where you lead, I will follow

by awakeanddreaming

Summary

He holds out his hand for her to shake, “I’m Scott Moir, Joe’s son. I’m taking over the diner for my dad.”

The girl takes in his words, seeming to consider them carefully, before finally putting her hand in his, “I’m Janie.”

Notes

I wanted to write something purely happy and this is what I ended up with. This was meant to be a Gilmore Girls AU, but the characters developed and went on their own path all by themselves, so now I am considering this Gilmore inspired.

Thanks as always to everyone who read it and gave feedback, you know who you are and you are all the best!

Scott is a small town boy. He felt lost out there in the big world. Nowhere else ever felt like home. Small towns, he thinks, have this quality about them that make them their own entity, like a living breathing thing, that function on their own, separate from the outside world. Scott watches as a gust of wind carries leaves across the town square, as the sun peeks up over the tips of the nearly bald trees—soft orange and pink light colouring the little town. It’s like the town is letting out a long exhale, waking up for the day. The town square, right here where he stands, is the heart of Ilderton
and the people who live here, its blood, will soon to be flitting about bringing news, gossip and life from all corners of town.

Joe’s Diner sits on the west side corner of the square, right in the middle of everything, a chamber of the heart. Scott flips the old warn sign in the window to open and shuffles back behind the counter turning on the coffee pot and placing the little glass lid over his tray of donuts. He’s been back in Ilderton for two week so—since his twenty-eighth birthday— but this is his first day opening as the new owner of his family’s diner. His grandfather had owned the building when it was a hardware store and then when he was a kid his dad had turned it into a diner. He forgot how much he missed it here. Missed his home. His little town.

He feels like he’s exactly where he belongs. He takes his baseball cap off his head, running his hand through his hair before replacing the cap backwards. His hair is getting long and unruly, he is well overdue for a haircut, he can hear his mother’s voice in his head telling him as much. So, the hat will have to do to contain it for now. It’s his favourite Detroit Tigers hat, one he got with his dad and grandpa at a game years and years ago.

A hand pats him on the shoulder, “You ready, man?”

“I think so, Chiddy,” he turns to his cook, and also his friend, Patrick—who he has affectionately called Chiddy since they were kids—and smiles. He’s so happy to have a friend like Chiddy who welcomed him back to Ilderton almost as if he never left, even after Scott nearly let their friendship completely slip away. He’s also nervous. He keeps going to adjust his hat, keeps checking and rechecking everything is ready to go, but despite his nerves, today is going to be a good day. He can feel it.

The first customer of the day comes in while he’s in the store room, he hears Chiddy offer a warm hello , that is met by something mumbled that he can’t quite make out. Chiddy chuckles in a way that Scott knows means he is familiar with whoever it is.

All he catches as he heads back out into the main part of the diner is a quiet, Thank you, and a head of long brown hair retreating out the door. Scott doesn’t recognize the woman, now hurrying across the street, which he guesses shouldn’t surprise him, it’s been a long time since he lived in Ilderton. Nearly nine years.

The day goes by without much fuss. As is true with small towns, word that his dad was planning on retiring—being on his feet all day getting too difficult on his arthritic joints, the stress of running a business too tough on his heart—and that Scott would be returning to take over the diner had spread quickly. He spends much of his day getting reacquainted with old friends and neighbours, people that had been staples of his childhood.

Though, eventually, he starts getting a little bit gristly at having had to field questions all day about why he’s been away for so long, why he rarely visited, what happened to Kaitlyn. His hair is now a wild mess under his hat from running his hands through it so many times, his nails bitten to the quick and he realizes he’s starting to get a bit sharp with his answers—he forgot this about small towns: your business is everyone’s business—but for the most part no one seems surprised or unhappy to see him here, running the diner that he spent so much of his life in.

That is until somewhere around four in the afternoon when the smallest customer of the day walks in. She’s almost swallowed by the large book bag slung over her shoulders, adding weight to her steps. She can’t be more than eight or nine, wearing a school uniform—probably from a school in London, as there are no private schools in Ilderton. Her red-brown hair is tied back in perfect braids which swing around her face with each step as she walks determinedly to the counter.
Popping herself up on one of the red vinyl stools at the counter the small girl stares up at him. Her eyes are a disarming shade of green, somewhere between sea and forest, sharp and bright. The depth of her stare, like getting caught in an ocean tide, would be alarming if she weren’t so little, with soft freckles dotting her nose and cheeks like the wings of a bird.

“You’re not Joe,” she says, frowning.

He shakes his head, “You're right, I’m not.”

“Where’s Joe?” she asks, looking around the room like she’s hopeful she’ll find him at one of the dozen or so tables.

“He,” Scott takes a look at the clock on the wall, “should be boarding a cruise ship in Miami right about now.”

“When will he be back?”

“In Ilderton? Probably in two weeks. At the diner, well I’m sorry to say kiddo, but you’re going to have to deal with me for a while.”

She stares at him, harder if that were possible, the dark green flecks in her eyes, ringing them, becoming more prominent.

He holds out his hand for her to shake, “I’m Scott Moir, Joe’s son. I’m taking over the diner for my dad.”

The girl takes in his words, seeming to consider them carefully, before finally putting her hand in his, “I’m Janie.”

“What can I get for you, Janie?”

“The biggest coffee you have, with milk, please,” she says with a bright grin. “Oh, and a hot chocolate with whipped cream!”

Scott is trying to figure out what to make of this child in front of him, looking around for a parent who doesn’t seem to be around, though clearly exists given the expensive school uniform and perfectly styled braids. He’s about to ask her who she is getting coffee for, and where her parents are when Chiddy steps out from the kitchen with a to-go bag.

“I thought I heard my favourite nine-year-old,” Chiddy says, approaching the counter. He reaches over to hand the girl the bag. “Dinner for you and your mom, chicken burgers.” He winks, “And I threw in some extra curly fries for you.” He leans toward Scott and lowers his voice slightly, “She also gets an extra large coffee with two milks for her mom and a hot chocolate with lots of whipped cream.”

When little Janie is finally on her way, carefully crossing the town square in the direction of Marie-France’s dance studio, Scott looks at Chiddy a little bewildered. “Who was that?”

“Janie,” Chiddy smiles. “You’ll see.” And that’s that.

It isn’t until the next morning that he’s met with the same line of questioning. It’s a woman, a young woman, early or maybe mid twenties by the looks of it. Her face is smooth, pale and dotted with big freckles, her eyes are big too, and bright, though ringed with dark circles. She’s wearing a bun in her hair and a scowl on her face and he can’t decide if it’s adorable or terrifying. He leans towards disconcerting when she glares at him with her sharp green eyes.
“You’re not Joe,” she says, and it’s little more than a grumble. It feels a bit like déjà vu.

“Nope,” he responds with a smile.

“You’re not Chiddy,” she looks around the diner, trying, maybe, to make sure that she is in the right place.

“That is also correct,” he laughs, but she doesn’t look impressed. She looks at him like she’s appraising him, seeing if he’s worth her time. She looks him up and down and he feels nervous under her gaze, adjusting his hat and running a hand through his hair.

She tugs at the sleeves of her sweater, her head nodding as she breathes in a deep sigh. “So he really did retire, then?”

He nods, “I’m Scott, Joe’s son.”

“Mmm,” is all she says in response.

“What can I get for you?”

“Coffee.”

“What?”

She holds out her hands in a gesture that can only be taken to mean big, so he sets to work pouring an extra large coffee.

“Milk,” she says, when he has poured just over half the cup. He adds a bit more coffee and then reaches for the carton of milk adding a bit until she nods that it is enough.

