something wicked this way comes
by awakeanddreaming, bucketofrice (epigraphs), carmen_sandiego, EastFromEden, echoesofstardust, falsettodrop, gracesvirtue (orphan account), hartmaddox, iwantthemtostay, konahau (naheka), lapetitemort20, Miss_Six, naheka, only_because3, OnlySkyAboveMe, PinkGerberDaisies, rookandpawn, runnyc33, virtueoso, Walkinrobe

Summary

Halloween wraps fear in innocence, as though it were a slightly sour sweet. Let terror, then, be turned into a treat…

(AKA… spooktober.)
It’s fall y’all!

What better time of year to snuggle with a mug of tea, a cozy blanket, and a good supernatural story while it rains outside? We enjoyed writing smutmas so so much last year that we decided to bring you another collaboration, this time, around fall and with some new friends. The result? Spooktober. The Writers’ Guild & friends have banded together to bring you 18 days of spook, autumn, supernatural, fairytales and various creatures, all leading up to Halloween. Each day, an author (or authors) will be posting their own spooktober story. We encourage others writers to join in posting their own stories and using the spooktober tag; the more the merrier! Thank you to all our readers; you are the most amazing people and we savor every kudo and comment you give us. Thanks to all of you who were super excited as soon as we started to announce this! We hope that you'll enjoy our little Halloween treat (or trick) for you.

With all our love, The Writers’ Guild & Friends.

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- Word Count: 6.5k

**Chapter 11: on hallowed ground**

- Authors: virtueoso, runnyc33
- Summary: For three-hundred and twenty-four days of the year, Hogwarts' top floor corridor lies empty and abandoned, resigned to sink into obscurity and whispered legend. Then, on day three-hundred and twenty-five, something strange happens.
- Rating: T
- Additional tags: Hogwarts!AU, brief mention of (ghost) body horror/gore
- Word Count: 11.6k

**Chapter 12: couldn't hide from the thunder (in a sky full of stars)**

- Author: carmen_sandiego
- Summary: Tessa can sense that he’s someone with a lot of questions in his mind - and some hopes, too. It feels right that she lingered a little longer this evening at her table, if she gets to read the cards for him now.
- Rating: T
- Additional Tags: tarot reading, fall vibes, family, original child characters, reference to past character death, possibly a bookstore/coffee shop AU if you squint
- Word Count: 15.5k

**Chapter 13: kiss you like the sun grounds you**

- Authors: falsettodrop & only_because3
- Summary: Y’all ever just get horny in a pumpkin patch?
- Rating: E
- Additional Tags: fall vibes, explicit sexual content, exhibitionism, public sex, comeplay??
- Word Count: 3.9k

**Chapter 14: I never did believe in the ways of magic (but I’m beginning to wonder why)**

- Author: iwanthemtostay
- Summary: Tessa’s not quite sure how she would have wanted to see Scott Moir again after three years, but she knows it wouldn’t have been in the Douglas Library
- Rating: M
- Additional Tags: possible haunted library, tired postgrads
- Word Count: 9.9k

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- Author: rookandpawn & walkinrobe
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- Author: lolohannah
- Summary: Tessa never wanted to be a succubus. And she hadn’t known she was one, had no idea demons were even a thing that really existed, until she had her first real boyfriend at seventeen. A hundred years ago.
- Rating: E
- Additional Tags: Tessa/OC, mentions of violence and murder, supernatural sex
- Word Count: 10k

Chapter 17: hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have

- Author: only_because3
- Summary: She doesn't consider those times when she has to go help her clients to be her best work but they praise her anyway, call her everything from a god and an angel and a witch. Once, a man called her a demon. That was the last word he ever spoke.
- Rating: M
- Additional tags: mentions of physical and emotional abuse, murder, Medusa AU, a dark romcom
- Word Count: 10.8k

Chapter 18: look me in the heart and tell me you won't go

- Author: bucketofrice
- Summary: In exactly seven weeks, Samantha Jordan Carpenter will disappear from the world forever.
- Rating: G
- Additional Tags: The Age of Adaline AU, Museum AU, again lol, an on-brand amount of melancholy
- Word Count: 10.3k

Chapter 19: make your home in my arms

- Author: Miss_Six
- Summary: Sometimes, you can have your happy ending.
- Rating: M
- Additional tags: Modern mythology AU
- Word Count: 5k

Chapter 20: you can build your kingdom in my heart (if you want)

- Author: awakeanddreaming
- Summary: Our story starts with once upon a time, because of course that's how all fairytales begin.
- Rating: M
- Additional tags: Fairytale AU, Rapunzel, underage, innocence, first time smut
- Word Count: 19.2k
Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir announce end to their two-year break from competition

TORONTO — “We missed competing.” It was a decision they arrived at over a series of conversations, and finally made firm during a long car ride last summer in Beijing. “We were driving to the Great Wall,” Virtue said. “We were in the car for a couple of hours and we just talked about, ‘OK, in a dream world, if we came back, what would our team look like? What would we skate like? What music would we use?’ And we just kind of really started building a plan then. “We didn’t waffle that much, and we didn’t make pros/cons lists or anything like that. It just felt right.” The 26-year-old Virtue, and Moir, 28, will return to competition for the 2016-17 season,
and rather than work with their old coach Marina Zoueva, they’ll move to Montreal to train with Marie-France Dubreuil and Patrice Lauzon. Virtue and Moir have long been known as pushing the envelope in ice dancing with their innovative moves. They said they’ll return as different skaters than they were two years ago, largely because of the experience they’ve gained performing night in and night out on show tours. “You’ll see a different side of us than probably what you saw at the last Olympics for sure,” said Moir, an Ilderton, Ont., native. “There will be some classic Virtue and Moir, but at the same time we want to skate some edgy stuff, and try and push ourselves.”

“Canadian skating fans will undoubtedly be excited to welcome back Tessa and Scott,” Skate Canada CEO Dan Thompson said in a statement. “The ice dance landscape in Canada is powerful and the return of six-time Canadian champions Tessa and Scott will further invigorate this discipline. “We wish them the best of luck in their return.”

It started, as many things do, with a comeback. It started with claps of thunder and the echoing thuds of moving boxes being thrown carelessly around on the curb, and then, later, crowding two apartments up to the ceilings. It started with a house. A beautiful house—or rather a manor—which had been converted into a medium sized apartment complex near the canal de Lachine and the Atwater market which young couples and hipster millennials were particularly fond of. Only the carefully crafted art déco facade, the load-bearing walls, and the stained glass skylight had survived the renovations. The skeleton of the house had remained, its fleshy insides ripped out and discarded, its sinuous and serpentine bones sheltering newcomers like a ribcage protects the heart and lungs. The house had known love, longing, pain, bliss, and suffering. In ancient times, in times barely remembered in the hustle and bustle of the city, it had been a gothic revival church with deep vaults, blue-green stained-glass windows, golden curtains, and intricate wooden carvings that looked so realistic they might have been imbued with life. A place where love met death and bliss met misery. Tears and champagne had seeped into the ground, wails and laughter had saturated the limestone, until it felt full and replete—drunk with emotions.

“Where are they?” Tessa asked, looking out the windows, her foot tapping on the wooden floor. “They promised they’d be here to help us unpack.”

Scott peeked his head into the doorway. “Probably stuck in traffic because of the storm,” he replied. “It’s a downpour out there, I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Tessa sighed, the sound echoing off the empty walls as she looked around, boxes and suitcases near suffocating her in the tight space. Her neat nature had led her to create an efficient color-coded system: each room had been assigned a color, each box then labelled in that color and she had even gone to the lengths of sticking a small laminated inventory of each box’s content on their sides. It had been a whole thing which had made Scott chuckle and had left her fingers stained for days. A whole overzealous thing it turned out since the apartment was so small—a one-bedroom with an en-suite bathroom, a modest but functional kitchen that opened to the living room, and a quaint terrace. It would be a weird change of pace from her spacious London house. Thankfully, the apartment had come fully furnished and she only had to buy a new comforter and new sheets. The exposed brick, the small fireplace with its gorgeous bas-reliefs, the blue stained-glass window in the bathroom, and the exposed beams had been the selling points of this place if she were completely honest with herself. The fact that it was only a fifteen-minute walk to their new training center was an added bonus. That had been the selling point for Scott, who had been only too happy to rent the neighboring apartment on the floor.

“Jake was supposed to pick up Jordan from the airport and come straight here,” she said. “Have you heard from him?”
“I texted but no answers yet,” Scott said, carrying a box inside.

She shivered and hugged herself tighter. “I’m so cold,” she said, blowing condensation on the window and tracing a smiley face with one finger. “Don’t you have your own boxes to carry?” she chuckled, turning around and watching him set it down on the kitchen counter.

