed. They make mistakes, over and over again. They weakened, and it made them grow stronger.

And it’s a good life.

They skate on.

Together.

Always.

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vii. Twenty Two Years Before Today, Scott

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He wasn’t sure when he met her, exactly—there were a lot of kids hanging around the rink and at camp—even after Aunt Carol said come dance with Tessa, Scottie. He was unsure of her, even though she was supposedly his girlfriend or something. It was quickly obvious that she could keep up. Other girls couldn’t. It made him want to work harder.

She hadn’t been skating for as long as he had, didn’t move like she’d been born with skates on her feet like Moirs did. But she was a dancer, graceful, special even when the older girls were on the ice too. He wasn’t particularly tall, definitely wasn’t clumsy, but something about her—maybe how tiny
she felt? Delicate, almost—made him feel like he was going to trip over his skates and take her down with him.

She also didn’t really talk, which he just didn’t get. Who didn’t have things to say, all the time? There was so much to talk about. But she was reserved, pulled together like the ribbon in her hair, which was always matched to her skating skirt (she never wore leggings like Cara and Sheri and even Jordan did), her bangs smoothed straight before she skated onto the ice. He asked her once what she liked to do, and she blinked and said Dance. And read, obviously. It wasn’t obvious. She had non-assigned books in her backpack, usually at least one Babysitter’s Club and something that had looked fun at the library. Where she went, every Saturday. For fun.

And she skated fast, said Oh yeah when he said Race you. And sometimes she won. It made him want to keep up, to win, to be better.

When she fell on the ice—he told her at first, everybody falls, and she said I know in a ‘duh’ voice—when she fell, she just got up, wiped the frost off her butt and took off even harder. She worked hard. He knew she was steely, like his mom, like Aunt Carol, like Moirs.

So yeah, he was a little unsure of her.

Then one day early on, he said something—honestly he would never remember what, it melted away with time, became a narrative of a memory that he told himself—and she laughed, really laughed, like it was the funniest thing she had heard all day. It was so hard and genuine and honking and delighted there was no way she was making it up.

He decided he liked the sound.

He decided he liked her.

He decided he liked when he made that sound happen.

He decided he wouldn’t mind hearing that every day for as long as he could.

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viii. Eighty Years After Today, Tessa

And he did.

Chapter End Notes

And so…. Was it worth the wait? This chapter’s biggest challenge was not getting lazy in the face of the fact that I had written so much toward this chapter. To me, there were no surprises, just the last pieces of narrative fitting together. We got so so many repeated lines: the talking and the laughter. Together. Always. Trust Tessa to make the first move, even if he’d laid all the groundwork. Everything and I everything you. They
skate on; they dance on. Savage Garden plays. She makes a commitment as a child to dance, on ice, with Scott. And, of course, Scott’s promise to give her an epic life—potentially the thing that inadvertently but officially kicks off their adulthoods, as she chases a fantasy and he works to prove he can provide for her.

Building the first kiss scene was the toughest, since I’d blocked it out so long ago and needed to have it fit everything I had written since. After running into some issues because I hadn’t watched Moulin Rouge!, I watched three Ginger/Fred movies to pick which one to use. Initially I had Scott singing The Way You Look Tonight since Swing Time is a better movie (though the plots are terrible in everything), but They Can’t Take That Away From Me, and the plot of Shall We Dance fit so much better (Astaire is on the playlist but I recommend Ella’s version best). So that got switched up. Getting the right tone was the trickiest part, since I wanted them on the cusp of something huge, and having this quiet, perfect moment, but for it to be a good memory, and sort of heart-crackingly expansive at the same time (I think this is a key place of how the story is told impacts what you get out of it. Curious what re-readers think).

The vows was the last part to come together (and had some final edits which necessitated a, like, 2 AM posting before a crazy work day) since I basically ran out of ways to say things. Whoops. Initially I wasn’t going to include vows at all but I liked the thought of private promises to each other being the commitment, not whatever they said in front of Tessa’s 320 guests. I threw You Are The Best Thing in as a nod to my last finished series, because I’m trash. I also liked the symmetry of having a section end with them, together, looking at the world looking at them (2026 Olys); one where they dance on; one where they skate on.

The final flash-forward, them with three kids skating around his rink to It’s A Good Life If You Don’t Weaken by the Hip, was about as fluffy as I could get. After the Olys and an interview as the centerpieces of the other two flash-forwards, I wanted something quiet and settled and ordinary for the final extended glimpse of them. I loved the visual of Grace in a skating dress but with incredibly messy hair—the perfect blend of both parents. I loved Tessa dancing with Trick. I loved Hockey Dad Scott in sneakers on ice Gigi. Ginger was the final kid name I picked, and was sort of happy I had them watching Fred/Ginger movies as early as chapter two or four or something. I wanted something that started with a G, and I liked the nickname Gigi—it seemed like the sort of kicky, just-a-little-pretentious French-inspired name Tessa would pick for a third kid. Their lives are fully shifted, fully grown, full circle.

I nearly ended on Scott’s last section—it was the ending for the first twelve chapters, since I wrote it so early on—until I realized that he would have one more section than her, and that felt wrong. Her final three words were written after about two minutes of thought. They just fit together way too well, with everything else. I worried it was maybe a little too cutesy, but don’t regret it at all.
THE EXTRA STUFF

Chapter Notes

As promised, a timeline + playlist for the entire fic! Altogether I just added about 38 pages of content to supplement this fic. This *should* be everything—I've gone through it like seven times to make sure it's complete. Please let me know if you notice I missed a section.