He places a lid on the cup and hands it to her, her fingers brush his as she takes the cup in her hands and he feels a little rush, like a jolt of caffeine straight into his system. She holds the cup up to her face, breathing in the aroma, and her whole body seems to perk up, her scowl fades, her eyes close briefly and she seems to stand up a bit straighter. He watches as she takes a long sip, before she looks back up at him. “Coffee tastes different,” she says, biting her lip like she’s thinking. Unsure how she feels.

“It’s not poisoned,” he says. He thinks the difference is that he spent all Sunday evening after the diner closed cleaning out the coffee maker, coffee pots, and the grinder, so it tastes smoother now.

“Hmm,” she says, like that fact has yet to be determined. “Thank you.”

It’s just as she’s leaving that Chiddy pops out from the kitchen, she sees him and offers a little smile, it’s small but he swears it lights up the whole diner, and a wave before heading out the door and across the square, the morning sun bouncing off her hair gives the dark brown a red glow.

“Who’s that?” he turns to ask Chiddy. He knows it’s been a while since he’s lived in Ilderton, but Ilderton is not known for getting new residents. It’s the place you are born and raised in, the place where you continue the tradition of your parents and raise your own kids in practically the same backyard, or it’s the place you leave to go to University or work and never come back to—unless of course you’re Scott. The woman looked to only be a few years younger than Scott, which means that they would have been in high school at the same time, so Scott thinks he should recognize her, at least have a vague idea of who she might be, but he doesn’t. He knows he would remember her, had he ever met her.
“That’s Tess,” Chiddy says, then watching Scott’s face scrunch up in confusion he elaborates. “She moved here just before you left.”

“I’ve never seen her before,” he says finally, still picturing the depth of her eyes as she’d stared at him, the radiance of her smile.

“You were really up in your own head back then,” Chiddy says with a shrug. “And she was going through some shit too.” The way he says it means, probably better that you didn’t know each other then.

“She’s a little grumpy,” he says.

Chiddy laughs, “Tess? No, she’s just not a morning person, you’re lucky you got more than three words out of her before eight.” Chiddy looks at him like he isn’t sure how much he should reveal, even though small towns run on gossip, as if rumours are oxygen. “I think she also might be stressed. This is her first year running Marie’s dance studio by herself and they just had to redo the plumbing in the building...and she’s had some, uh, family stuff going on. She usually comes in more, your dad helped her out a lot with business advice. You’ll see, I think you’ll get along.”

Scott tries to take in everything his friend has told him, finding that he really does want to know as much about this Tess as he can. He’s strangely drawn to her.

“Where is Marie?” he asks.

“She finally got married to Patrice! They moved to Montreal to open a dance school there.”

“Marie and Patch! Finally,” he missed so much. He regrets not coming back more, not coming back sooner.

“Yeah, they have a little girl now too, moved to be closer to family,” Chiddy informs him. “Tess has been teaching ballet for Marie for years, then she started to help run things and I guess when they left Marie and Patch left her the studio.”

Scott looks across the grassy expanse of the town square, over the paths he used to ride his bike on, the benches he would sit on in the summer sun drinking milkshakes his dad would make at the diner, the tree he fell out of and broke his wrist, to where Marie-France’s—though now he guesses it’s this Tessa’s—dance studio stands.

It’s an old squat building with a faded sign that just says Dance over the large doors. Inside, he remembers, is one big open dance studio, big enough to set up chairs and a little stage to host performances, with a sprung wood floor, one wall just floor to ceiling mirrors. In the back there’s an office, a kitchenette, costume storage, and change rooms. He remembers all the classes he took with Marie as a kid, his mom insisting that it would improve his skating, his agility on the ice, and make him a better player. He loved to move to music, picking up the rhythm easily, but he could never follow choreography always stumbling over his own feet and forgetting the next steps. Marie, with her boundless energy and infectious spirit, was always so kind and patient with him. With everyone. He thinks that every kid in Ilderton in the past two decades has taken dance with Miss Marie-France, he hopes that Tessa can give the same to all the kids to come.

As Scott predicted, small town life is, well, predictable. He has the same customers ordering variations of the same things everyday. His most reliable, the two faces he has come to set his time
by, are Tessa and Janie. Tessa is in every morning between 7:30 and 8:00 and Janie every afternoon as soon as she gets off the bus from school in London. Tessa gets her extra large coffee with milk every day, sometimes he tosses in a donut and is met with a grateful smile—one of his favourite parts of the day—though she still hardly says more than three words to him.

Janie on the other hand is chatty in the afternoons. He can tell that by nature she is usually quiet and reserved, more often than not coming in clutching a book to her chest, but once you get her going the little girl can talk forever, and he finds that she loves to talk about her mom.

Janie talks about her mom like most kids her age talk about their best friend and their idol all wrapped up in one. He finds himself looking forward to the day he gets to meet this elusive mother, who he finds out is just finishing up her degree in business, while running her own business. All while raising who he has come to see as a pretty amazing kid.

Everything follows this pattern of predictability until the Friday of his second week running the diner. Tessa comes in later than usual, and a little less sullen. She plunks herself down on one of the old stools at the counter, running her finger along a crack in the formica countertop, before dropping her bag on the stool next to her.

“Coffee,” she says, as her typical greeting. He turns to grab a paper cup but she shakes her head from side to side, her messy bun bouncing and loosening with the movement. “To stay. And eggs,” she pauses for a moment, lips pursing and moving to the side. “Or pancakes. Oh, eggs and pancakes? Can I do that?”

He suppresses a laugh, this is probably the most he’s heard her speak, her voice is soft and bubbly and carries with it a childlike excitement. “How about chocolate chip pancakes?”

She claps her hands together and a bright grin splits her face. “Yes!” she’s practically cheering. And he does laugh this time, he can’t help but admire how cute she looks with a wide grin plastered to her face, nearly bouncing in her seat at the prospect of chocolate chip pancakes. She seems even younger now, filled up with a certain lightness that he has yet to see in her, like a hot air balloon ready to float away.

He pours her coffee first and she thanks him before he sends the order for chocolate chip pancakes and eggs to the kitchen for Chiddy. After checking on the couple of other customers scattered about the dining room and refilling a few mugs of coffee Scott turns is attention back to Tessa.

“So,” he starts, “you seem rather chipper this morning. Or is it just that you trust I’m not poisoning your morning coffee now?”

She laughs at that, a full guffaw, her body shakes and she snorts before covering her mouth. It’s the best sound Scott thinks he’s ever heard, he wants to bottle it up and store it to listen to whenever he needs a pick me up. It’s such a big, boisterous laugh from such a small, seemingly mild mannered young woman. “Well, I’m alive and I drink two extra larges from you a day. So, I suppose even if you were trying to poison me you’re doing a bad job.”

He raises his eyebrows in question, she only ever comes in once in the morning. She waves him off though, ignoring his questioning look. “I drink a lot of coffee, always have a pot on the go at the studio, but yours is much better.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, I guess.”

“It is,” she smiles and the sun streaming in from the window catches her eyes, making them sparkle.
“So, good morning?” he asks, finding he wants to keep hearing her talk.

She nods. “I’m usually not a morning person, actually I’m never a morning person but I got to have a bit of a later start today, and I finally sorted a bunch of things with the studio,” she looks up at him, tilting her head, finger absentmly tracing the cracks in the counter, he looks back at her, waiting to see if she has more to say. She continues, “I managed to get some of my classes registered at a competition in London that usually only takes applications from dance schools with more than a hundred students,” he can hear the excitement in her voice.

“That’s great,” he says, not really knowing if he should add anything to the conversation or just let her plow forward.

She nods again, “And the town is going to pay for part of the plumbing bill because the backup that caused my pipes to burst was city property and they knew it was an issue. And I’m really happy to not have to deal with that ever again...I mean of course until I have to hear about it at the next town meeting.” She talks so quickly, barely taking a breath between words and Scott almost regrets getting Janie talking, but somehow he finds her babbling endearing. “Oh and it’s Friday night, which is pizza and classic movie night. Going to watch something Audrey Hepburn, maybe Breakfast at Tiffany’s or Funny Face .”