“Yeah, but this one’s way lighter,” he smiled. “Let me at least feel useful without throwing my back out. That’d be a shame the day we officially move in.”

“I’m worried,” she said. “Jordan should have called or texted. That’s not her style. We were supposed to have a slumber party after she helped me unpack a bit.”

“Hey now,” Scott said, coming across to her and rubbing his hands up and down her arms. “I’m sure Jake is talking her ear off and she’s just being too polite to look at her phone.”

She nodded, wiggling her fingers, trying to get the blood circulating again. “Convince me not to turn the heat on in September.”

He pulled an arm around her shoulders. “Come on, I’ll help you unpack some and then you’ll do me. That’ll warm you right up.” His smile was playful and contagious. It was supposed to be a happy day, the first one of the rest of their lives. There was no need to worry, and she pushed aside the uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“Sure,” she smiled. “Let’s do the bedroom first. The rest can wait.”

In her bed that night, her sleep was restless, thunder rolling outside. She didn’t think Montreal would be so cold, and she simply could not get warm or comfortable. It felt like she was sinking right into her mattress and she cursed herself for not thinking about bringing one of her spares from London. Her back and neck hurt from tossing and turning and she knew she would pay the price tomorrow at practice. The theme song of the movie she had tried to watch to fall asleep kept playing ominously in her mind, over and over again, setting her further on edge. She tried counting sheep, kittens, and puppies; she tried visualizing herself soaking up the sun in a meadow, breathing techniques, and as a last resort, she even listened to whale noises that were supposed to help ease her mind into unconsciousness—they did not, they made her teeth grind—until she threw in the towel and grabbed her phone. ‘Are you awake?’ she texted Scott, pricking up her ears, hoping to hear him stir on the other side of the wall.

She gave up on a reply after ten minutes; he was probably blissfully asleep and would be as fresh as a daisy tomorrow. Typical Scott, she thought with a huff as she threw back the covers and violently shivered when her feet touched the floor—her blood felt like ice. She wrapped herself into her favorite cashmere throw and let her fingers graze the walls as she made her way to the kitchen to brew some chamomile tea. This apartment felt... weird. She had no other word for it despite her ample vocabulary. It unsettled her. She chalked it up to the newness of everything and was convinced that she would get used to it in time, but when her fingertips had made contact with the wall, she could have sworn she felt a current coming from the bricks, like a wave sending electricity up her arms and down her whole body, making her skin erupt in goosebumps. She removed her hand quickly and shook her head. The building was old; it probably explained the draft too.

She was staring into the open flame as she waited for the familiar hissing of water in the kettle when she heard it.

A crack.
At first she thought her sleep deprived mind was making it up, but the noise got louder. She felt it deep in her rib cage and stomach: a low rumbling sound that seemingly came from nowhere, like standing too close to the speakers at a concert. She wrapped the throw tighter around her body and her hand shook as she removed the kettle from the stove. She listened carefully walking around her kitchen trying to find the origin, her heart racing—she could barely hear anything over the thumping pulse of blood in her ears.

**CRACK**

**CRACK**

**CRACK**

She jumped at the sudden noises, turning around quickly, eyes wild and open wide. She rushed to the wall to turn on all the lights in the kitchen, something she felt she should have done as soon as she entered the room. The electric discharge she felt in her fingertips when she touched the light switch made her yelp and she brought them to her mouth to soothe—they were bright red and burning. A weight settled in her stomach as she hurried to the faucet to run her hand under the cold water. Uneasiness washed over her; the water didn’t seem to have any effect on the searing sensation and she now felt her heart pulse in her fingers.

She kept her hand under the running water, trying to focus on the flow to steady her heartbeat and slow her breathing. The cracking had subsided now and she wanted to laugh at her overreaction to a simple stimulus. Adrenaline was coursing through her body, numbing her, covering her with a sheen of sweat and making her shiver violently. Deep breath in, long breath out; she closed her eyes, centering herself, feeling the tiles underneath her feet and the cold metal of the sink she was leaning against. Everything was going to be fine, she kept telling herself, there was no reason for her to panic like this.

It felt as if she stayed like that for an hour—it had been mere minutes—before she finally turned the water off and put the kettle back onto the stove. She would need something stronger to calm her nerves… gin, perhaps, and she rummaged through her cupboards for the bottle, pouring a generous quantity into a teacup along with her chamomile tea.

Once prepared, she sipped her tea slowly, letting the alcohol warm up her throat, humming a song she hadn’t been able to get out of her head, tapping her foot to the rhythm when a deafening **BANG** cut through the quiet, startling her into dropping her cup—she watched it shatter, rooted on the spot, unable to move. Her heart began racing as she turned her head wildly around the room, trying to follow the sound to its origin. The bangs kept thumping, louder and louder. She couldn’t handle her body: she couldn’t stop the shivering, her limbs vibrating and twitching uncontrollably, cold sweat trickling down her spine. Her heart felt like it could burst out of her chest. The walls roared and rumbled vociferously, the noise vibrating through her—*bang bang bang*. The nausea felt overwhelming and she regretted spiking her chamomile with this much gin, afraid now to splatter it all over her brand new floor. It felt like metal and wood were waging a war against her walls and inside her—hold on, was the noise coming from Scott’s apartment?

Was he hearing this too? Was anyone else? And if it was his apartment, what was he doing banging on the walls in the middle of the night? His apartment was laid out much the same as hers, so she knew it was his bedroom wall that ran alongside her kitchen. Was it...his **bed** banging on the wall? Did he have a **girl** there? Classic Scott! Being the charming flirt that he always was, of course he had a girl over. That explained all the noise! She wasn’t going crazy, Scott had just done what he always did. She couldn’t believe he had gone out—without her!— after he was done unpacking and just...brought a girl home. It had always annoyed her when they were training in
Michigan, but now, here, in Montreal? That was where she drew the line. They had agreed and shook on it with their special secret handshake: no distractions, one hundred percent focus on training and competitions all the way to the Olympics. And now, one day in, and Scott was already breaking his promise? She wouldn’t let this stand. Everything had to be perfect for this comeback to work and that meant no outside significant others.

She huffed, wrapped herself tighter in her afghan, slipped into her sneakers, and walked briskly the few steps that separated their apartments before banging loudly on his door, almost injuring her hand in the process.

She was about to give it a good kick when it finally opened. “Virtch?” Scott asked, eyes bleary and hair disheveled. “What the fuck are you doing? It’s 3 am!” He was rubbing his eyes and yawning like nothing was wrong.

“What the fuck am I doing?” she hissed, jabbing her index finger into his chest. “What the fuck are you doing banging your bed on my wall?”

“What are you talking about?” he asked, blinking slowly and rubbing the spot she had poked. “I was sleeping before you came here and woke me.”

“I heard banging!” she insisted. “Do you have a girl in there with you?”

He chuckled. “A girl? Are you serious?”

“I heard banging. I’m not crazy!”

He laughed and leaned against the doorway. “I appreciate you thinking I could get a girl to come home with me on our first night in Montreal, T, but I promise you, there’s no girl and there definitely was no banging. Of any kind.” He must have taken a good look at her and saw how crazed she looked before he carried on. “Hey, are you okay?”

She tried to fix her hair so it didn’t stick out of her bun so much. “I don’t know,” she stuttered. “I couldn’t sleep. And I heard cracking sounds coming from the walls. And then I made tea and I heard bangs, they were so loud and the switch thingie burned my fingers and the bangs, they wouldn’t stop. They wouldn’t stop and it was in the walls, I swear, I’m not crazy.”

“Come here.” He grabbed her hand and drew her against him, rubbing his hands up her down her arms. “This is an old building,” he rationalized. “You probably heard the pipes rattling when you drew water for your tea. The electricity just got turned on, it played tricks on you.”

She snuggled closer in his embrace. His warmth already made everything better. She could feel her heartbeat slow down to normal. “You really didn’t hear anything?” she sighed.

“I didn’t hear anything, I was sound asleep. Listen, this is a new place, we’re starting a new life here, we have our first day of training tomorrow, it’s all very stressful. I’m sure you just got a bit… overwhelmed.”

She nodded against his chest. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m sure you’re right. I’m sorry I came in here like a banshee and almost knocked down your door.”

He smiled and kissed the top of her head and she couldn’t help but to lean into it. “I’ve always appreciated your enthusiasm.”

“I’m sorry,” she continued. “I’ll leave you to your beauty sleep,” she said, but made no movement to extricate herself from his arms. “I know you need it.”
He tightened his arms around her and she felt his nose nuzzle her hair. “Do you want to sleep here? I don’t think you should be alone right now. I’ve never seen you this frazzled. You can sleep on the couch.”