As I've said multiple times, one of the themes of this story was about how the stories we tell ourselves shape our lives, so I really do think doing a reread chronologically, while pretty interesting, would have some redundant parts and maybe not entirely adhere together (ever try making a cookie out of cookie dough ice cream? I think it's like that). Please keep that in mind, and be gentle with critiques on this topic. Hopefully this will be an interesting reference point, though, and if anyone does do a chronological reread, let me know what you think.

I also added an author's note at the bottom of each chapter detailing process, what I was thinking, challenges I had, how it knitted together. This isn't meant to be a pretentious literary analysis, and I promise I don't have an over-inflated sense of my writing ability. I'm plenty self-critical. So hopefully it doesn't come across as pretentious. But people asked when stuff came into play, and thought you might find it interesting. The details on how I kept everything organized are on ch. 3.

And now, I'm finally ready for a bit of a break! I'll be around in the comments if you have any questions and re-lurking on tumblr at @aregularjo (probably...), but I did want to get this part out before the tour goes quiet and people get antsy. Next up is a triathlon and a lot of holiday baking but do plan on sticking around a bit and hope to talk to you all soon. The hugest of thanks for paying attention to this monster story. You've made it so fun.

Twenty-two Years Before Today

15, vii—October 1997. After a tentative start to their partnership, Scott decides he wants to make Tessa laugh.

Twenty-one Years Before Today

1, iv—August 1998. Tessa makes the choice to dance, on ice, with Scott.

Eighteen Years Before Today

2, i—June 2001. Tessa and Scott go see Moulin Rouge! and she realizes she still has a little bit of a crush on Scott.

Seventeen Years Before Today

2, iii—October 2002. Scott cheers Tessa up at a Homecoming dance by dancing to Savage Garden, but she gets her first kiss from another guy. On the phone with her sister afterwards, though, she
realizes she is for-real-in-love with Scott.

_Sixteen Years Before Today_

3, iii—April 2003. Scott shuts down a guy who is interested in Tessa by describing her as “she’s Tessa,” which she overhears and misunderstands.

_Fifteen Years Before Today_

12, iv—May 2004. As they move to Michigan—and after a few Talks from all the older men in their lives—Scott promises Tessa that he’ll protect her always.

4, vi—July 2004. After Marina witnesses a moment, she tells Scott he and Tessa are too close and it’s too dangerous. He tells her he’s not a skater without her.

_Fourteen Years Before Today_

3, ii—January 2005. At dinner with MF and P before Can Nats, Marie explains to Tessa why she trusts Patch so much. Tessa is struck by the thought of the two of them being involved romantically, and Marie offers a toast to two extraordinary partnerships.

_Thirteen Years Before Today_

15, i—February 2006. Scott comforts Tessa after they miss Turin by watching a Ginger/Fred movie and dancing. They kiss for the first time and he promises her an epic life.

_Twelve Years Before Today_

3, i—July-October 2007. Tessa starts to date Fedor, which confuses and irritates Scott. She tells him it’s because it’s straightforward.

_Eleven Years Before Today_

2, ii—February 2008. Scott and Tessa hook up for the first time at Four Continents, after he punches a guy hitting on Tessa. He proposes sex-twizzling.

3, iv—February-August 2008. Six months of hooking up gets progressively more fucked-up after Tessa drunkenly tells Scott that she loves him, they both pretend it didn’t happen, and her legs start to give her trouble.

4, ii—August 2008. After she finally admits she’s a lot more injured than she lets on and needs surgery, they fight. She suggests that he stay in Michigan because the space will be good for them.

4, ix—November-December 2008. Tessa and Scott try to make up after her surgery. He tells her she’s his best friend and they can’t lose that. It takes three practices for Marina to throw them into couples’ counseling.

_Ten Years Before Today_

3, vi—October 2009. In an interview in the lead up to the Games, to further the narrative that they’re Canadian sweethearts, she jokes that “maybe” there’s a chance of a relationship, even though he’s with Jess and she’s with David.
Nine Years Before Today

4, v—February 2010. As she’s on a high from winning but in tremendous pain, Scott convinces Tessa to go for another Games.

1, ii—April 2010. Sensing the opportunities available, they make the decision to lean into a narrative and embark on a new public life together.

5, iii—May 2010. On tour, Scott gets in fights and sleeps with groupies as the Sexagon causes unhappy tension for the rest of the cast, particularly Chiddy. Scott offers his support and proposes a friendship truce, as a moment reminds him of the inherent danger of being involved with Tess.

5, vi—September 2010; Tessa breaks into Scott’s bedroom to tell him that she needs surgery again, and admits she broke it off with David. They vow to do things differently and she ends up crashing there. After her surgery, she buys him a bear (to Jordan’s disgust), and feels the schism that’s been open for two years has finally healed.

9, vi—December 2010. Scott’s a thoughtful and attentive partner after her second surgery. Tessa finally asks Scott why he stuck by her. He says it was never a choice—he’d already chosen her.

Eight Years Before Today

3, vii—April 2011. Scott is struck by the way that Tessa has reinvented herself post-surgery to seize incredible opportunities; she tries to tell him that they’re in it together. Their lives are running on parallel tracks often, but they make time for a late-night diner snack and midnight wander through Toronto.

8, ii—late September 2011. Tessa helps Scott prank Meryl and Charlie, as he works out his feeling of sadness that the long-standing and close friendship is fracturing. It’s the last time for a long while that they are all truly friends.