She doesn’t stop talking until he brings out her pancakes, placing them and a bottle of maple syrup in front of her. Scott watches as she drowns her pancakes with syrup, fully saturating the entire plate before shovelling them in nearly as quickly as she’d been talking. He resists the urge to use his thumb to wipe up a trail of syrup dripping over her lip and down her chin.

She looks up at him watching her eat, and he’s afraid she’s going to chastise him for staring. Instead she looks up at his hat and furrows her brow. “That’s the wrong team, you know,” she says, between bites. She looks around at all the Canada memorabilia on the shelves, the flag hanging behind the register—Ilderton really is a patriotic town—and finally eyes his Canada Is Home t-shirt. “You ought to be a Jays fan.”

He smiles, adjusts his hat and refills her coffee. “Maybe one day.”

He doesn’t see Janie that night.

The next week follows the same pattern. Tessa comes in the mornings, she doesn’t chat as much as she had Friday and doesn’t stay to eat again, but she smiles at him every morning and makes groggy banter. Tuesday she comes in wearing a pink leotard, a little ballet skirt and a wrap around sweater. She is also donning a pair of white mouse ears with a bow on her head. He raises his eyebrows at her in question and flicks one of the ears, before he reaches for a paper cup to pour her coffee.

“Today,” she starts, fixing him with a glare, “is the first day of my Angelina Ballerina preschool class and if I didn’t wear the ears, I would forget them at home and all my kids would be extremely disappointed that Miss Tessa was not in proper Angelina Ballerina attire.”

He laughs as he hands her her coffee, fishing a sprinkled donut out from the little glass tray, it seems like a donut kind of day. “I’m sure you’d remember.”

“Seriously Scott, I would not. I do not do mornings. Last Tuesday I forgot my keys, and nearly left the house in my bunny slippers.”

He shakes his head and laughs at that image, Tessa shuffling out of her house half asleep wearing
well worn bunny slippers, he adds the cute little mouse ears to his picture too.

Like the past two weeks he sees Janie in the afternoons, she’s started lingering a little longer when she comes in, asking for her hot chocolate first and drinking it at the counter while reading whatever her book of the week is, or working on sheets of homework. She makes casual conversation with him, like she is trying hard to be a little adult.

Wednesday she is sitting on what he has come to think of as her stool up at the counter, the one right next to the register. She’s using her hands to push off the counter, one and then the other, swivelling herself on the stool, kicking her feet under the counter. She’s just finished using a long spoon to eat all the whipped cream and chocolate shavings off her hot chocolate.

“How come I never met you before,” she says as she pushes off the counter with her right hand, spinning herself to the left before pushing back off the other way. “I’ve lived in Ilderton my whole life, that’s nine years and four months almost, and I’d never seen you before you started working here. I met your brothers before, Charlie and Danny, and their kids, where were you?”

He takes off his hat and puts in on the counter, both hands coming to run through his hair. “I lived in Michigan for a bit.”

“To play hockey, right?” she asks, stopping her motion to look at him.

He nods, “How’d you know that?”

“Your dad talked about you sometimes,” she shrugs and then points to an old picture hanging on the wall of the diner. It’s of him from high school, in his hockey gear, smiling at the camera. The team had won their championship game.

“Yeah, I went to play hockey for a bit.”

“Why’d you never come back?” she presses, and he would be annoyed but there is such a curious innocence to her line of questioning that he can’t bring himself to be.

He doesn’t want to disappoint her but he doesn’t have any good answers to give her, at least none that a nine year old would understand. He can’t explain that he stayed away because when his dreams didn’t pan out he felt like such a disappointment to his family, that he found a girlfriend who could have been great for him but he mostly used her as an excuse to stay away. Instead he says, “It’s complicated, kiddo.”

“Okay,” she says, like she completely understands.

On Thursday she looks up at him from over the top of her book while he is refilling the sugar shakers. “I could help you, if you wanted,” she says, half hiding behind the pages of Charlotte’s Web. “Joe, your dad, he used to let me help sometimes. Like wipe the tables and stuff.”

“Would you like to do that?” he asks her, filing away for later that he should really ask his dad about Janie when he gets the chance.

She nods. “I like helping. Mom says that she’d lose her head if it wasn’t for me.”

Friday, Tessa comes in late and stays for breakfast again. Waffles this time, with chocolate and whipped cream. She chats with him about how well her Angelina Ballerina class went.

“I have to open up a second session,” she says, her face breaking into the smile he’s started to like so much. “Some moms from London heard about it and I already have twenty-five three and four-year-
olds signed up."

“That’s awesome, Tess,” he says, handing her a napkin for the whipped cream she’s managed to get on her nose. “It’s Friday, so more Audrey tonight?”

“No, tonight is Marilyn, Some Like it Hot.”

Just like the previous Friday, he doesn’t see Janie.

The next morning is a perfect, warm early autumn day, orange and yellow leaves still clinging onto the trees catch the light of the sun reflecting it’s rays on the sidewalk like stained glass. He leaves Chiddy in charge of opening the diner to give himself a morning off. In his little apartment above the diner he slips into his running gear and heads to the high school track, only to find he wasn’t the only one with the same idea.

There is a young woman running the track, she’s on the far side from him so he can’t quite make out who she is, just her brown ponytail swinging with each step and her white sports bra and black leggings. There is a small figure sitting cross legged on the grass in the football field, what appears to be a stopwatch in her hands.

“One more lap!” the child calls, and he realizes it’s Janie. He wonders if the runner is her mom, if he will finally get to meet the woman he’s heard so much about.

“I don’t wanna,” the runner protests and he immediately recognizes the voice as Tessa. They must be related and he feels silly now for not having realized. They look so similar, especially those piercing green eyes that seem to stare into his soul. They’ve both drawn him in and captivated him in the same way too. He walks across the grass to Janie and plops himself down next to her.

“Hey kiddo,” he says, looking from her back to Tessa who has slowed her run down to barely a jog and is moving towards them.

“Good morning Scott,” Janie looks up at him and grins exposing where she is missing two of her front teeth and it’s a sight he could get used to seeing. He doesn’t think he’s ever had anyone seem as happy to see him as this tiny little person. She has a book and little bag of gummy worms in her lap, and is holding an old stopwatch in her hand.

“Candy for breakfast?” he questions as she pops one of the chewy red and white striped worms into her mouth.

“Those are leftovers,” Tessa says from where she stands at the edge of the track, breathless, clutching at her side.

“Leftovers from what?” he questions, a light laugh leaving his lips. Tessa is in front of them now, she grabs a candy worm and stretches it between her teeth. He can’t help but stare.

“Movie night,” Janie supplies. “You can’t have movie night without junk food.” Then she looks to Tessa, and to her still running stopwatch. “Mom, you weren’t done yet! You still have one more lap.”

Scott can feel his eyes widen and his eyebrows raise as he looks between the two, and now what had been a strong familial resemblance is uncanny. Janie really is a miniaturized Tessa, all the way down to the way they both cock their heads to the right and glare at him as if in challenge. Daring him to
comment. He wasn’t going to. He would never, but he tries to school the look of surprise they must be witnessing on his face. He can feel the muscles in his jaw tighten and heat rise into his cheeks as Tessa raises her eyebrows at him, waiting for the questions she expects to come. Waiting for the inevitable, but you’re not old enough to have a nine-year-old. He won’t go there.

“Jeez Tess,” he says, smiling at her. “Clock is ticking, you better finish that lap.”

Her face softens and she lets out a breathy chuckle before collapsing on the grass next to her daughter, grabbing another candy. “I hate running.”

He raises his brow again, as if to say than why are you here, running at nine in the morning.