“You don’t have a couch, Scott.”

“I do have a couch,” he protested. “It’s the same you have, the one that came with the apartment.”

“No one can sleep on that couch.”

“Okay,” he pretended to sigh. “We can share the bed, but no funny business, Virtch, I have my eye on you.”

“I’m taking the right side.”

“I wouldn’t have expected it any other way.”

* 

Scott would never admit it to Tessa because she had gotten this crazy idea that her apartment was purposefully trying to keep her from sleeping, but he didn’t particularly like his apartment either. Between the gurgling of water going through the pipes at all hours of the night, the various cracking and hissing sounds that came with living in an old edifice and the finicky electricity, his apartment felt odd and a bit gloomy. He slept like a log, unlike Tessa, whose restlessness had only gotten worse, but his ears kept ringing whenever he spent too much time there. He constantly heard metal and snow: skates scraping across the ice and blades being sharpened. At first it had been soothing, bringing back happy memories of his childhood when he used to watch his uncle work at the rink, but it had slowly become a nuisance. He couldn’t get the sounds out of his head; it drove him bonkers. He’d grown used to keeping some sort of background noise on to fight it, music being his weapon of choice—only he knew it drove Tessa nuts to hear his music through their wall every time they were both home. She already had trouble sleeping and therefore was highly strung, the slightest thing setting her off.

The sounds of her tiny fists hitting the wall startled him awake from his nap. “Does it have to be The Hip again?” Tessa complained from the other side of the wall. Her voice was coming through surprisingly clear and he straightened up.

He lowered the volume on his speakers. “You know this isn’t what I imagined it would be like when I said it would be cool to be neighbors.”

“At least change your playlist from time to time so I don’t get bored to death,” she said and he could hear the annoyance in her voice.

“You wouldn’t get bored to death if you slept. You know, like a normal person.”

“Perhaps I would sleep if you stopped listening to The Hip every time we come back from the rink.” The annoyance in her voice didn’t diminish one bit.

“Don’t blame The Hip for your insomnia. You know I have to have music on to tune out the tinnitus.”

He heard some shuffling and her feet padding on the floor before he heard her telltale knocks on his door. He was too bone-tired to get up and answer it. “Come in, it’s open,” he yelled and a few minutes later he saw her figure in his doorway.
She plopped next to him on the bed. “You need to talk to someone about your ears. It’s not normal to keep hearing skating sounds when you’re out of the rink.”

He turned on his side and looked at her. “Do you really want to talk to me about what’s normal to hear?” he asked, trying to keep the chuckle out of his tone. He knew Tessa didn’t like to be teased about that. “You should talk to someone.”

He saw her fidget with a loose thread on her tee-shirt. “I talk to you about it.”

“Tess—” he started softly.

“I’m serious though,” she said. “I think you’re a bit too wrapped up in our training. You need to relax and compartmentalize between skating and free time.”

“Well, it’s after practice and you’re here, so…”

“I’m sorry,” she said, looking down. “I know we said we should keep our distance and have our own lives outside of training.” She swung her legs off the bed. “I’ll go.”

Scott’s heart skipped a beat and he grabbed her arm. “Come on,” he said with as much apology as he could muster. “I didn’t mean it like that. Stay.”

If he were honest, he could use the company. The sounds always went away when he was with her, but he didn’t want her to be his crutch and need her this much. They were already together all the time, he didn’t want her to feel like he was being clingy and suffocating her.

To his relief, it didn’t look like she needed much convincing and she laid back on the bed next to him—closer this time, probably looking for warmth if he knew anything about her. “I’m worried about you,” she whispered.

He stroked a thumb around her dark circles; they had turned a shade of purple that made her usually bright green eyes look cloudy. “I’m worried about you too,” he whispered back. “You need to sleep.”

She leaned into his touch and shrugged softly. “I get a few hours whenever I sleep next to you.”

“Come here,” he said, drawing her closer. “Lay your head on me.” He clasped the back of her neck and guided her head to that sweet familiar spot between his chest and his neck where she could listen to the steady beat of his heart.

She snuggled against him, burying her nose into his shirt and gently fisting its soft fabric. “Just a little nap,” she muttered and he saw her lids flutter close two seconds after. A nap would do them both some good after the day they had. He smiled, tightened his arms around her, and reveled in this deep feeling of contentment he felt purring in his rib cage—he closed his eyes too.

The door slammed!

It woke them up with a start at the same time. Scott straightened up immediately and looked at Tessa, confusion echoing in her eyes. Did that really happen or did they imagine it in the eerie veil between dream and reality? Their imagination had been overly active in the last few weeks.

“What was that?” Tessa asked him, after a few seconds passed in silence. Her eyes were wide and frightened and he could see the blood pumping wildly in her jugular. He was not used to seeing her this way and it made him very uneasy. Tessa wasn’t scared of anything. She hadn’t been scared of cutting her legs open—twice—or of the painful recovery both surgeries had entailed, she hadn’t
batted an eyelash at competing at an Olympics she knew they would lose, she hadn’t been scared of uprooting her entire life to a city she didn’t speak the language of on the off chance they would be able to finesse two gold medals in South Korea two years later.

He swallowed and tried to keep his composure. “I think it was the front door.”

Her breath hitched. “Don’t joke,” she said, hitting him on the chest.

The lights flickered.

Uneasiness settled deeply into Scott. This wasn’t normal. None of this was. What was happening to them? Were they slowly losing their minds? Imagining things, hearing noises? He grabbed Tessa’s wrist and pulled her closer. “I’m not joking,” he said, trying not to let his fear show. “Maybe you didn’t close it properly and a draft shut it?”

“I know how to close a door!” she huffed. “I locked that door, I’m sure of it.”

He swung his legs off the side of the bed. “Are you?” he asked her.

“Where are you going?” she asked and he could hear the terror in her voice as her eyes darted to the flickering lights. “Someone could be in here!”

Why wasn’t this like the movies and why didn’t he keep a baseball bat under his bed? “I know,” he said, finally getting up and going to his door, pressing his ear to the wood to try and listen to what could be going on on the other side. “I don’t hear anything,” he told her and he opened his bedroom door to go into the living room. She was right on his heels, grabbing his elbow, and he turned around. “Stay here.”

She crossed her arms and she looked exactly like she did when she was nine (and he eleven) and he had messed up his steps—a bit miffed but pliable. “Stay here? What am I? A damsel in distress? I can take care of myself,” she whisper-yelled. “And I’m not letting you go in there alone.”

“Come on, Tess,” he sighed. “Stay there for a minute, I’m just checking.”


He tip-toed into the living room, his fingers searching for the light switch on the wall and when he finally flipped it, nothing happened—it was pitch black, the gleaming of the moon creating a ghostly chiaroscuro atmosphere. “Well fuck,” he groaned, fumbling his way around the room.

He felt electricity running through his fingers as he groped along the wall and remembered that Tessa had told him the same thing had happened to her in her own apartment. What the fuck was going on? He squinted and opened his eyes wide alternatively, trying to see if someone was moving or hiding in the darkness. “Is someone there?” he asked out loud, hoping in the back of his mind that perhaps one of their neighbors had come in trying to borrow some sugar or something.

A warm breath blew on the back of his neck, making his hair stand on end, goosebumps crawling all over his body. He turned around immediately, heart beating wildly, but finding nothing there. He took a deep steadying breath and from the corner of his eye, he glimpsed something: pale and translucent, a strange figure floating just behind the couch. He closed his eyes out of pure reflex and when he opened them again, the shadowy figure had disappeared. He rubbed a hand over his eyes and inspected the semi-darkness closer—had anything even been there or had it just been a figment of his tired and frightened mind?
He padded to the kitchen, trying to make himself as silent as possible and managed to turn on the overhead light from the extractor. Finally! Some light! He barely had a chance to look over his living room when he heard Tessa scream from his bedroom. “SCOTT—” The sound had made his heart stop and his stomach drop. He could hear and feel her terror.

He ran back into the room, throwing the door open—she was curled up on the floor, in one corner. “Tess! Are you okay?” he asked, hurrying to her, cradling her face into his hands. She was shaking like a leaf. “What happened?” She didn’t answer and kept rocking back and forth muttering to herself, trying to cover her ears with her hands. He clasped them in his and pulled her into his lap. “Tess! Breathe in, please. What happened? Tess, talk to me.”