Seven Years Before Today

9, ii—March 2012. Before Worlds, Tessa worries that if they don’t win, it’s because of her and her injury entirely. Scott cheers her up and reminds her of all they’ve done by leaving the bucket of rice.

7, vi—March 2012. After Worlds, Scott and Charlie nearly comes to blows after Scott shit-talks their silver and Charlie tells him to be less in love with Tessa.

4, iv—late May/early June 2012. While picking the music for Carmen, Scott calls Tessa sexy and encourages her to embrace this side of herself, then wonders whether she’s dating the skier.

5, v—July 2012. Mixed up and confused about Igor’s departure and his own growing feelings for Tessa, Scott sleeps with Cassandra for the first time. She asks him about his history with Tessa. He says it’s just a story. She asks him who he’s fooling.

6, vi—July 2012-November 2013. Tessa and Scott sleep together while on tour in summer 2012; over the course of the next year they hook up, date, break up at Worlds 2013, and cheat on their new SO’s with each other, until they’re caught in Paris.

5, viii—December 2012. Tessa’s parents announce they’re separating, and she flees to the Moirs. She and Scott sleep together; while this has been happening with regularity there is a shift. She spends the night and then the next day with him. When out Christmas shopping, he suggests they give “this” a try. She’s unsure, but she’s loved him forever, and says yes.
Six Years Before Today

6, iii—New Years Day-March 2013. Scott and Tessa attempt a “real” relationship, but the stress and fears and miscommunications around their skating career makes it too much to handle. He’s terrified that one day he’ll lose her to her “real” life and she’s scared he doesn’t actually love her and isn’t ready for a relationship. They don’t talk. After they lose at Worlds, she says that they need to take the reality show, and go on a break to focus on their career. He accuses her of not loving him and drops her off at home.

4, vii—March 2013. An hour after the fight and break up post-Worlds, Tessa attempts to apologize to Scott. Instead she catches Cass and Scott making out at a bar in Ilderton.

6, v—March 2013. The day after the fight and sleeping with Cassandra, Scott must go to gala practice and face Tessa, who is absolutely broken. He is too. They mourn the end of their relationship, and she flees to France the next day.

5, iv—April 2013. Seeing each other for the first time since Worlds, Tessa and Scott make the deal for the reality-TV series. Scott tries to apologize to Tessa, who is furious but too empathetic—and has way too much at stake—to fully cut him out of her life.

5, i — June/July 2013. As they begin to crumble and break, Tessa comes to the rink and proposes they dance to *Stay*. Scott realizes she’s writing the end of their story.

5, iv—November 2013. At Trophee Eric Bompard, Cass catches Tessa and Scott making out, in a mirror of events earlier this year. She breaks up with him, and he realizes what a mess they’ve made of our lives. He vows to be a better person for everyone, moving forward.

7, viii—November 2013. Tessa finally confronts Marina, and they argue about choices and being reactionary versus having agency. Tessa realizes how terribly she and Scott have treated each other and realizes that she is no longer a child, nor in love with Scott. She vows to make better choices and be in control of her own life moving forward.

6, vii—December 2013. After the events of Paris and the last several months, Tessa and Scott sit down and agree they should retire, but they need to get through the Olympics first. They agree to make it count and make it “worth it.” Neither feels particularly great, though.

2, v—December 2013: In their last genuine conversation, Meryl expresses sorrow at the state of Scott and Tessa’s partnership, but genuinely wishes Tessa well (after the Olympics, of course).

Five Years Before Today

7, iii—February 2014. In the buildup to Sochi, Kate implores Tessa to treat herself and Scott with grace. They earn silver in Sochi, and it’s bittersweet and filled with lasts, but they make their time count. After she watches Scott leave with Kaitlyn at a COH party, she gets drunk, and promises Chiddy that she’s gonna be OK. Chiddy promises her that nobody doubts that.

5, ii—February 2014. At the Games, Scott gives it his all, makes memories, reflects with Patch on his partnership with Tessa and insists that they have to be OK. While doing karaoke, he meets Kaitlyn.

9, v—March-August 2014: Running away from Tessa and coming to terms with the end of his skating career, Scott dives headfirst into a relationship with Kaitlyn, but is unable to be fully open and available despite his best intentions.

11, i—March 2014. Tessa and Scott meet in Montreal to choreo show programs, and build their first program together. Despite the obvious personal connection to the music Scott wants to use, Tessa
resolves to show them both more grace as they rebuild a professional relationship.

7, viii—March 2014. In Japan for SOI, they agree to be partners, moving forward, and Scott says he would never regret anything between them. They skate off in dance hold.

5, vi—April 2014. After a CSOI interview where he teases their elementary-school relationship, she admits she no longer remembers their first kiss, back at the skating rink. She tells him she’s going to be choosing herself now, being independent, and setting boundaries from him and the sport to keep her sanity. Tripped up over her ‘lying,’ he sees that every fear is gonna be realized, and she’s going to go off and be amazing—exactly as he suspected— and he’ll be back in Ilderton.

5, ii—September 2014. Tessa and Midori go to TIFF parties with Ryan. Midori finally asks what happened between Tessa and Scott. Tessa says ruefully they lost their damned minds.

10, iii — early October 2014. Tessa attempts the “normal college thing” by going to a party, but bails and asks Scott to pick her up. She realizes it’s the first time since the Olympics that they’ve hung out without the excuse of work stuff.