“This one,” she gestures to Janie, “convinced me to sign up for a charity run at the end of the month, so I am training. Reluctantly.” She grabs another candy, her daughter scowls and swats her hand away. Tessa smirks and quickly grabs two more.

In retaliation Janie grabs the three remaining gummy worms and puts them all in her mouth at once.

“This is ridiculous,” Scott says, standing up. “Come on.”

“What?” Tessa asks, mouth full of gummy candy.

“I’m getting the two of you proper breakfast, you’re not just going to eat candy.” Standing in front of the two of them, he offers them each a hand to pull them up. To Janie he says, “How do you feel about chocolate chip pancakes, kiddo?”

He brings them to the diner, setting the two of them up in his favourite table right in the window. He watches Tessa tuck a stray bit of hair behind Janie’s ear, and Janie settles in to her seat with her book, a well worn paperback. He lingers for a moment, and he thinks his expression might mirror that of Tessa, her whole being relaxing as she looks at her daughter, the softest smile slowly creeping across her face, before heading into the kitchen.

“Why didn’t you tell me that Tess was Janie’s mom,” he says to Chiddy the second the kitchen door closes behind him.

Chiddy turns to him and offers little more than a shrug.

“Dude?” Scott persists.

“I don’t know what you want me to tell you man? Janie is Tessa’s kid. I wanted her to tell you herself, okay?”

Scott sighs, because he knows he’s grown fond of both Tessa and Janie and this news doesn’t change that at all. But he feels a bit blindsided by it. He asked Chiddy about Janie’s mom and he’d just shrugged, nonchalant and told him he’d meet her eventually. So maybe he’s a bit mad his friend lied to him, and maybe he’s just a bit upset at feeling like he knows so little about the people of this town now. “It’s not like I would have judged her, that isn’t me, man.”

“I know, I know, not on purpose. Not like that.” Chiddy sighs and peaks out into the diner where Tessa and Janie are playing some type of mini finger soccer game with a balled up napkin and the salt and pepper shakers. “She’s had a tough time, but she’s a great mom and Ilderton has been great to her for the most part, when her parents kicked her out she was welcome here. But people still judge without meaning to,” he pauses and looks at Scott, thinking before continuing. “We thought it might be nice for you to get to know her as Tessa, not just Janie’s mom. She deserves that.”
“We?”

“We?”

“Me, your parents... Your dad helped Tessa out a lot, especially when Janie was young. Marie took Tess in when she came here, pregnant with Janie. Tessa taught dance at the studio and Marie let her stay in her spare room. Then when Tessa was too pregnant to dance, she helped Marie with the administrative stuff. When Janie was a toddler she pretty much lived at the studio, so your dad would let her come over here for a change of scenery and he’d watch her. Anyways he and I talked before and he thought it would be best not to tell you about Tessa and Janie... so you could I dunno make your own kind of relationship with them.”

He thinks about this for a minute, imagines a teenage Tessa, pregnant with nowhere to go, pictures a toddler Janie sitting on the counter at the dinner playing with the salt and pepper shakers while his dad hovers next to her just like the pictures he’s seen with all his nieces and nephews. The image tugs at his heart, he has only known the two of them for a few weeks and yet he feels some pull towards them both. It hurts him that they have this connection to his family that no one told him about. That he was purposefully kept in the dark. Makes him feel like in the years he was gone he lost something with his town, his family, lost their trust in him. He also knows it doesn’t matter now, but he feels a tinge of regret that had he come back sooner he could have gotten to know Tessa and Janie earlier.

The next morning Tessa and Janie come in together. Janie leads, skipping happily ahead as Tessa trudges behind her. They sit down together at the same table by the window that Scott had set them in yesterday. When Scott gets over to them Tessa has her head buried in her folded arms on the table.

“She’ll take the biggest coffee you’ve got,” Janie says.

“And if you have anything like Kahlua, Bailey’s... vodka even, toss that in there too,” Tessa says, more to the table than to him.

He looks to Janie for an explanation, his eyebrows pinching together. “Today is Sunday,” she says, as if that is enough to explain everything.

“And that requires alcohol?”

“Yes,” Tessa says, chancing a glance up at him. “Copious amounts.”

“Sunday means brunch with Kate and Jim,” Janie offers. “My grandparents.”

And there it is, the missing puzzle piece. Scott knows from talking to Chiddy yesterday that Tessa’s parents kicked her out when she was pregnant. Though these could of course be Janie’s father’s parents they are meeting for brunch. He assumes not though, based solely on the fact that in the three weeks he’s known her Janie has not once mentioned a father, though talks about her mom with such innocent admiration.

“My parents,” Tessa confirms, sitting up to face him. The tired look she gives him tells him she doesn’t want to field questions about it, not now.

“No booze here,” he says. “But I could make you a fancy coffee or something. A mocha?” He doesn’t really do specialty coffees, it isn’t that kind of place, but he’s sure he can figure it out, if it’ll bring a smile to Tessa’s face.

“With whipped cream?” she asks, her first smile of the day.
“Of course.”

“One for me too!” Janie says, her smile so bright it rivals the sun.

“Maybe go easy on the coffee in hers,” Tessa says, looking between her daughter and Scott.

Not long after Tessa and Janie leave, his brother Charlie and his brood come in for breakfast, a Sunday tradition that Scott remembers from his own childhood. Family breakfasts every Sunday at the diner—even though they were always popping by the diner to see their dad there was something special about Sunday breakfast. Quinn, the oldest, rushes up to the counter bounding into the stool that Janie sits in every afternoon after school.

“Hi Uncle Scott,” she says with a broad grin, missing a front tooth.

“Hey Quinny,” he reaches forward and tussles her hair. “Hot chocolate?”

“Yes please!” He watches her pushing herself back and forth on the swivel stool and he can’t help but think of Janie, her big green eyes looking up at him as she tells him about her day at school, or what her and her mom had done on the weekend, about how she’d hopes she can have a sleepover with her best friend Laina now that she doesn’t see her as much because she switched schools.

He’s just finished pouring out hot chocolates and coffees when his eldest brother Danny, his wife, and daughter come in followed closely by his parents. His dad looks around the diner, cataloguing every minute change (there are few) before smiling at Scott. This is his dad’s first time back in the diner since Scott took over.

“Place looks good,” his dad says, with a nod.

“He hasn’t burnt it down at least,” Danny says with a teasing smile, helping his daughter Charlotte onto the stool next to her cousin.

“You really ought to cut your hair and stop wearing that hat though, Scotty,” his mom says.

Once the whole Moir clan is settled into a few tables Scott brings over all their drinks. His dad takes a long slow sip of his coffee before looking up at him. “Coffee tastes different,” he says, inhaling the steam floating off the top.

Scott can’t help but laugh, picturing Tessa’s expression the first time he met her and she’d said the same. The way her forehead creased, her nose scrunched up and how she’d chewed on her bottom lip trying to figure out what was different about her drink. His dad looks to him as if to ask, what’s so funny. “It’s not bad,” Joe says. “Just different.”

“Tessa said the same thing,” Scott says, using this as a natural way to bring her up with his family, having wanted to ask his dad about her anyways. “And I just cleaned the coffee machine, that’s all.”

“Miss Tessa!” Charlotte perks up at the name.

“I love her,” says Quinn. “She’s the best, she always has such cool stickers after class too! On Wednesday we got sparkle butterflies!”

Hearing his nieces talk so excitedly about Tessa settles something inside his chest, he takes a deep breath in. He is happy knowing that Tessa is leaving the same impression on this generation of Ilderton kids as Marie-France had on those before.

“Tessa really is something special,” Charlie says, looking up at him with a knowing smile. “All the
kids are in her dance classes. They all adore her.”

“She is really great,” Scott finds himself agreeing. “Her kid too. Janie is a pretty great kid.”