He caressed every inch of her he could get access to, hoping to soothe the panic away. There was no more room for his own terror and dread. Only hers mattered. He lifted her head so that their eyes would meet. “I—I—” she stuttered. She couldn’t hold his gaze, her eyes flitting in every direction. “I—I saw something,” she said. “There was something—someone—several someones. I don’t know. I don’t know. It was coming toward me. I felt them all over me. Scott—” she said, eyes boring into his now, “it was coming for me.”

He cradled her head to his chest and stroked her hair. “It’s okay, Tess. I’m here.” She was still shivering and it looked like her body was on the verge of completely shutting down—it jerked and twitched no matter how tight he was trying to hold her. Hug the panic away had been one of the first pieces of advice his coaches had given him when he had to deal with Tessa’s anxiety before and after performing. The hug had worked for eighteen years and he hoped it would now too. He gripped her harder. He couldn’t tell her what had happened in the living room—what he had seen or what he thought he had seen. “No one is coming for you, Tess,” he reassured her. “I’m here. I got you.”

The lights flickered quicker, flashing from day to night like an old movie rolling. She clung to him like a koala, fists bunching up the fabric of his t-shirt, legs wrapping around his hips. “I’m not crazy, I swear,” she whimpered. “I swear I’m not crazy. I saw something. Something was here.”

“I know you’re not crazy,” he soothed. “No one was in the living room. Just you and me here. We’re just a bit frazzled.”

“Scott,” she whispered, watching the shadows dance on the walls. The air felt tight and constrictive. “Something is not right.”

“Tess—” he started… And then everything went black.

Pitch black and silent.

“Scott!”

It was hard to keep his cool now. He had never been a fan of the dark and his nerves were frayed, adrenaline flooding his system. “I think the power went out,” he faltered.

He felt her hand on his face going down his cheek and palming his jaw. “Scott, are you okay?” she asked. “You’re crying,” she noted, wiping away his tears with careful fingers.

His denial died on his lips as he felt the telltale wetness trickling down his face. “I don’t know why it’s happening,” he stammered. He couldn’t focus; the ringing in his ears had come back and his neck started hurting, the sudden tightness there inexplicable.

She cradled his head and hugged him to her chest. “Hey, hey, it’s okay,” she tried to comfort him,
seemingly regaining some of her composure. "It's fine. Everything's going to be fine. You're right," she said. "Of course you're right. The power went out and we're just a bit high strung right now." He could hear her trying to rationalize things, her emotions already evening out as his went down a rollercoaster. They were going to pieces.

She broke away from his embrace and got up to the window. He wanted to follow suit, but his limbs would not move; he was glued to the floor. "The whole block is out," she announced and he could feel the ringing in his ears desist. "It's not just us. It's a complete black out. And—we're snowed in."

That made him jump to his feet. He peered out the window: the whole street was covered with several heavy layers of snow, chunky shimmering snowflakes pouring from the skies. "I don't understand," he spluttered. "The sun was shining when we got home. How did we get snowed in?"

Tessa hugged herself. "I don't know. I don't understand what's happening. It makes no sense."

Scott could not compute what was happening. He felt like he was going to throw up. They couldn't be snowed in. They had barely been home for—his eyes fell to his nightstand clock, the digits glowing red in the dark like a beacon: 2:20am. "That cannot be right," he cried out. "Tess, what time is it?" He knew she always wore her grandmother's Gucci watch unless she was on the ice and Bingo, he saw her look down at her wrist.

She followed the direction of his gaze. "That's not right," she said, pointing at his alarm clock. "It's only five past eleven. But we slept longer than we intended, I think."

He raked a hand through his hair and rubbed his palm across his face. "We did," he nodded. "Okay, let's find something to eat and then go to sleep. You're staying here tonight, no discussion. We'll huddle for warmth. Hopefully the power will be back tomorrow."

She took his hand. "Come on, I'll make you something."

"Please don't," he chuckled, a smile returning to his face.

She beamed back at him. "I was being facetious. There's no electricity and even with it, I'm not that good. I'm sure you have some cold leftovers in your fridge we can eat."

"We can look," he agreed easily, letting her guide them to the kitchen in the dark.

He felt a cold gush of air tickle the back of his neck and when he looked over his shoulder, he could have sworn he saw the curtain move and two translucent figures passing near the window. But that had to be his imagination. Right?

Tessa woke up to the feeling of water dripping on her face and raised a hand to wipe it off, thinking Scott was joking around in finding new ways to wake her up, but she could find no wetness there. She opened her eyes to a distorted face crawling on the ceiling, slithering along the four corners of her bedroom. She barely had the time to gasp and blink before it was already gone, her white ceiling immaculate once again. She rubbed her eyes, drowsy but alert at the same time: there was no water—or tears—there; she patted her cheeks trying to find some proof that she had not hallucinated the whole thing, but they were dry as well. Freezing cold, but dry. She straightened up and took a deep cleansing breath; she wouldn't take a sleeping pill before bed again if it was going to worsen her already psychedelic imagination as soon as she came to.
She went about her usual morning routine—the power having blissfully come back after an entire day without—and was already thinking about that first delicious cup of coffee she would treat herself with as soon as she’d be done with yoga. She hummed while washing her face, brushing her teeth, styling her hair, and massaging her skincare in—she could not get that fucking song out of her head. It drove her absolutely mad. She had tried listening to every song on her playlists and had even taken to turning the radio on. Nothing worked. That song was firmly stuck inside her brain and didn’t want to get out. And the worst part? She couldn’t even remember what the song was, she had no clue. She only heard the same few notes—haunting violins, nagging piano, and heavy drums. Over and over again without respite. Why couldn’t she figure out what song it was? Why couldn’t she get it out of her head? And why was her brain insistent on torturing her that way when she should be focused on their skating music?

She heard the front door open and close as she was slipping into her warmest hoodie. “Scott?” she called out. “Is that you? Did you find some groceries?” He didn’t answer but she heard him rummage around as she was pulling up her leggings.

“Scott?” she called out again, coming into the living room. He had lit a fire in the fireplace and was standing in front of it, seemingly entranced by the flames. She came closer and held out her hands in front of the fire. She was always so cold these days. Add that to the list of unexplainable weird things that went on in her apartment. “How did you guess I would be freezing?” she deadpanned.

He didn’t reply yet again and she turned to face him better. She saw flames dancing in his hazel eyes, but they were flat and hollow. He looked like he was under a spell—hypnotized. She recognized nothing from his usual joyful and warm gaze. “Scott?” she called again. “Are you okay?” she asked, grabbing his arm.

He had no reaction and his arm felt limp and floppy in her hand. “Come on,” she said. “Don’t scare me like that, it’s not funny.” She tightened her grip on his forearm but his face gave away nothing. “Scott?” she repeated. “You could look at me when I’m talking to you, you know.” She waved a hand in front of his face, trying to be funny, but her stomach sank when she saw that his eyes were still dead, spellbound by the fire.

Was he hurt? Had something happened? She looked him over for any injury, examining him closely for blood or wounds, but found nothing in her cursory inspection: he looked perfectly fine. Should she shake him? Scream in his face? Dump a bucket of water over his head? She put two fingers carefully on the side of his neck, trying to feel for his pulse: his heart was smooth and steady, beating regularly under her touch. Nothing felt out of place. What the fuck was going on with him? This fire hadn’t lit itself. He had to be somewhat conscious.

She grabbed both his shoulders a bit more brutally than she would have under normal circumstances. “Scott?” she called again. She lowered his chin with two fingers, trying to meet his eyes. She came closer and looked deeply into his eyes—they were glazed and glassy and his lids fluttered quickly. Her breath hitched when the thought crossed her mind. Was he asleep and sleepwalking?

He certainly looked like it, but it left her dumbfounded. In all the years she had known him, in all the years he had slept on the other side of her wall, in bed beside her or simply napped on her shoulder, she had never known him to sleepwalk. Ever. She had eighteen years of knowing everything about his sleeping habits and this was not one of them. Her brain flooded with questions each more complex and worrying than the last. But most importantly: how were you supposed to wake someone up from an episode like that? She doubted the shaking or the bucket of water would be viable options now.
She guided him carefully to her couch. He was very docile and sat down with ease. The gentle method it would be, then. She took his face in her hands, cradling it gently, turned it toward her and held it close. She could feel his warm steady breath on her face and she stroked his ears softly. “Scott?” she whispered. “You have to wake up.”

His eyelids kept fluttering softly. Was he dreaming? She laid a hand on his forearm and traced his face with the other—gentle fingers lingering on the arch of his brows, brushing under his eyes, down the bridge of his nose, rubbing his cheekbones and moving toward his jaw. She skimmed his jaw and smiled to herself as she pulled on his earlobes. “Scott?”

No reaction.