5, vii—October 2014. At SCI, Scott goes out to dinner with Kaitlyn, Poje, Jeff, and Adam Rippon. He snarks about Ryan, and misses a ton of shade—especially from Adam—about his and Tessa’s romantic types.

8, i—New Years Eve 2014. After a tumultuous, lost ten months, where they haven’t been great to each other but also haven’t been able to quit each other, Scott and Tessa wish each other a happy new year. Tessa resolves to be a better partner in 2015.

Four Years Before Today

6, iv—January 2015. After Tessa admits pretending to be in love with Scott wasn’t the hard part about skating, Ryan asks Tessa if she was ever in love with Scott. She ducks the question and wonders what kind of person that makes her.

10, ii—February 2015. Scott buys a fixer-upper, at his brother’s urging, and Kaitlyn suggests that she move in with him. Scott balks at the proposition and .

8, v—March 2015. Tessa tells Scott that she broke up with Ryan while golfing, as part of her year of saying yes to herself. She reflects on how hard it is being independent, but is genuinely proud of herself. They discuss their relationship and agree that they were responsible for their actions, but the feelings, under all the confusion, were very real.

9, i—April 2015: Tessa hauls Scott out of a bar and makes him talk about where his head is at. She admits she’s worried about him, and they talk about their (mostly, in this conversation, his) struggles with retirement. He still feels an incredible guilt over the last two seasons, and is having trouble feeling worthy and finding a purpose.

9, iv—June 2015. They go to Scotland, and he asks if she’d be interested in coming back. She is aghast that he would suggest it, since she doesn’t want to be his second choice or his excuse to run away from Kaitlyn. She doubles-down on her belief that he should work it out with Kaitlyn, and that the best thing she can do for him is smooth the way to that partnership. After they share a dance, she is shaken and offers Kaitlyn stories of what he was like as a kid and friendship.

11, ii—July 2015. They go to China, and decide to come back to competition. Scott convinces Tessa that they can do it right, do it better, this time around. Though Tessa, trying to be a fully supportive friend, urges Scott to stay with Kaitlyn, he realizes that he can’t be both a good boyfriend and a good
skating partner, and makes the adult choice to break up with Kaitlyn if they do return.

8, ix—August 2015. After their conversation in China, Tess flies to Montreal to run the idea of coming back by Marie France, fearful that it will disrupt the genuine friendship she and Scott have built. Marie encourages it, but leaves the decision to Tessa. Tess goes to Scott’s apartment when she gets back to London and announces she’s ready to come back. They watch footage of their last Trophee Eric Bompard performance before falling asleep.

1, iii—September 2015. Scott goes to Winnipeg to break up with Kaitlyn, telling her he’s shitty and can’t be both a good boyfriend and manage the comeback with Tessa. He says that he and Tessa can never be together, and the comeback isn’t about that. Kaitlyn accuses him of being up in his own bullshit.

7, i—November 2015. Tessa and Scott decide to choreo something to “Sorry” as they pack up her house in preparation for the move to Montreal. She’s reminded just how much is at stake and that she can’t fuck this up again.

Three Years Before Today

2, iv—February 2016. Shortly after the move to Montreal, Tessa comes over with a thoughtful surprise gift. They have a quiet evening and she crashes at his place while watching Dirty Dancing. Scott realizes he’s in love with her and maybe always has been. He starts to formulate a new two-year plan.

3, v—March 2016. At dinner with Joanie’s new boyfriend, Tessa repeats an old cover story about the state of their relationship, which makes Scott a little angry but mostly sad.

4, iii—March 2016. During manicures before Worlds, Tessa lays out her fears for Jeff and insists she and Scott are in a good place. Scott, she says, brings out the worst in her. Jeff is skeptical and reminds her that Scott also was the best of her.

8, iii—April 2016. In Japan, Tessa tells Scott that she doesn’t believe in destiny anymore; after he takes her on what feels like a date, she wonders what the hell they’re doing after a near-kiss goodnight.

10, i—May 2016. After returning from tours and settling into what feels like dating without physical aspects, Tessa explains to Marie-France that she can’t be with Scott because they’ve done it before and it ruins their relationship. Marie-France points out that while they bring out the worst in each other, they also make each other better, and she wonders if this time it could be different.

9, vii—late May 2016. Tessa’s been noticing that Scott has stepped it up, as a partner, but he stresses out since he doesn’t know how to move forward with her. One day after dinner, she kisses him even though she’s not ready for a relationship. He asks her not to shut him out.

7, ii—June 2016. They admit to JF that they’ve slept together and have a complicated relationship, but take baby steps toward working to something new and better.

10, v—late June 2016. A clusterfuck of a dinner with Madi, Zach, Olivia, and Adri leads Tessa to reconsider what she really wants from Scott, and whether she has a claim over him.

10, vi—late June 2016. After the clusterfuck of a dinner, Scott confesses his feelings to Tessa and tells her she’s it. Scott comes up with a plan for how they can navigate skating and being with each other and being business partners.

11, v—July-September 2016. Tessa struggles to figure out how to reconcile everything she wants
with Scott, and get over her past fears regarding their relationship. Finally, at ACI, she tells him she loves him, and commits.

12, viii—August 2016. Tessa’s uncertainty about how to navigate them is causing Scott to lose faith. He turns to Patch for advice. Patch tells him to continue to wait for her because Tessa’s never given up on him.

14, ii—October 2016. Chiddy figures out that they’re together in very dramatic fashion.