His mom looks at him, first surprised, maybe because she wasn’t sure he’d know that Janie was Tessa’s daughter, or maybe that she didn’t think his reaction to this would be like it is, but he can’t help the affection in his tone. They are both the best parts of his day, he doesn’t want to analyse why. Then his mom’s expression softens as she searches his face, she looks to his dad who smiles at them both, before reaching out and putting her hand on Scott’s arm. “They really are something special, Scotty.”

Very little changes, now that he knows Tessa is Janie’s mom. The two of them are still the brightest parts of his day, bringing light into the diner with them as soon as they swing open the door, one in the morning, the other in the afternoon. Occasionally, now that she’s hit a bit of a stride with the studio Tessa will come by for lunch. They still order dinner from him almost every weekday, and though sometimes that means both of them popping into the diner together, it is still often Janie picking up their order and bringing it to Tessa at the studio.

“Kiddo, can your mom cook?” Scott asks Janie one afternoon before sending her off with two grilled cheese sandwiches and French fries to bring her mom in between classes at the studio.

“Define cooking,” Janie says.

He laughs. “Oh you know, buying groceries, making things on the stove...your mom can cook right?”

“She can make really good poached eggs and she almost never burns the toast anymore,” Janie says. “Oh! And she has perfected the amount of time it takes for Pilsbury cookies to bake. The package says 8-12 minutes, but if you take them out at 11 they are perfect every time.”

Scott isn’t sure if he should shake his head or laugh, or both. What he does know is that he wants to do something special for them, for Tessa. So the next day he tells Chiddy not to make their order of poutine and turkey clubs, instead he heads up to his apartment over the diner and packs a Tupperware full of creamy butternut squash soup, his mom’s recipe, and tosses together a salad because he isn’t sure when the last time either of them ate a vegetable that didn’t come on a hamburger was. He packs it all in an insulated bag and sends it to the studio with Janie in the afternoon.

Tessa comes in the next morning, brandishing the Tupperware—also his mom’s—in one hand and a small scrap of paper in the other. She smacks them both down on the counter in front of him, her hand coming down so hard that the sugar shaker a few seats over shakes. Her eyes are watery, but she fixes her them on him, catching him in an unwavering stare.

She thrusts the paper at him, it’s the note he had added to their dinner yesterday. He recognizes his own messy scrawl.

*I thought you could use a proper home cooked meal, not just diner food (even if it is my diner food).*

-Scott

“I don’t know whether to be mad at you, or if I should hug you,” she says, voice raised like she wants to yell but can’t bring herself to do it. “So I made you cookies instead.”
He looks at the Tupperware, which is indeed filled with what appears to be chocolate chip cookies. He has to bite his lip to hold in the laugh that wants to break free. “Pilsbury?” he asks.

She looks at him, eyes wide, before shaking her head, a reluctant smile gracing her lips. “Dammit Jane.”

“She may have mentioned that those and poached eggs are your specialties in the kitchen.”

“I’m really good at poached eggs,” she says, her cheeks have turned pretty shade of pink and she casts her eyes down, brushing a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

“I’m sure you are, T.”

“T?”

“Sorry, I tend to give out a lot of nicknames,” he shrugs.

“No, it’s okay. I like it.”

“I’m sorry if I overstepped with dinner too.”

She looks up at him again, finding his eyes. Her bottom lip is tucked in between her teeth and she takes a deep breath in through her nose, like she is preparing herself to say something. When she speaks again her voice is quiet, only meant for him. “No, it’s okay. I kind of liked that too,” she clears her throat. “The food I mean. It was really good. Thank you. You may not have realized this, but I don’t really cook.”

He laughs, louder than he expected, “I would never have guessed.”

“Thank you Scott, you’re a good guy. I’m glad you came back to Ilderton. You’re a good friend to have.”

They’re friends now, she’d said it herself, the words had warmed him, like the first sip of coffee, the heat of her words heating him from inside his chest outward. They’re friends now, and it’s a few months after he’s met them, Tessa and Janie. Snow is swirling in the street outside the diner, the wind picking it up off the snow banks and redistributing it across the square, and he looks down at the newspaper he has spread out in front of him and thinks, since they are friends he can tell Tessa about the theatre in London having a classic movie week, playing the *The Princess Bride* on Friday night. That’s a thing a friend would tell another friend. It’s not like he looked it up after she mentioned it was her favourite movie.

He waits until she’s settled with her Friday breakfast, bacon and eggs, though she refuses to get poached—claiming hers are so much better—before he brings it up. “I saw that the old theatre in London was playing *Princess Bride* tonight,” he says, while she has a mouthful of egg. “I thought you and Janie might like to see it.”

She finishes chewing, holding up a finger to him to wait a moment. There is a little string of runny yellow yolk right in the corner of her mouth and he hands her a napkin. “That’s my favourite. I would love to take Janie to see it. Thanks Scott.”

She is about to take a bite of bacon, ripping the strip in half with her fingers before she stops abruptly. “Dammit. We can’t. My Jeep isn’t working. Something like the radiator, the alternator maybe? A belt of some kind? The part won’t be in until Tuesday, so no London for us.”
Scott thinks for a minute, taking off his hat and running his hands through his hair, which much to his mother’s dismay he has yet to cut. “What if I went with you and Janie? I could drive us all in my truck? She’s good in the snow.”

“You wouldn’t mind? What about the diner?”

“Chiddy’ll be fine for a night.” He’d even consider pulling his dad out of retirement for a night, if it meant spending the evening with Tessa and Janie outside the diner. “I mean, only if that’s okay with you. I know Friday night movies are your thing...I wouldn’t want to intrude.”

“Thank you Scott. We’d love that. Janie really likes you,” she says, though he thinks she might mean, I really like you, but that might just be wishful thinking. “It’ll be fun.”

Chiddy is surprisingly happy to man the diner for the night, shooing him upstairs to change into something that doesn’t smell like coffee and grease as soon as he hears who his company for the evening will be.

The three of them go to the theatre together. Tessa had given him her address and he’d agreed to pick them up at home. They live in a little house not too far from the centre of town, but far enough that they aren’t right on top of any of their neighbours. He isn’t sure if he should text her to let her know he is here, he hates the idea, but he’s also nervous to go up and knock on the door.

In the end he’s saved from having to decide by Janie, who pokes her head through the curtains and waves at him. He waves back from the driver's seat and before he can get his seatbelt off the two of them are trudging out of the house, their boots dragging through the snow on the unshovelled walk, towards his beat up old truck. Janie slides onto the back bench and Tessa gets in the front next to him.

“You didn’t lock the door,” Scott says, as soon as she has closed the door to his truck. “To your house.”

“Scott, it’s Ilderton, I know everyone here. Who’s going to break in?”

“What she means to say is, she lost her keys.” Janie says, shaking her head while searching for the seatbelt in the back.

“Tess--” Scott starts, but is cut off by her whipping her head toward the back seat.

“Hey! You said you wouldn’t tell. That’s it, now you only get to pick one kind of candy at the movies.”

Janie starts to laugh and the sound is infectious. Her laugh is light and bubbly like a summer afternoon and soon Scott and Tessa are laughing along with her, the sound filling up and spilling out of the cab of his truck.

“So, how exactly did you lose your keys?” Scott asks.

Tessa shrugs and makes a face, her nose scrunching up, forehead wrinkling. “That is a very good question and honestly I have no idea. I lost them yesterday.”

“Last time she lost them they were in the freezer next to the ice cream,” Janie says, as Scott slips the truck into reverse and heads out towards London, shaking his head.

Once they get to the movie theatre Tessa and Janie go straight to the concession counter while Scott gets their tickets—he insisted on paying for them, despite Tessa’s protests. When he comes up to
them at the counter they’ve already picked out three different types of candy and the attendant is filling them a large popcorn.

“Can’t have movie night without junk food?” he asks.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” is Tessa’s answer, picking up her carton of Milk Duds.