Her heart rate skyrocketed and she could feel her hands starting to shake and a cold sweat trickling down her back. She took a deep breath, hoping to calm herself down. Her mind now, even worried, wasn’t able to tune out that ominous song that plagued her. She shook her head, trying to get back to the matter at hand and felt a cold draft whispering on the back of her neck. She turned around swiftly, but no one—or nothing—was there. As soon as she turned her attention back to Scott, another cold whisper tickled the back of her ears. Was someone talking to her? She sighed and tried, again, to shut out whatever the hell possessed her mind.

Well…there was one thing she could try… “Scott?” she repeated yet again. “I’m sure some part of you can hear me right now and you know we agreed never to do that again when we moved to Montreal but if you don’t wake up, I’m going to have to kiss you,” she said.

Nothing. So much for her feeble threats… Even when he was sleepwalking, he was stubborn.

She palmed his jaw and pressed a soft kiss on his cheek. “Scott?” she called again. “Wake up or the lips are next,” she warned as she placed soft kisses all over his face, hoping the sensation would somehow bring him back to consciousness.

She girded her loins and nestled closer to him—he had left her no choice. She pulled his face down to hers and kissed him straight on the mouth. A familiar warmth spread in her belly—his lips were warm, soft, and pliable under hers. After a few seconds, she kissed him a little harder, darting her tongue out to trace the edges of his mouth. This was probably the chastest kiss they had shared in a long time and it reminded her of when they first started doing this. She smiled fondly against his lips as she recalled the memories of a party, a closet, and a game. She licked his lips again and kissed him with renewed ardor hoping it would finally break the spell he seemed to be under. The song in her head had stopped and she could feel every inch of skin that was in contact with Scott tingle and heat up. The heat was almost unbearable but she didn’t relent—she couldn’t detach herself from him. Just when she thought she could no longer stand the heat between them and the tidal wave of emotions that threatened to burst out of her, she felt his lips twitch against hers.

She pulled back immediately. “Scott?” she asked. “Wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up,” she pleaded, squishing her forehead against his.

This time she felt his hand tremble underneath hers and he grabbed her wrist suddenly. “Tessa?” Scott slurred. He sounded exactly like he did when he just woke up and she let out a huge sigh of relief.

“Hey there,” she said, throwing herself into his lap and hugging him so tight she was afraid she would break some ribs. “Are you okay?” she asked, pulling back from him a bit, to let him breathe.

He shook his head and blinked slowly. ”Yeah,” he mumbled. “What’s going on? Why does it smell
like nutmeg and cinnamon in here? Did you burn some cookies? It’s not Christmas yet.”

She chuckled. “You sleepwalked into my apartment and lit a fire in the fireplace,” she explained.

He looked confused and bleary. “I did what?” he questioned. “What time is it?” he asked and looked in the direction of her old clock on the mantel. “It’s not already 2:20 pm, is it?”

She glanced at her clock. “Damn, it stopped again! No, it’s morning,” she said. “You walked right in and wouldn’t talk or respond or anything. You scared the crap out of me.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist and held her tight against him. “I’m sorry, kiddo,” he said. “Wait, did you kiss me to wake me up?” he asked, rubbing two fingers over his lips.

She blushed scarlet. “Um yeah,” she admitted, a bit bashful. “I’m sorry about that. I was kind of hoping you wouldn’t remember, but I had to go thermonuclear on your ass. Nothing else was working.”

He grinned. “What am I now? Sleeping Beauty, eh?”

“Well, actually,” she laughed. “Well, actually, that’s pretty accurate. I’ll be your Prince Charming any day of the week, babe,” she replied in a poor imitation of his voice. He had said those exact words to her when they danced to the waltz in the short a few years back and he looked like a proper Disney prince in navy blue velours.

He pressed a kiss to her temple before he came back to his senses. “Okay, but seriously, there’s no cookies?”

“No cookies,” she confirmed. “Remember the snow storm? You were supposed to find us some groceries.”

“Oh right!” he exclaimed and jumped to his feet, letting her fall on the other side of the couch. He went to the window and looked at the snowy landscape. “What a mess,” he sighed. “Day three of this nonsense and I’m already going stir crazy.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “Same.”

He laughed. “No, I mean I’m literally going stir crazy. I saw two nuns kissing in my living room last night.”

She couldn’t help the giggles that burst out of her. “Scott, what did we say about watching porn before going to sleep?”

He glared at her but she could see his eyes were light and amused. “Listen, if I watched porn before sleeping—which I don’t by the way—it wouldn’t be gay nun porn, trust me on that.”

“Sure,” she sniggered. “So those two nuns kissing, did they say anything? Like, I don’t know, they needed your help to look for their lost crucifixes down their robes?”

“I’m serious,” he huffed. “I was going for a snack and there they were, kissing, in my living room. I swear I saw them. I didn’t even have time to scream anything, I was rooted to the spot. They looked at me and I think I blinked and they were gone? I don’t even remember going back to bed.”

He paused. “I don’t remember anything after that actually. Except coming to on your couch with your tongue in my mouth.”

“There was no tongue,” she defended herself.
He raised a brow in her direction. “I can still taste your toothpaste on my lips, T.”

“Okay,” she relented. “There was a little bit of tongue. But most importantly, was there tongue between the two hot gay nuns?” She exploded in a fit of giggles again.

“Come on,” he scolded gently. “I’m not making things up, I swear.” He ran a hand through his hair and Tessa could now see and feel the uneasiness underneath his goofy facade.

She got up and laid a hand on his shoulder. “Hey, I’m sorry. I know you’re not making things up.”

He turned and looked at her, his face etched with worry. “I think I’m going insane…” he whispered.

She sighed and nestled against his side, looking out the window. “If you’re going insane, I’m going down with you.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, ”I don’t want to scare you. Let’s go get those groceries and watch Netflix all day. I’ll be fine.”

“I’m already scared,” she said, squeezing his hand, hoping to anchor herself to him, to his realness and his existence. There was nothing more comforting to her than feeling him close, knowing, inevitably, that his body and his entire self would be right there, next to her. “It’s this place,” she murmured, like she was telling him a secret that should have remained hidden within these four walls. “It’s messing with our heads.”

He squeezed her hand back and nodded slowly. “My neck is killing me,” he complained, raising a hand to rub the spot. “How about some yoga first?”

She heard the pipes gargle and the wall crack as she led him to the center of the room. The apartment was not happy. She closed her eyes and tried to repress the sinister coil that had taken hold of her stomach. “Yoga first,” she agreed.

Anything to distract her—them—from whatever was persecuting them.

*   

Insomnia was lonely. Scott had come to learn this in the past three hours. He never would have imagined that he’d catch whatever ailed Tessa, but there he was: awake in the middle of the night, alone, watching some old figure skating videos on his computer, trying the keep the demons at bay. Everything became heavier at night: movements were sluggish, thoughts were leaden—he felt as if the weight of all the sleeping souls around him would crush his shoulders and break his back. Everything hurt: his neck and back felt tight and strained; his legs stiff and cramped and he could feel a migraine settling in. He turned up the volume nonetheless, hoping to drown out the ringing in his ears and the frenzy of the elements outside—heavy rain mixed with snow pelted against his windows, the howling wind battering the building, making it wail and crack even more than usual.

Usually the sound of rain put him right to sleep, but he was restless. His brain couldn’t focus; it played leapfrog with him, flitting nonsensically from one thought to the other—somewhere in the back of his mind, his subconscious whispered that the apartment wanted to keep him up and awake. It had a purpose that Scott wasn’t yet privy to and could only guess to be nefarious.

He sighed and stopped the video, taking his head in his hands. He could pop over to Tessa’s and borrow some of her sleeping pills… but Tessa had told him the vivid (and frightening) dreams they had created weren’t worth the three hours of sleep she had gotten out of them. Dawn would break soon and the daylight would bring him a sense of peace and quiet again, and perhaps then he would
finally be allowed a few hours of blissful unconsciousness.

The house had other plans.

The rain had turned into hail and he heard it pummel his windows with renewed violence. He never used to be this jittery—competition had been the only thing that got his blood and adrenaline pumping. Now he felt like he was constantly looking over his shoulder, always suspicious, always jumpy, his heart always on the verge of beating out of his chest. The back of his head tingled in a way that had become all too familiar ever since he had moved in; he turned around and his eyes were drawn to the wall: had the bas-reliefs always looked so alive? Had their eyes always looked so piercing? He got up and crossed the room quickly, kneeling to examine them. They held a strange allure, gorgeous and finely sculpted, but their eyes… It felt like they followed him and every move he made—he took a few steps to the side and their wooden stares tracked him.

The house howled and groaned.