12, iii—November 2016. In Japan, Tessa comforts Scott after the sudden death of a friend.

13, iv—December 2016. At the Final, they run into Charlie White. Scott makes up with him over beers and a hockey game in Marseilles, and Charlie catches on to the fact that Scott and Tessa are dating.

11, vi—December 2016. Scott and Tessa call all their siblings and parents to say they’re together. Their family members have opinions.

Two years before today

13, iii—January 2017. At Can Nats, Tessa and Scott argue after she tells a junior that they’re not dating, and he’s hurt by her white lie. It’s only resolved—imperfectly—after a call to JF.

9, iii—March 2017. At Worlds he teases their relationship to the press and she pushes back on that. He trips, and she comforts him, telling him that this relationship is the happiest she’s ever been. He says that he wants to be a worthy partner to her and takes it seriously.

7, v—April 2017. After winning worlds and a perfect comeback season, Tessa and Scott discuss trust, intimacy, responsibility and forgiveness, contrasting how they handle themselves now to how they behaved in the runup to Sochi.

10, iv—May 2017. Scott’s basement floods, causing the two of them to have a conversation about where they each see their future.

12, i—June 2017. They pick “Come What May” and “Long Time Running” for their final season.

11, iii—July 2017. Tessa tries to explain the relationship to Jordan, but can’t articulate it from the inside. Jordan hears wedding bells anyways, and her support surprises Tessa.

13, xi—December 2017. Losing the Final poses a final challenge to their relationship.

14, iii—December 2017-February 2018. Despite the scare at the Final, Tessa and Scott run toward the Games. During the free, Tessa wonders if they’ve got magic on their side

One Year Before Today

14, vii—February 2018. After the free, Scott asks Tessa if she has any regrets. She says not one.

15, iv—February 2018. After winning the Games, Tessa and Scott stay up all night coming up with a new list of dreams to accomplish together.

14, iv—February 2018-July 2018. Tessa and Scott fly through the Games, touring season, and an insane, imperfect, wonderful summer. At the end of it, Scott tells her he wants to marry her.

8, iv—February 2018. After they get back from the Games and before everything really sinks in, Scott and Tessa sort through offers and she agrees to go to school in Montreal so they can be
together as he coaches.

13, ii—March 2018. In advance of their Ellen appearance, Tessa argues that they should be careful about revealing too much of their personal lives, and digs into her position. After pushing her a bit, Scott agrees to go along.

13, vi — April 2018. Scott dances with a fan, and it makes it onto Instagram. He and Tessa discuss how she needs his support on this kind of stuff, and he agrees to be a little more careful out in public, even though the thought of being a public figure makes him wary.

12, v—April 2018. Tessa admits to Scott that she hasn’t really spoken to her dad since 2016, and hasn’t told her dad about them, because he left.

13, ix—July 2018. After a fan takes a video of them without permission in Japan, Scott urges Tessa to quit social media. She reminds him that she needs it to build a separate career and decides to keep it as professional as possible. Instead of tearing them apart, the incident brings them closer together regarding how to address speculation.

8, vii—late November 2018. Tessa finds the ring in his sock drawer and tells him she doesn’t need more time to make a decision.

12, ix—December 2018. Two-plus years after he says they should get a dog, Tessa gifts him one for an early Christmas present.

13, v—December 2018. As their lives settle, Tessa worries that their lives are going to be too boring for Scott.

The Past Year

13, i—January 2019. Tessa and Scott appear in covers of magazines in the same month.


12, x—February 2019. Scott plans a surprise trip on Paris to ask Tessa a not-that-surprising question.

14, vii—March 2019. Tessa and Scott announce the engagement officially.

12, ii—April 2019. At their engagement party, Scott toasts Tessa and their journey.

11, iv — May 2019. Scott recounts his proposal to dumbfounded TV hosts in Vancouver.

13, vii—June 2019. They get into a stupid fight. Tessa apologizes first. They laugh and move on with their lives.

14, vii—July 2019. The date of the wedding leaks. Tessa realizes she doesn’t care.

14, vi—August 2019. Scott listens to a voicemail from Tessa, who is on her bachelorette trip.

12, vii—August 2019. Despite the frenzy of their lives, Scott and Tessa pledge to continue to make time for each other, and skating.

Yesterday

1.i—October 2019. At the rehearsal dinner, a lot of friends and family toast them as “inevitable.” They know better though.
15, iv—October 2019. After the rehearsal dinner, Scott and Tessa share a quiet moment and a dance together, and make some promises to each other.

Today

6, i—October 2019. Scott gets incredibly nervous before the First Look, and gets shit from everybody. She’s stunning, just as he predicted.

4, i—October 2019. The music at the ceremony through their first dance through the last at the wedding offers a prism for their relationship’s evolution through the years.

14, i—October 2019. Jordan brings down the house with her toast.

15, v—October 2019. While comparing memories of their high-school days, Tessa and Scott are reminded that no matter how much they’ve achieved together, they still have individual perspectives, and their memories are their own stories.

One Year After Today

8, viii—Late November 2020. Scott brings dinner home and asks Tessa if she wants to perform in the Ilderton winter showcase in a few weeks. She tells him she can’t do lifts.

Two Years After Today

13, x—July 2021. Scott and Tessa just miss out on a Canada Day baby, and they choose a name together.

12, vi—September 2021. After taking his junior teams to an international competition, Scott comes home to a Tessa struggling to adjust to parenting.