“This isn’t dinner though, right?” Maybe he should have offered to bring them something to eat earlier.

“Mom made pizza,” Janie says, a hint of pride in her voice.

Scott looks to Tessa with raised eyebrows, impressed. Tessa who has been focused on opening her chocolates looks up at him with a shy smile, “It was just from frozen.”

“But,” Janie butts in, clearly wanting to defend her mom, “you didn’t burn it.”

Tessa shakes her head and laughs. “I didn’t.”

While the girls are distracted Scott orders himself a diet Coke and pays for all of their snacks before they head into the theatre.

Janie falls asleep in the truck on the twenty minute drive back to Ilderton, lying across the cool leather of the back bench. Tessa takes off her coat and drapes it over her sleeping child.

“She just started at Matthews Hall this year. I have to get her there before seven thirty and she takes the bus home from London and doesn’t get back until four. I feel bad because it is such a long day, but she likes it there—she’s already part of the student government. School here just wasn’t a challenge for her.”

“She seems like a smart kid,” Scott says, glancing into the back, watching the slow and steady rise and fall of Janie’s body as she curls further under Tessa’s coat.

“She is. She’s so smart,” there is such affection to Tessa voice, the way it softens and curls gently around the words, when she talks about her daughter. Scott loves hearing the two of them talk about one another, each other’s favourite people. “It’s the school I went to, but also why we have Sunday brunches with my parents. They agreed to pay her tuition in exchange for brunch every Sunday.”

They’ve pulled up in front of Tessa’s house, but she’s made no move to get out and he is in no rush to kick her out. He loves finding out these little things about Tessa and Janie and their life. He wants to keep talking to her as long as she’ll let him. He looks to Janie in the backseat again, she looks so small and peaceful, her hair coming out of the ponytail it had been done up in. It’s started to snow again outside, large flakes drifting slowly toward the ground.

“You can wait a few minutes,” he says, “before you have to wake her up to get inside.”

“Thanks,” Tessa says, her smile nearly as soft and quiet as her voice.

They sit in silence for a moment, side by side, watching the snowfall outside, listening to the low rumble of his truck’s engine.

“You never ask me about...Janie...how I got here,” she says. “I know you must have questions.” She’s turned towards him, leaning the side of her head against the seat back.

He shrugs. “It’s not important. You’re here, and you have a pretty great kid.”
She laughs, she looks even younger than usual in the dim light from the street lamps. Her expression is open, vulnerable, and he prepares to listen without judgment, wanting to take any bit of this amazing woman that she is willing to share. “It’s pretty cliché,” she says, laughing again—barely more than a few puffs of breath.

“Prom night?” He questions.

“Homecoming.”

“Didn’t know Canada had homecoming.”

“Expensive private schools do, I guess,” she’s looking a bit wistful. Not quite like she misses it though. “She was born right around when my prom would have been. Exactly a month after I turned seventeen.”

He shifts his body to face her a bit better, he tries to keep his voice and expression gentle, curious but not judgemental. He doesn’t want her to close herself off to him. “And her dad?”

She gives him a small smile, it’s relaxed but knowing. “He’s off at some fancy school, getting some fancy degree,” there is no real bitterness to her tone even if there is some to her words. “He calls once a week or so, now that she’s older, asks her about school and her friends. And he sends her a birthday and a Christmas present every year—always something ridiculously expensive that I have no idea what to do with.”

Scott can’t imagine having a kid out there somewhere and not trying to see them as much as he could, stepping up and being a dad. He says as much.

“He’s not a bad guy, not at all,” Tessa says, her tone even, not exactly trying to defend him, yet firm in her assessment. “He was my first real boyfriend...only real boyfriend actually. We grew up together and I thought I loved him...but after I got pregnant well, he was always better at listening to our parents than I was.”

“Your parents didn’t take it well, eh?” He can’t imagine that either. Even when he hit rock bottom, refusing to come home, still holding onto the hope of a dream that was never going to happen, while making stupid and sometimes reckless decisions, his parents still supported him.

“No. I became a stain on their perfect image. They wanted to just sweep things under the rug, but that wasn’t what I wanted. So, I wasn’t welcome at home. I was sixteen. I came to Ilderton because I took dance with Marie-France here when I was younger and it always felt like a safe place.”

“I’m sorry, Tess,” Scott says, finding himself moving closer to her, his voice lowering to a whisper.

She looks out the truck window at her little house with its big front porch, surrounded by old trees, their bare branches coated with snow and ice glistening under the streetlights. Then she looks to Janie curled up in the back of the truck sleeping peacefully, a perfect carbon copy of her mom. “Don’t be sorry,” she says, reaching out to put a hand on his wrist. “I’m not.”

She has her hand under the cuff of his winter coat, her fingers resting against his bare skin, her hand is cold but her touch sends a warmth coursing through him. He thinks that, aside from accidental finger brushes, this is the first time she’s touched him. She lets her hand rest there, her thumb rubbing, soothingly, against the underside of his wrist and just this little bit of contact renders him unable to do anything but stare at her.

“Thank you,” she says, and he can feel the warmth of her breath brush against his face as he whispers into the dark of the car. “I had a really great time tonight. We both did. She really does like
you, you know. You don’t really talk about it, but I’m glad you decided to come back to Ilderton and that we’ve gotten to know you.”

“I’m really glad I came back too,” they’re sitting closer now, Tessa has her knees tucked up under her on the seat so that her entire body has turned to face him. There is something different about the way that she’s looking at him, like she’s trying to unwrap him, find out what’s underneath, like she wants to know him—all of him. He has to resist the urge to press his lips to hers, to spill everything he has into her. Now isn’t the time, especially not with her little girl asleep in the backseat. Instead he reaches out and brushes a tendril of hair off her face, letting his fingers linger on her cheek before tucking it behind her ear. “I’m so glad I met you too, both of you.”

He means it.

It’s a few days before Christmas, it’s sunny though wet snow still blankets the ground, Tessa comes into the diner in red and green elf hat adorned with little jingle bells, wearing striped red and white tights and a red tutu. Scott has to bite back a laugh as she jingles up to the counter.

“You look festive,” he says.

“Today is our Christmas recital,” Tessa says as way of explanation. And he already knew this. Three days ago, Janie had proudly informed him that she was getting to play Clara in their Nutcracker arrangement and handed him a ticket, for the front row, she said, if he wanted to come. He told her he wouldn’t miss it.

Tessa has a gift bag in her hand, tissue paper that matches her tights spills out the top, and she slides it across the counter towards him. He hesitates before picking it up. “I didn’t get you anything,” he says.

“Scott, you’ve shovelled my driveway like five times in the past two weeks, this is the least I could do.”

“I didn’t want you or Janie breaking a leg or something,” he mumbles with a shrug, but pulls the tissue paper out of the bag.

Inside is a blue baseball cap, he pulls it out to see the Toronto Maple Leafs logo embroidered on the front.

“I wasn’t sure if I could change your baseball allegiance,” she says. “But I thought you should support at least one proper team.”

He laughs, taking his hat off and running a hand through his hair—which he has trimmed, but is still too long according to his mother—before replacing it with the new one. “I love it.”

“It looks good on you,” she smiles and reaches to tuck a piece of unruly hair under the cap. She lets her palm linger on his cheek. “I’ll see you later at the show?” she asks, her hand still against his face, her eyes locking on to his.

“I wouldn’t miss it,” he says.