And then he heard it. “Scott,” something hissed from the darkness. He jumped backward and felt a cold gust of air run through him. “Scott,” it hissed again.

“Who’s there?” he asked, getting up and turning around, eyes wide. He felt stupid for even asking; he was truly going insane. Was he expecting an answer? He didn’t know what would scare him most: that the creature would reply or that it wouldn’t.

The walls crack loudly and he saw them ripple. He rubbed his eyes and blinked quickly, trying to make the vision disappear and bring reality back, but the bricks twisted and warped, creating waves that ricocheted all around him. Surely he was hallucinating now? He glimpsed a translucent figure sliding around the room. His eyes followed it until a second translucent silhouette appeared from the wall. “Scott,” it whispered.

The air felt different—suffocating and heavy. It smelled like nutmeg and burned cookies. “Scott,” it breathed. “Remember.”

The two translucent figures came together near the window and embraced. “Remember what?” he asked. “Who are you?”

The smell became overpowering, his ears starting to ring—metal grating against metal—and he felt like smoke was spreading in his lungs. He couldn’t breathe. “You have to remember, Scott,” the figure murmured against his ear, suddenly standing behind him.

The wind howled, making the window’s hinges vibrate until they shattered in a loud explosion of wood and glass. Hail rushed into the room, pelting the wooden floor, covering it in crystals the size of golf balls.

He jolted backwards another foot and felt his back hit the wall. “Remember what?” he screamed into the room. But who could hear him? The wind and hail were deafening, he couldn’t hear himself think. “Remember what?” he screamed again and sunk to the floor, covering his ears with his hands.

The two figures slithered in front him. “Remember,” they whispered both, surrounding him and wrapping their diaphanous shapes around him.

No one was coming, he realized and he willed his stumbling body into getting up. “Leave me alone,” he yelled, trying to extricate himself from their disembodied figures.

It wouldn’t let him go quietly. Dozen of discarnate greyish hands sprung from the wall behind him.
and held him there, tightening their grip around his struggling body until his vision narrowed to black spots. His heart pounded in his ears and the dizziness threatened to overcome him. He could not black out, he repeated to himself like a mantra. He had to fight. The house wouldn’t let him go quietly, but neither would he. “Leave me alone, let me go,” he choked through the hands that squeezed around his throat.

The two figures pressed their faceless shapes against his face. “Remember Scott,” they repeated.

He grappled against the hands that kept him slammed to the wall. “Tell me,” he gasped, trying to suck in as much oxygen as he could. He felt the hands loosen their iron grip a fraction and he bucked harder against them. “Remember what?” A change of light caught his eye and from the open window, he saw dawn breaking. His heart thumped harder against his ribs.

“Remember,” it hissed in his ear and the smell of burning flesh hit his nose, making him gag. He tried to repress the overwhelming nausea. “Tessa,” it breathed and his heart skipped a beat. “Remember Tessa.”

The first ray of sunlight broke through his window and illuminated the room; the hands and the figures disappeared suddenly, retreating back into the wall—his body dropping to the ground with a thud.

He laid there for a few seconds, prostrate, curled up around himself, wishing unconsciousness would take him, but images of Tessa swirled around his mind and, for her, he willed his aching body to its feet.

He had to get to her.

He thought daylight was safer.

He was wrong.

*Tessa couldn’t move. She woke up a few minutes before sunrise, feeling cold and wanting to pull the blankets up when she first noticed it: she couldn’t move. Not her legs, not her arms, not one finger—nothing was responsive. Her heart pounded in her chest and she could feel the panic settling in; the overwhelming feeling of dread flooded her system, her vision disfigured, as if she were looking through a fish-eye lens. But she couldn’t close her eyes; she had tried in vain. She could feel the tears running down her cheeks and she tried lifting a hand to wipe them off, but nothing would move. The tears flowed harder and she felt her nose start to clog up—was she going to die here? In bed? Drowning in tears, suffocating in snot?

She tried to calm her heart down, but it wouldn’t cooperate either. The panic was soul crushing. Her head was cemented to the pillow, her body embedded, frozen. She tried to scream but no words came out. She was paralyzed. There was a hidden presence in the room, something dark, and it was tormenting her, refusing to let her go.

She watched them emerge from the shadows, petrified, unable to escape, a prisoner of her own body and mind. They crawled up the end of her bed—white shadowy faceless figures—until they settled on top of her. They weighed nothing but she felt a crushing pressure on her chest, making it all the more difficult to breathe. She couldn’t close her eyes, she had no option but to stare upward into the darkness.

“Remember,” one of them whispered, pressing against her face. She wanted to turn away, she
wanted to close her eyes, go back to sleep or wake up, she didn’t know, but she wanted this to stop. Frustration began seeping into her mind; she had made a living of controlling her body, each movement intentional, precise, and sharp—this was hell and she was sure the creatures who tormented her knew it.

She tried to make a sound, to move her lips. She has so many questions. “Remember,” the other whispered in turn, and she felt the sudden sensation of water dripping onto her face. “Remember Tessa,” it whispered again. Were they trying to drown her? Was this to be her fate?

The figures caressed her face slowly, speaking gibberish in her ear. This was just a dream, she kept telling herself, she would wake up any second. She focused on the light changing, dancing on the opposite wall as dawn started to break. Just as daylight was flooding her room, she heard her front door slam and hurried feet running across the wooden floor. “Tessa!” Scott’s yell felt like a balm to her soul. He was there. Everything would be fine, nothing could ever be wrong when he was beside her.

He threw her bedroom door open and rushed to her side, climbing on the bed. He was dripping wet, hair windswept, smelling faintly of smoke, but he was there. “Tess!” He sounded out of breath and panicked. “Are you okay?” he asked, cradling her face, looking her over.

His touch unlocked her body and she felt her hand twitch. “S—Scott,” she stuttered, mouth dry, her tongue like sandpaper.

“You’re okay,” he gasped, and she could hear the relief in his voice. Without any warning whatsoever, he pulled her face to his and pressed his lips against hers. “You’re okay, you’re okay, you’re okay,” he said over and over against her mouth, peppering it with a thousand kisses. She raised her trembling arms around his neck and pulled him against her, returning his kisses with fervor.

They had kissed plenty of times before: soft, tender kisses; raw, lip-biting, passionate kisses; guilty, forbidden kisses, heartbreaking and anguished kisses, but he had never kissed her like that—desperately, like she was the only woman left on earth, his saving grace. Warmth spread in her lower abdomen and tingled her spine, and, with every kiss, each deeper and more frantic than the last, he woke her from her paralysis, making her soul burn bright.

If she felt like she was drowning before, this was nothing compared to what was happening now. There were no logical thoughts, no ulterior motives, no plans—only this tidal feeling of love and gratefulness that threatened to overtake them both. No matter how much they said they would never do this again, it felt right, unstoppable, and inevitable. He had come for her, he was there, that was all that mattered at the moment: them together, melting into each other until they became one.

Clothes flew—his first, and he helped her out of hers—and it wasn’t long before they were both naked and his wet mouth was roaming all over her body, settling between her thighs, spreading them wide. He brushed his thumb against her clit, making her gasp and shiver, and he closed his mouth around her, sucking, licking, lapping as her hips bucked and rolled, fucking herself against his lips and tongue. He added fingers, the sound of them pumping wetly in and out of her so obscene and erotic it made her gush all over him, and she spread her legs wider, inviting him closer, deeper, a hand fisting his hair roughly.

“Fuck, Tess,” he moaned against her and she only rocked harder on his tongue, pleasure consuming her, incapable of uttering a single word. She felt his hands bruise each side of her hips where he was holding her down and she knew that he was probably rutting against the mattress, close to unravelling too.
She needed him inside of her now, before their last shred of control was gone. “Come here,” she moaned, grabbing his face, pulling it to hers and kissing him deeply, licking his lips, sucking on his tongue, tasting herself in his mouth. “I want you.”

She knew she didn’t need to say more; years and years of intimacy and familiarity with each other’s bodies had made him particularly aware of her needs. She slipped a hand between them, gripping his cock tight, fisting him slowly, drawing a rough and low ‘fuck’ from his lips. When she felt he couldn’t take anymore—his words gibberish in the crook of her neck, his whole body stiffening and shivering under her touch—she guided him to her entrance and he pushed inside swiftly, taking her roughly.

There was no slow and gentle, there was no taking their time and building their pleasure slowly. His hips slapped against her frantically, the sounds wet and lewd, as she gripped his ass, urging him to go harder, faster, deeper. His mouth was buried in her neck, sucking and nipping at her soft skin, turning it red and raw. The demons needed to be fed, they needed to be kept quiet, at bay; they demanded a sacrifice.