Seven Years After Today

13, vii—January 2026. Scott and Tessa conduct a CBC interview about their lives as rumors swirl that they’re lighting the torch for the Calgary Games.

14, v—February 2026. Scott and Tessa try to balance Grace and Patrick and two careers at the Calgary Games. Before Scott’s team takes the ice, they take a moment for themselves.

15, vi—December 2026. Tessa takes the ice for the first time since their third child, Gigi, was born, and reflects on the path her life has taken.

Playlist

I realize all of this material is not helping my “I’m not crazy; I’m just thorough” case, but I listen to a lot of music while I write, so I thought I’d share. Some of these songs are supposed to be in the text somehow (like, the characters are listening to it); some of it is music that fit the themes I was working with and sort of went in naturally, and some of it was stuff I imagined the characters listening to when I was having trouble getting into the right space for writing them (this is most of the country). Comp songs were on the playlist as well but I didn’t include them. At the end of writing each chapter I’d pick one song/line to head up the chapter.

Chapter One: “Poison and Wine” by the Civil Wars. This one was sort of a ‘duh’ add and song, given the teases around choice, the tone of the song, and the prominence in the fandom. Other songs
to listen to are pretty classic big love songs. Nothing really goes with a particular vignette here, just tone-setting, IMO.

*“We’re All In the Dance” Feist*
*“The House That Built Me” Miranda Lambert—I tried to get into country for this fic, and this was about as close as I could get.*
*“Come What May” Moulin Rouge!*
*“Long Time Running” The Hip*
*“When We Were Young” Adele*
*“Where Does the Good Go” Tegan and Sara—This song was super popularized by Grey’s Anatomy and can totally imagine it being An Anthem in 2010 as Tessa works through the Vancouver games.*
*“The Circle Game” Joni Mitchell—The Moms are super into Joni*
*“I’ll Try Anything Once” The Strokes—There’s a line in here that I wish was the chapter title, and I’ll probably be using it in the future. But the standard-ness of The Civil Wars won out, though I sort of wish it didn’t*
*“Life is a Song” Patrick Park—This is the ending song from the OC and it ends me. “And we build our house of cards/and we wait for it to fall/always forget how strange it is/just to be alive at all” is a great song.*
*“When the Right One Comes Along,” Nashville—Maybe on the nose (and Meryl and Charlie skated to something similar from the show) but love this one.*
*“When You Say Nothing At All” Allison Krauss. “I’m just a girl, standing in front of a boy, asking him to love her.”*

**Chapter Two:** “New Years Day” by Taylor Swift. T.Swift is one of the best chroniclers of love out there, and she’s timed well enough that at least one song from each album seems to fit the contemporaneous evolution. This song is amazing; it or “If We Were Vampires” are firmly my favorite ‘relationship’ songs. This chapter is mostly about high school romance, so lots of contemporaneous stuff that might’ve been on the radio or at the school dance.

*“Lose Yourself” Eminem—this to me is *the* song for the hookup scene. And Scott <3’s Eminem, obviously.*
*“Yeah!” Usher*
*“Semi Charmed Life” Third Eye Blind—full stop, Scott could do this entire song. I am positive.*
*“I Knew I Loved You” Savage Garden—slow dance fever*
*“Read My Mind” The Killers—this song is basically high school to me*
*“I Don’t Wanna Wait” Paula Cole—DAWSON’S. Even though Canadians probably watch Degrassi, I guess?*
*“Mary’s Song (Oh My My My)” Taylor Swift—yes, on the nose. No, I didn’t care.*
*“I Want it That Way” The Backstreet Boys*
*“100 Years” When I was 15, two classmates were killed in a car accident, and this is the song we used in a dance recital tribute to them later that year. I think about it often.*

**Chapter Three:** “Thinking Out Loud” Ed Sheeran. A little cutesy, but the line used was great, and we’re still in the teenaged-youthful love stage, so it fit.

*“Love the Way You Lie” Eminem & Rihanna—I tried to include a few contemporaneous artists that they would presumably listen to throughout. Both of these were easy*
*“Uptown Girl” Billy Joel—getting into the contrasts*
*“Time After Time” Cyndi Lauper—the most melodramatic song*
*“The Crane Wife 3” The Decemberists—a song about a woman desperately in love that she twists and destroys herself for a guy who only realizes what he’s asking of her after it’s too
late. Hmm.

- "I Think We're Alone Now" Tiffany. Edgy, sexy, naive—the perfect song for them in this era.
- “Let Go” Frou Frou.
- “Maps” Yeah Yeah Yeahs—this (plus Let Go) just feels like a warning
- “If I Ain’t Got You” Alicia Keys—in 2005, I used to belt this out alone in my car about my maybe-not-really HS boyfriend. It’s dramatic, guys.
- “Set Fire to the Third Bar” Snow Patrol—this story takes places in the late aughts. Of course there’s Snow Patrol.
- “Sweet Thing” Van Morrison
- “With Or Without You” U2—Scott’s totally a Ross/Rachel shipper

Chapter Four: “Flaws” Bastille. I use this in fic, um, basically whenever I write? It’s such a good statement on how flaws can destroy or strengthen a partnership. This playlist was definitely a hodgepodge given the years covered, but it’s a pretty solid list of angsty, rock, and rap, which reflects the mood nicely.