Scott didn’t expect to see Tessa and Janie again until sometime after Christmas. He especially didn’t expect to see them at his parents house on Christmas Eve. His parents host an open house for friends and family every Christmas Eve, though it’s been years since he made it to one so maybe he’s the
It’s late in the evening when Tessa and Janie arrive, both dressed up, like for an event. Scott is in the kitchen, sipping on his eggnog, talking to his cousin Cara when they come in. He watches as his mom takes Tessa’s coat, unable to ignore how the green velvet dress she is wearing hugs her body in all the right places, dipping low down her sternum, her hair is half up and hanging in loose curls over her left shoulder. Janie is next to her in a red velvet dress with a tulle skirt, she is fiddling with a necklace around her neck—probably new. Tessa looks up and catches his eye, she smiles at him but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes, she looks tired, or sad. He finds he just wants to wrap her up in his arms to make everything better, whatever the problem is.

Janie on the other hand is bouncing with excitement as they navigate their way through the crowd towards him, though she sticks close to her mother’s side. She is still fiddling with the little gold necklace she is wearing, looking at it rather than where they are walking, Tessa reaches out to put an arm around her shoulder to guide her.

Cara follows his gaze as he watches Tessa and Janie approach. “She looks beautiful,” Cara says.

“She really is,” he answers without thinking. “So beautiful.”

Cara claps him on the shoulder, giving a small squeeze. “Be careful with her, Scotty,” she says before walking away to talk to someone else.

“Hi Scott,” Janie says, bouncing on her heels. He notices that she’s wearing little black shoes with just the tiniest hint of a wide heel, with little red bows to match her dress. He thinks she may also be wearing a hint her mom’s lipstick.

“Hey,” Tessa says, her voice so soft it hardly carries over the din of the crowd. She brushes her hair back behind her shoulder. Now that she’s closer he can see that she looks tired, not physically, no that kind of emotional exhaustion that leaves you drained and just waiting to collapse into someone’s arms and break down.

“Eggnog?” he offers, reaching for the ladle.

Tessa puts her hand on his to stop him, but holds it there, the contact seems to relax her. “Scott, you aren’t working, you don’t have to serve me. I can do it. But thank you.”

Tessa pours herself a generous serving of the eggnog, and Janie helps herself to some cookies.

“That’s a nice necklace kid,” Scott nods to the chain that Janie still hasn’t let go of. It’s a delicate gold chain with a small pendant on it, shaped like a heart with blue-purple center stone, ringed with what looks like diamonds, though he assumes they aren’t real.

Janie smiles widely at him. “Thank you, it’s Alexandrite, that’s my birthstone! It’s real gold, and it has real diamonds.”

Scott looks to Tessa, wide-eyed. “It was her Christmas gift from my parents,” she says, just barely holding back a sigh.

Janie nods, proudly, seemingly feeling very grown up with her real jewelry. “And my dad got me my own iPad! A brand new one. But mom made me leave that in the car.”

“That’s pretty cool kiddo,” Scott says, not wanting to put a damper on the child’s excitement for her gifts, but understanding Tessa’s tired demeanor. “You’ll have to show me sometime.”
“We had an early Christmas Eve dinner with my parents,” Tessa says, rubbing between her eyes. “The first one since she was born, she’s really excited by the spectacle of it all.”

Scott reaches out and puts his hand on her upper arm, rubbing gently. He is trying to let her know he understands, he can tell that she is feeling overwhelmed and drained. He wants her to know that he’s here, if she needs him to be. “Hey kiddo,” he says to Janie, his hand still on Tessa’s arm. “Once you’ve finished your cookies, I think all the kids are in the basement watching a movie and playing games. Quinn got a pretty cool version of Monopoly.”

Janie looks up at her mom, silently asking for permission. Tessa nods, and Janie shoves her last cookie into her mouth before taking off towards the basement stairs.

“Jane!” Tessa calls after her, adopting that tone that all moms have. “Do not run on the stairs.”

Scott finds their coats and takes Tessa out to the back deck for some fresh air. He lets his mom know where they’ll be on the way out, just in case Janie comes looking for her mom. As soon as they sit down on the little loveseat on the deck Tessa rests her head on him and he wraps an arm around her shoulders. It feels natural to hold her like this, like she just fits against him. The weather is hovering right at zero and Tessa huddles closer into his side. They sit quietly for a few minutes, admiring the Christmas lights his dad has strung from the trees is the yard, and the ones on the trellis that twinkle like little stars.

“That’s a seven hundred dollar necklace, the one that Janie got,” she takes a deep breath. “For a nine-year-old. That’s more than I’ve been able to spend on her for Christmas the last six years combined. I guess they figured they missed the first eight years so they had to go big.”

He holds her a little tighter, resting his cheek on the top of her head. He isn’t really sure what to say, or if she really needs him to say anything at all.

“Janie used the wrong fork at dinner, and I swear my mother’s eyes nearly popped out of her head. She couldn’t stop glaring at me, like I’m some terrible parent for not having taught my kid proper dinner etiquette,” she does sigh this time, long and deep. “And Janie wouldn’t stop talking about you, which lead to a whole lot of questioning about what kind of men I’m hanging out with. I think ‘you would allow a man you have only known for a few months, who works at a diner, take you and your child in his car all the way to London to the movies? He’s practically a stranger, Tess,’ were her exact words.”

“I’m sorry Tess,” he likes spending time with her and with Janie, wants to know more about them, wants to find a space somewhere in their lives, but he doesn’t want to make things difficult for them. “Though, did you mention that I’m actually a business owner?”

She laughs, he feels her body shake against his. “I did.”

“I’m still sorry, I—”

“Don’t be sorry, I like having you in our life,” she lifts her head a little and then tucks in back in against his chest. “I just don’t know how to navigate any of this.”

“I think you’re doing a great job, you’re a great mom Tess, and I have it on good authority that you’re a great dance teacher.”

She shakes her head against his chest and then he feels her take a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds before releasing. Her voice wavers a bit when she speaks. “I haven’t gone on a date with anyone since before Janie...when I was sixteen,” she pauses, he can tell that she’s biting her lip in
that way that she does when she’s thinking of how to say what she wants to say next. “I haven’t been with anyone except Chris, Janie’s dad...I don’t know how to do this,” she finds his hand with hers, weaving their fingers together. He runs his thumb along the back of her hand.

He’s about to tell her that he doesn’t expect anything from her, that she doesn’t have to worry, that he only wants whatever she is comfortable with. He wants to let her lead, and he will follow her wherever she takes them. He opens his mouth to tell her this, but she shakes her head again.

“I really like you, Scott,” she says, so quiet he hardly hears it over the wind in the trees, but he does. “It’s just been me and Janie for a really long time, but I really like you. I don’t know what to do about it, but I like you.”

“I really like you too, Tess.”

They sit there in the cold, cuddled together watching the Christmas lights until it starts to snow.

Things change a little, though not much, and not all at once after their conversation on Christmas Eve. He doesn’t see Tessa and Janie on Christmas day, but she sends him a Christmas tree emoji and a selfie of her and Janie under their little tree, overflowing with decorations, eating chocolate for breakfast.

He’s back at the diner on Boxing Day, though he’s given Chiddy the week off and he’s manning the place alone. Tessa and Janie come in an hour before he’s set to close, no one else is in the diner so he goes up into his apartment to get some of the leftovers from his parents Christmas dinner and makes them something special. He flips the sign to closed and the two of them help him set the diner to rights and close up for the evening. He brings down The Game of Life from when he was a kid, the three of them play together at his favourite window table while sharing stories about their Christmases.

Janie tells him how excited she is to go to Toronto to see the National Ballet, her gift from Tessa. He knows that Tessa pulled some strings and found a great deal on both tickets and a hotel to be able to make it a special weekend for Janie. He watches how her face lights up when she talks about all the things that the two of them will do when they spend the day in the city, already having planned an entire day of mother-daughter activities. Her voice gets higher and louder the more excited she gets and Scott smiles at Tessa, happy to see that Janie is even more excited than she seemed about the big ticket items from her dad and her grandparents.

“Mom made me a dress to wear too,” she says, when it’s Scott’s turn to spin the wheel, he already has a van full of kids and no money left. “It’s the most beautiful dress ever.”