“Scott,” she whined. She was so close. She only needed a tiny bit more to get there and she knew he was almost there too; she could feel him twitch and swell inside of her with each frenzied thrust.

“I know, baby,” he grunted, slanting his lips against hers, plunging his tongue in her mouth, devouring her, savoring her. “Touch yourself.”

She slipped a hand between their slick bodies, gasping at the wetness pooling between them and rubbed her clitoris in quick circular motions. She saw him look down at where they were joined, at their bodies coming together and she smiled when she heard him growl. She knew he felt her fingers brush against him each time he pushed inside her. “I’m so close, Tess,” he grunted.

She wrapped her available arm around his neck, pressing their bodies closer, urging him deeper. “Me too,” she moaned. “Keep going, don’t stop.”

His hand joined hers, rubbing between them and when her sticky fingers grazed his balls, he thrust into her so hard the bed banged on the wall, making them giggle between open-mouthed kisses. His whole body spasmed and contracted under her touch and she felt his cock twitch inside her, coating her walls with his thick come. “Please,” she mewed, gripping his hand still rubbing her clitoris. “Harder.”

“Come on, Tess,” he groaned, stroking and rocking into her as long as his already softening cock would allow. “I got you, you’re so close.”

His voice was all she needed to burst at the seams. She brought her hands to her breasts, pinched her nipples hard and fell over the edge, body tightening all around him, white hot light erupting behind her closed eyes. “Fuck,” she moaned, hips rocking softly, trying to make the feeling last a little bit longer.

“Gentle, babe,” he reminded her, the feeling of her fluttering cunt sucking him deeper probably too much for his oversensitive cock now. She giggled and wrapped herself around him, not letting him pull out, arms snug around his neck. He laid his head on her chest, lulled by the sound of her beating heart and she closed her eyes as she ran her hand through his hair, basking in their mutual bliss.

When she opened her eyes again, two distorted faces were slithering across her ceiling, watching them intently from above. “SCOTT!” she yelled, straightening up and clasping the sheet around
She saw his gaze following hers and heard his gasp when he saw the white twisted faces leering down at them. He put out his hand across her chest in a useless attempt to protect her. The two translucent figures emerged from behind the curtains and floated to the end of their bed. Had they been watching the whole time? Revelling in their pleasure?

“Remember,” they whispered together, crawling on the bed, closer and closer to them. Tessa and Scott were petrified—there was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

They felt the figures go through them and a warm white light surrounding them before they blacked out.

They woke up a few minutes later, bright sunlight flooding Tessa’s bedroom. For the first time ever since they moved into the building, she felt warm and at peace, the place no longer unsettling and scary.

“Are you okay?” she asked Scott, grasping his hand.

He looked around and then at her. “Yeah,” he nodded. “I guess so. How about you? What was that? We didn’t hallucinate this, right?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” she answered. “I don’t know what the hell that was.” Her bedroom looked… normal. It was silent—no cracks, no bangs, no spirits or distorted faces haunting it.

“My ears aren’t ringing,” Scott told her. “And I’m not feeling sore all over anymore. Did we actually exorcise this shit or what?”

Now that she was thinking about it, she finally got that song out of her head. “I don’t know. Maybe,” she said carefully. She knew better than to be optimistic; this felt too good to be true. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the quiet for a few seconds. Images and sounds swirled around in her mind’s eye, but she couldn’t make sense of it.

“Tess—” Scott’s tone startled her. “You’re crying.”

She raised a hand to her face and found wetness there. “Moulin Rouge,” she whispered wistfully. “What?”

She couldn’t stop the tears. “Moulin Rouge,” she said. “That’s the song I had stuck in my head. El Tango de Roxanne. We skated to it, I think. We won a gold medal.”

The emotions and memories came crashing back to her now and she felt her heart drop in her stomach. The terror, the deafening noise, the smell, the pain—and Scott’s kiss. His desperate loving last kiss—and his tears that had dripped down her cheeks making it taste sweet and salty at the same time.

She saw the confusion and worry etched on his face; it crinkled the corner of his eyes. “Are you sure you’re okay Tess? We never skated to it.”

She palmed his jaw and pressed her face against his cheek. “Remember, Scott,” she said, kissing his temple.

“You have to remember, Scott,” said two voices coming from the other side of the room, making him gasp.
Two familiar figures had emerged from behind the curtain. Tessa recognized them immediately—they were the spirits that had haunted them. Except they had bodies now; they were women (a blonde and a brunette) and they were looking at them, holding hands. “The nuns!” Scott exclaimed.

“I told you we should have been more careful,” the blonde told the brunette.

“It doesn’t matter now anyways,” replied the brunette. “Scott,” she said, turning to him. “You have to remember.”

“Tessa,” he said softly, moving closer to her. “I don’t understand what’s going on.”

She didn’t either. It only had just come back to her in bits and pieces. “You kissed me, remember?” she said, pressing her lips to his. “On the plane. Coming back from Korea. You kissed me.”

“I—I don’t—” he stuttered. His eyes glistened and his body was shivering.

“We won the Olympics,” she smiled through her tears. “And you kissed me,” she said, pressing her mouth against his again. “We were happy. So happy.” She was crying now and she didn’t even bother trying to wipe the tears that were flowing freely down her cheeks. “Deliriously, incandescently happy.” She smiled softly, tracing his eyes with the tips of her fingers. “And then—then we got on a plane back to Canada and you kissed me again.”

She saw the moment he remembered. His beautiful hazel eyes filled with tears and he buried his face into her neck. “I kissed you,” he sobbed. “I remember, Tess. I remember everything.”

She wondered if he remembered the electric feeling of the crowd cheering them on as they skated the best performances of their lives and won their third gold medal or how he had hugged her so tight she had hardly been able to breathe. But none of that had mattered. Because they had won. And it had been perfect. She hoped he would remember their passionate kisses, their feverish lovemaking, and all the fun they had following their win. He deserved to remember some happy memories too.

Because she knew... From his sobs she knew he remembered the dread as the plane started to plummet from the sky, the terror, the panic, the anger and the inevitability—his tears, his hands gripping her arm and her hands, breaking her fingers, his heady kisses, his whispered words of love and devotion as he accepted their fate.

She hoped he had forgotten the whiplash, the smell of smoke and burning flesh and the sound of metal bending and snapping before black and blue oblivion overtook them.

Tessa turned to the two women that were still watching them and asked the question she was so terrified to know the answer to. She took a deep breath and steeled herself. “Are we dead?”

“Yes,” the brunette said simply. “I’m so sorry.”

Tessa could only nod as she wrapped her arms around Scott, their bodies heaving, wrecked with heartache and sorrow. He grabbed the back of her neck, burying his nose in her sweet strawberry smell. How did she still smell like her shampoo if she was dead? If they both were? “Why are we here?” he asked after a moment. “Why did we come back here?”

“The building lets the dead live within their walls. It’s a converging spot for supernatural activity,” the blonde explained. “Your love brought you back here.”

“You had some of your happiest memories here,” the brunette continued. “The building fed off
your love for two years, it seeped into the bricks and the wood. You left parts of your souls here. When you died you came back here."

“We didn’t expect you to forget you were dead. We didn’t anticipate the trauma,” the blonde told them. “We had to make you remember. We had to make you realize you were dead. It had to come from you.”

“And for that,” the brunette carried on, “we needed you to get closer. A lot closer. So we haunted you. We scared you into remembering. We’re sorry.”

Tessa looked at Scott, bewildered. The same sentiment echoed in his eyes. This was too much information, too much emotion for them to process. She was clinging to him as much as he was to her and she felt his fingers lace through hers. “Are we—are we going to remain here forever?” she asked.

“Your souls are bound to this place. You can never leave,” the blonde explained patiently. “You never left the building, incidentally. You thought you were leaving for practice but your memories replaced what you thought was reality once you died and came back here.”

“The house can play tricks on you,” the brunette shrugged.

“What about our families?” Scott asked. “We’ll live here forever as… ghosts, but what about them?”

Tessa could feel his anger. He would never see his parents, brothers, or nieces and nephews ever again. She would never see her mother, sisters, brothers nor her sweet Poppy. That train of thought brought back a fresh round of tears to her eyes. Their whole families were planning to welcome them home at the airport; she couldn’t even begin to imagine the devastation they must have felt when they heard they would never be back.

“This is why it was paramount that you remembered today,” the blonde told her. “Today is All Hallows’ Eve. The veil between the worlds of the living and the dead is never thinner than on this day. It’s the only day of the year you can leave this house.”

“Leave?” Tessa asked. “Would our families be able to see us if we went to see them on Halloween?” She saw Scott’s face light up at the suggestion and she knew he would love nothing more than one more day with his family. Just like she would.