- “Everything You Want” Vertical Horizon—the angsty teen years continue.
- “Save Tonight” Eagle Eye Cherry—same. I just freaking love this song.
- “Human” The Killers—“are you human, or are you dancer?”
- “I Will Follow You Into the Dark” Death Cab—pretty self-explanatory
- “Run This Town” Jay Z feat. everyone—the perfect Olympics song, per Scott Moir
- “Lost in the World” Kanye & Bon Iver
- “Keep Breathing” Ingrid Michaelson—another Grey’s influenced track, whether Tessa knew it or not.
- “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” Deep Blue Something—theme + subject are perfection
- “If You Leave” Orchestral Maneuvers in the Dark
- “We Found Love” Rihanna

Chapter Five: “Stay” by Rihanna. Initially I only wanted the last chapter (well worth the wait) to be from a song they’d used, but this was actually pretty perfect, both the topic + I really leaned into the idea of Tess “creating” their breakup narrative on ice without ever talking to Scott.

- “One Way or Another” Blondie—Plotting music from the 80s!
- “Fake Empire” The National
- “The Ice Is Getting Thinner” Death Cab—I mean, subtextual much?
- All Too Well Taylor Swift—the best T.Swift song ever, hands down
- “If I Didn’t Know Better” Nashville cast—again, about the closest to country I get.
- “Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow” Amy Winehouse version ONLY
- “Fade Into You” Mazzy Star
- “The One That Got Away” The Civil Wars
- “Bobcaygeon” The Hip
- “Toxic” Britney Spears—more plotting music, natch

Chapter Six: “Skinny Love” by Bon Iver. This song was iconic on “Chuck” which is probably my favorite show ever. It’s also an incredibly brutal breakup song in its own right.

- “Eavesdrop” The Civil Wars—“I don’t want to talk right now/I just want your arms wrapped around/me and this moment” was nearly the chapter title, but I didn’t want to use two Civil Wars songs.
- “Signs” Bloc Party—the acoustic version in particular is heartbreaking
- “Sweet Dreams” Eurythmics—more plotting, more dread
• “Into the Mystic” Van Morrison—choreographing in the kitchen in his shirt, natch
• “Vienna” Billy Joel—“you can get what you want or you can just get old”
• “Footloose” Kenny Loggins
• “I Wanna Dance With Somebody” Whitney Houston—I mean, they DO get married after all
• “Bite Hard” Franz Ferdinand—man I wish there was more Franz in general, but this is a great one.
• “A Girl, A Boy, and A Graveyard” Jeremy Messersmith
• “A Case of You” Joni Mitchell—Kate and Alma, again.

Chapter Seven: “Make You Feel My Love” Adele. This was initially “Someone Like You” but this felt more fitting, and aching.

• “Under Pressure” David Bowie/Freddie Mercury—totally in my head as Cass catches them
• “Life on Mars” David Bowie—also playing as they kiss in the bar. The big crescendo is so messy and perfect for crashing together.
• “Four Five Seconds” Rihanna/Kanye/Paul—I’m still not sure what this song means (I think it’s a breakup?) but the artists meant that it would be included
• ”Sorry” Biebz!
• “Dance me to the End of Love” and “Anthem” Leonard Cohen—more Canadian dancing in the kitchen.
• “Stronger” Kelly Clarkson—Scott subscribes to the Temple of Clarkson
• “Hall of Fame” will.i.am—this always feels like an Olympic song to me, even though I know it wasn’t the song that year.
• “Started from the Bottom” Drake
• “Cherry Wine” Hozier
• “Picture in a Frame” Tom Waits—maybe it’s bc of Bunheads but I’m sad this has never been an exh song as far as I can tell.
• “I Can’t Make You Love Me/Love in the Nick of Time” Bon Iver—ALSO a great potential exh

Chapter Eight: “Rivers and Roads” The Head and the Heart. This song’s a bit overused but all about the consistency of change and the importance of a few good friends.

• “The Riot’s Gone” Santigold—there’s a moment, sometime when you’re 24 or 25, when you realize that it’s not fun anymore and it hasn’t been for a while. And then you have to start the hard work of figuring out how to grow up. This song always brings me back to that moment.
• “Dancing On My Own” Robyn. Tessa watched a lot of Girls in 2014, but she would have listened to this song no matter what.
• “Flawless” Beyonce.
• “Vogue” Madonna.
• “Shake it Out” Florence and the Machine—sensing a theme here.
• “Dance Me to the End of Love” and “Anthem” by Leonard Cohen—the ultimate kitchen-dancing songs.
• “The Weight” The Band—a Canadian karaoke staple, I’m sure.
• “Use Somebody” Kings of Leon—I initially had this as a karaoke possibility but it seemed like a terrible karaoke song; regardless, it’s amazing.
• “Rich Girl” Hall & Oates—the is the only legitimate Hall & Oates song. I love the idea of Scott singing it to annoy T.

Chapter Nine: “The Oil Slick, Frightened Rabbit. I tried to have a lot more country on the playlist … Scottish indie folk rock is close, right? Right?
• “Swim Until You Can’t See Land” Frightened Rabbit—legitimately one of my favorite songs, ever
• “After the Storm” Mumford & Sons—British indie folk.
• “40 Day Dream” Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros—Los Angeles indie folk.
• “Hold On” Alabama Shakes—Southern indie folk.
• “I Need My Girl” The National—NYC indie folk (ish)
• “Whisky Lullaby” Braid Paisley/Allison Krauss—HERE IS COUNTRY MUSIC.
• “Drink In My Hand” Eric Church—more country music.
• “Hey Jealousy” Gin Blossoms. Again, sensing some themes here.
• “Grace, Too” The Hip—was so happy to work this song in.
• “Cigarettes and Coffee” Otis Redding. Playing over the kiss. Suuuuuuuch a good song.