“You sew?” he asks, Tessa, who can barely even make toast, not striking him as the seamstress type.

Tessa nods, “Yeah, I’ve always loved fashion and then Marie taught me to sew so that I could help make costumes for the studio. I made most of Janie’s baby clothes myself.”

Scott nods at her, impressed, before moving his full van five spaces. He hopes that this could maybe be a glimpse into his future, with these two girls who walked into his diner and walked out with pieces of his heart.

But board games after close, in the little corner of the diner, aren’t a regular thing just yet. Tessa goes back to coming in the mornings on her way to the studio and Janie comes by after school. She lingers
longer and longer though on days she doesn’t have her own dance classes to take. She likes helping him out with little tasks, bringing over drinks, or wiping down tables. Other days she sits at the counter and he helps her with her homework where he can.

“Mom isn’t great at math,” she says, sitting up at the counter, chewing on the end of her pencil. “Everything else she’s brilliant at. But not math, and it’s a lot harder at Matthews Hall.”

Scott leans over and looks at her sheet, helping her with her division problems, explaining best he can how to deal with remainders. It doesn’t take long before she’s getting it and can finish the rest of the problems on her own.

It happens on a bad day, Scott’s been on the phone all day trying to sort out missing produce from his weekly order, a coffee machine that may have just run its course, and finding out one of his old friends, a good buddy from high school is sick. He’s thinking of calling it a day and closing up early until Janie runs into the diner, waving a piece of paper, her face radiates joy, sunshine pours out of her. He can’t help but smile back at her.

It’s a math test in her hand. “I did it!” she says, “I got an A!” She rushes right around the counter, throwing her arms around Scott’s waist, her facing burying into his stomach. “Thank you, Scott. Thank you so much.”

Scott wraps her up in his arms and holds her tight. All the tension he’s been holding on to all day melts away. There is something so special about this moment and he wants to hold onto it just a bit longer. He’s so happy. He can feel tears welling up in his eyes and he blinks them away. “That’s amazing,” he says, lifting her up off the ground. “I’m so proud of you, kiddo.”

He really is proud, he finds his heart is bursting with it. He doesn’t understand, and he doesn’t care to question it, but he loves this sweet, smart, wonderful kid and her mom. He puts Janie back onto her feet and shoos her back over to the other side of the counter. “What do you want to have to celebrate?” he asks.

The next morning when Tessa comes in for her coffee he pulls her into his arms and holds her close. She comes easily, melting into his embrace, letting him hold her and sway from side to side. Though, when he pulls away he’s met with a questioning look.

“What was that for?” she asks, still standing close to him, nearly chest to chest.

“Just for having the most wonderful kid,” he says.

Things really change between them in early spring. The snow has all melted away and the tulips are just beginning to bud. The perfect time for new beginnings. It’s a Friday night, Scott is just sweeping the diner floor, the door propped open to let in the cool evening breeze, when Tessa walks up. She’s wearing an oversized knit sweater and jeans, her hair falling loosely around her face, which is free of makeup. He thinks this is his favourite version of her, the true Tessa. She looks a bit nervous, her hands tucked into the loose arms of her sweater, fiddling with the ends. She stays on the step, standing right in the open doorway.

“Hi,” she says, breathless, almost like she ran here.

He looks behind Tessa for Janie but doesn’t see her anywhere. “Where’s Janie?” he asks, “I thought Friday’s were movie night.”

Tessa averts her gaze, looking down at her feet where she is kicking at a crack in the step with her
white sneaker. “She’s having a sleepover at Laina’s...I started to watch *Funny Face* by myself but
just couldn’t get into it,” she brushes her hair behind her ear, her hands retreat even farther into her
sweater, fingers poking through some gaps in the knitting. “I thought,” she shrugs. “I don’t really
know what I thought,” she turns, like maybe she’s going to leave.

“Hey, T,” he says, and she stops, turning to look at him. “I was just about to close up. It’s a beautiful
night, would you like to go for a walk with me?”

“I’d love that,” she says and he can just make out her shy smile before she glances downward again.

They start their walk through the town square, walking so close that their shoulders bump and their
arms brush as they swing them in time with their strides. He lets her set the pace and he finds it easy,
natural, to fall into rhythm with her, their steps synchronizing. When they reach the front of her
dance studio, she untucks her hand from where it’s been hiding inside her cuff and finds his fingers.
He’s happy to follow, brushing his fingers along her, moving his hand so that it’s easy for her to
grasp.

She does. After a few more steps she pulls his and into hers and they continue on, she steers them left
into one of the oldest streets in Ilderton, lined with brick houses and mature trees.

“What was it like growing up here?” she asks.

He pauses in his step, thinking, before answering. “It was really great,” he starts. “There’s something
special about small towns, something comforting about knowing everyone, knowing that your whole
community has your back no matter what. Even if you fail. It was also tough, because there is only
so much room to grow in a small town.”

“Is that why you left?” she leans her head against his bicep as they walk, pulling their joined hands in
closer to her.

“Part of it, I think. I also think I wanted to prove myself. Prove that I could make it somewhere that
wasn’t here.”

“Why’d you come back?”

“Because I didn’t. I didn’t make it.”

She hums, thinking. “Why’d you come back when you did though?”

“It was time,” he knows that now. He was finally ready. Ready to admit that Ilderton was the only
home he ever really wanted. As a kid he’d always imagined running his dad’s diner, and then his
mom had called him and they talked about the toll the diner was having on his dad’s health, and then
he broke up with his girlfriend and six months later he took out all his savings, moved home and
bought the diner from his dad. It was time.

“I’m really glad you’re here,” she says.

They’ve turned down a few more streets and are heading back up towards the town square, street
lights illuminating their path. “I’m really glad too.”

When they’ve gotten back to the square, Tessa leads him to the little gazebo right in the middle. He
follows happily, not wanting to put an end to their time together.

“This is my favourite spot in the whole town,” she says. “It’s right smack dab in the centre of
everything.” She leads them right to the middle of the structure and faces him. She reaches one hand
up to take off his hat, the Maple Leafs one she had gifted him, the other comes up to thread through his hair. She pulls herself in close, the hand holding his hat pushing into his back pulling him into her. He can feel her breath against the skin of his neck. “Did you know,” she starts up again, “that this gazebo was originally built as part of a movie set back in the 50’s. The producers gifted it to the town. And right here, right in the middle is where the leads of the movie shared their first kiss.”

He did know this, everyone in Ilderton knows the story, though this isn’t even the original gazebo, just a replica built in the 80’s. It doesn’t matter though, all he can do is nod along and hope he understands where she is going with this. He wants to wait for her though, to make the first move. He wants this to be at her lead, he doesn’t want to push her.

He doesn’t have to. She stands on her tiptoes and tilts her chin up towards him, and then her lips are on his. Her kiss is soft, hesitant at first but then she’s melting into him, he brings his arms around her to support her, and presses his lips into hers. Her hand is still in his hair, lightly scratching at his scalp while she moves her mouth against his.

Knowing that she wants this, that she had taken them here, and he had followed, he feels okay to start to direct the kiss. He has one hand on the curve of her ass and he pulls her in even closer, so that their bodies are flush. He nips lightly against her bottom lip and she moans into his mouth. He uses this opportunity to tease his tongue into her mouth, finding her own.

Their kiss is both tender, filled with a sweet innocence, and electric, hot and filled with promise of what’s to come. He’s overcome with warmth, consumed by the feeling of having her in his arms like this. It’s hard to pull away. When he finally does it’s just enough so that he can lean in and rest his forehead against hers.

They’re both breathing heavily, in tandem with each other, each breathing in the others exhale.

Once she’s finally caught her breath Tessa says, “Janie has a sleepover again next weekend. Do you want to come over for pizza and old movies?”

“I’d love to.”

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!