Chapter Ten: “If We Were Vampires” Jason Isbell. OK, but this is a GREAT country song. 10/10 highly recommend.

• “Bring It On Home to Me” Sam Cooke
• “Leather Jacket” The Arkells
• “Closer” Tegan and Sara
• “Green Light” Lorde—all these are on Tessa’s playlist
• “Walk the Line” Johnny Cash
• “Fools Rush In” Elvis
• “Try a Little Tenderness” Otis Redding—OTIS FOREVER
• “Home” Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros
• “Something” The Beatles
• “Push” Rob Thomas—relatable, Rob.

Chapter Eleven: “The Book of Love” by the Magnetic Zeros. This is a GREAT love song on a great love-song album. Would also be a great exh, if anyone asks me.

• “Million Reasons” Lady Gaga—not 100 percent sure why this song got in my head during this chapter, but here you go
• “Die a Happy Man” Thomas Rhett—listened and I was like, ‘Hey I CAN like country.’
• “In My Life” The Beatles—
• “There is a Light that Never Goes out” The Smiths—my type of old music.
• “Hey Ho” The Lumineers. A discarded exh.
• “Wild Horses” The Stones—Another discarded exh from the first scene in this chap.
• “Another Story” The Head and the Heart—country adjacent, sure.
• “Holocene” Bon Iver—the moment in the movie where it all comes together.
• “All I Want” Kodaline

Chapter Twelve: “Latch” Sam Smith. Another song that I didn’t want to use, but fit too well. And since I broke the rule for Rihanna, what the hell, right?

• “Grace” Florence+the Machine—one asked in the comments if I listened to this song and the answer was TOTALLY
• “Apeshit” Jay Z + Beyonce—”I can’t believe we made it” as sung by the first couple of music. You’re goddamned right I listened to it.
• “This Must Be the Place” The Lumineers—looooooove. On the proposal soundtrack for sure.
• “Wait for Love” St. Lucia—this is the most upbeat song about having to wait for someone to figure their shit out.
• “Un-thinkable (I’m Ready)” Alicia Keys—we’re back to her, but a much happier song
• “Beast of Burden” The Stones—this is my personal favorite Stones song
“Ring of Fire” Johnny Cash—perfect old country for a proposal
“Feelin’ Good” Nina Simone—this is a song I pictured being in the running for PC
“Young and Beautiful” Lana del Ray—same. And only 25 percent bc it’s the song playing when Kanye proposed to Kim.

Chapter Thirteen: “XO” Beyonce. This is my favorite relationship song of all time, and the line used was perfect, but was a little nervous about using a song I had in mind. It’s just too damn good though.

“Water Under the Bridge” Adele—Adele sings about grown-up happy love! Had to include.
“This Town” Niall Horan—The line “everything comes back to you” killed me. Early on it was something they actually listened to (it was playing on the radio in a car scene I scrapped) but I still think about them.
“The Best Thing That Ever Happened to Me” Gladys Knight
“As Tears Go By” Rolling Stones
“Slip Into Your Skin” Patrick Watson
“I and Love and You” Avett Brothers
“Green Eyes” Coldplay—Another song I wasn’t sure about including (it’s a little weird) but won me over by this part.
“It Won’t Be Like This For Long” Darius Rucker—dad Scott gets one country song lullaby.
“Cross that Line” Josh Radin—he’s so underrated, IMO, and this is the perfect quiet song.

Chapter Fourteen: “I Choose You” Sara Bareilles. This was one of the earliest songs to come to me, honestly.

“The Story” Brandi Carlile—however, this song nearly overtook it as the title, but there wasn’t a single crystallizing lyric.
“Maybe I’m Amazed” Paul McCartney—one of the best love songs, ever.
“You’re Still the One” Shania Twain—this one is too cute.
“You Shook Me All Night Long” AC/DC—wedding dance central.
“Bless the Broken Road” Rascal Flatts—true story, they played my county fair around 2003ish, so I’m actually kinda partial.
“You’re My Best Friend” Queen—happy, non-angsty Queen.
“Crazy Love” Van Morrison—another kitchen dancing song. And wedding dancing song.
“Like Real People Do” Hozier—not sure I got *so much* Hozier, but I did and I don’t regret it.
“Knocking at the Door” the Arkells—sigh. Had to include.
“Shut Up and Dance” Walk the Moon—excellent reception song here.

Chapter Fifteen: “Long Time Running” The Hip. Where else to end a story about the Ballad of Scott and Tessa?

“They Can’t Take That Away from Me” Fred Astaire—quiet teenaged bedroom ballroom dancing forever.
“You Are the Best Thing” Ray La Montagne—one of my favorite wedding-y songs.
“It’s A Good Life If You Don’t Weaken” The Hip—them + their kids + skating + always.
“Truly Madly Deeply” Savage Garden—flashbacks to where it all began.
“The Best Thing That Ever Happened to Me” Gladys Knight.
“You Make My Dreams Come True” Hall & Oates—Flash mob much?
“Diamonds” Rihanna—obviously.
“Forever Young” and “I Hope You Dance”—the dancing-with-your-parents standards at the wedding, and the dancing-with-your-kids-in-their-nursery standards. Imagine Joe dancing with T during Scott/Alma’s dance (an idea that I scrapped).
Like it? Let me know!

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