The brunette sighed. “You can choose to apparate in corporal shape to anyone you wish to, but we advise against it. Your families and loved ones would never understand. The agony for you and them both would be too much to endure.”

Tessa’s face fell and she saw the same sorrow portrayed on Scott’s face. They looked intently at each other for a few seconds, hands clasped tight together; they didn’t need words to know what the other was thinking. They both agreed; they understood they could never put their families through this much pain. Scott pressed his forehead against hers and kissed her lips softly.

“Look out the window,” the blond told them after a few seconds had passed.

Their legs—if you could call them that, did they even have legs now that they were dead?—felt weak and wobbly as they wrapped the sheet around them and got up to the window. The sky was clear and blue, the sun shining brightly and there… there on the curb outside the house, were Jordan, Danny, and Charlie.

It felt so good to see them—it felt like an eternity. They looked tired and sad, but not completely
unhappy. “What are they doing here?” Tessa asked excitedly. She had missed her sister’s face. She wanted to run and hug her with all might. Her heart constricted at the thought; she wanted to so badly but knew she never could. When was the last time they had hugged? She couldn’t even remember and all of her longed for her sister’s embrace; it felt like a hole had been punched out in her heart.

“They came to empty your apartments and collect your belongings,” the brunette informed them. “They didn’t have the heart to do it sooner.”

Scott could not take his eyes off his brothers, his gaze following their every move as they took out empty card boxes from the trunk of their car. “Can we stay and watch them?” he asked eagerly. “We can…disappear, right?” he checked with the two women who nodded back. “They’ll never know we were there.”

Tessa looked at him fondly and snuggled closer against his side. He lowered his lips to hers and kissed her again. “This is better than nothing,” she said.

“At least we’ll be together,” he whispered softly.

“Until the end of time,” she said, a bittersweet smile playing on her lips.

“There’s no one I would rather spend eternity with, kiddo,” he said, kissing the top of her hair as they kept on looking at their families through the window, not wanting to miss even one second of it.

*The London Free Press*

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**Olympic Champions Virtue, Moir among those killed in fatal Air Canada plane crash**

TORONTO — As more information emerges about the recent fatal crash of an Air Canada Boeing 787 flight from Seoul to Toronto, Air Canada representatives have confirmed that two of the passengers onboard were Olympic ice dancing champions Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir.

Virtue and Moir, who had just days before captured the hearts of audiences across the globe with their gold-medal winning ice dancing performances during the Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, South Korea, were headed home to Canada following the closing ceremonies. Their win in PyeongChang had made Virtue, 28, and Moir, 30, the most decorated figure skaters of all time.

The pair were two of approximately 298 passengers aboard flight AC62 from Incheon Airport to Toronto Pearson. Authorities in both Korea and Canada are currently investigating how the flight, which lost contact with air traffic control four hours after takeoff in Korea, went down over the Pacific Ocean. Officials from Boeing and Air Canada are conducting independent investigations into the nature of the crash, and have pledged their assistance to crash investigators.

“Our thoughts at this time are with the families and loved ones of all the passengers and crew on AC62,” Air Canada spokesperson Jean Donnelly said in a statement Monday.

The Korean search and rescue agency dispatched to the site of the crash said it expects no survivors and bodies of most victims were probably trapped inside the fuselage of the plane in the
Rescuers have so far been able to recover only body parts, debris of the plane and some belongings of passengers, the agency’s Operations Deputy Hyun-Soo Kim told reporters in Seoul. The search is focused on a 124 nautical mile area in the Pacific, he said.

Following the confirmation that Virtue and Moir were on the passenger list for the flight, Skate Canada has announced it will be setting up a memorial fund to honour the skaters and foster a new generation of athletes.

“Tessa and Scott were not only the most decorated figure skaters of all time, they were also pioneers for their sport and an inspiration for so many athletes across the country,” Skate Canada president Leanna Caron said in a statement. “We at Skate Canada are heartbroken to hear of the loss and our hearts go out to their families during this incredibly difficult time.”

Representatives for Virtue and Moir could not be reached for comment at the time of publication.

In addition to their individual gold medal in PyeongChang, Virtue and Moir won gold in the team event alongside fellow Canadian skaters. They previously earned two silver medals at the 2014 Sochi Olympics—in the team and individual events—as well as gold in the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. Over the course of their 20-year partnership, Virtue and Moir became three-time world champions and eight-time national champions.

Memorial services for the pair are set to be scheduled in their hometowns of Ilderton, Ont. and London, Caron confirmed to the Free Press. Skate Canada will also announce a celebration of life in the coming days, and the CBC is set to air a tribute to their career. Those interested in donating to Skate Canada’s fund may do so through the organization’s homepage.

Chapter End Notes

Additional spoilery tags: major characters death, afterlife, plane crash, they were dead all along.
This was truly a TEAM effort and I couldn’t have done it without all my wonderful writer and fandom friends (you know who you are). Special thanks and cheek kisses to H & K for their rigorous meticulous work and to K for the last newspaper clipping: a true work of art.
Tell me your favorite parts? Kudos and comments always welcome! <3
Find me at east-from-eden on Tumblr and East_from_Eden on Twitter if you ever want to come yell at me or chat.
say my name

Chapter by echoesofstardust

Chapter Summary

What is the worth of your memories?

Chapter Notes

**Rating:** T

**Tags:** Near character injury/death, Rumpelstiltskin-esque, modern day AU, magical memory loss, public transport AU, (which I don't think is a thing but I'm making it one), trick or treating

**Word Count:** 11.7k

Hey all! It's an honour to be part of spooktober and I'm so excited to share what I've been working on. I went with the fairytale theme and this fic is loosely inspired by the fairytale 'Rumpelstiltskin'—but with my own spin on it.

A massive thank you to the Guild for the invitation to participate, to PurpleHazeGirl, OnlySkyAboveMe and iwantthemtostay for all their detailed feedback (it's thanks to them this fic is somewhat decent and that the timeline is consistent), and to lapetitemort20, walkinrobe and rookandpawn for the love and support always.

Title is from Destiny's Child's 'say my name' because I think I'm funny.

Hope you enjoy! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Scott’s been dreaming of exactly one shade of green.

He’s not a poet, not by a long shot, so he doesn’t know how to describe the colour. He can’t compare it to a forest, or to an emerald, or to the neon green sign above the Chinese restaurant that flickers erratically every time he walks past it. All he knows is that before he wakes up, it’s the last thing that he sees and it’s the first thing he remembers.

His grip tightens on the handle as the train car lurches to one side. The cramped press of bodies around him shifts in waves like they’re being tossed by the ocean. As he barely manages to stay steady on his feet, his eyes catch on her.

It’s a little embarrassing how often his gaze drifts towards her. He can’t remember the first time he saw her, but it’s probably close to something like half a year ago. She’s always on his morning train, without fail, somehow managing to stand gracefully even when the train jostles like it’s in a hurricane.
She’s got her focus directed on the book she’s holding, seeming thoroughly engrossed in whatever fictional world she’s reading about. He assumes her silver thermos must now be tucked away in her bag, the drink she’s sipping when they get on the train at the same station long gone.

He shakes his head a little to himself, averting his gaze to a spot on the train window. It’s not just that she’s pretty (because he knows she is) but there’s something else that draws him to her, every bit the cliche about the moth and the flame.

Not that he’s had the courage to introduce himself.

It’s the station before he needs to get off and it’s the one where she does. It’s usually at this point where his traitorous head sneaks a final glance, flicking his eyes up to where her the back of her head slips out of train car door.

She chooses to glance over her shoulder this time and meets his gaze.

His heart lodges itself in his throat.

He would’ve expected a look of annoyance or a frown (that he would’ve deserved) from her. It’s what he’d expect someone to give a guy who’s been caught staring.

Her smile is soft and a little tired, but she doesn’t look at him like he’s a stranger. She holds his gaze long enough for him to realise the colour of her eyes.

—

“Scott!” The scream that tears from her throat is ugly and red and raw. There was a kid, a little girl, that had wandered too close to the railway line, had chosen to peek down with too much momentum and started to fall.

Scott, bless his selfless heart, had managed to pull the little girl back.

But in doing so, his own motion had caused himself to lose balance and tip over the edge. The sound of the oncoming train had echoed long and hard in her ears.

People always talk about their life flashing before their eyes when they’re about to die. Tessa had discovered that nothing flashes when you watch someone as their life is about to end. Just the imprint of fear and shock and loss on their face tattooed on your eyelids.

That should’ve been the end of it.

But it wasn’t.

Even now, she doesn’t know if it was fate, or destiny, or the universe, or a god, or magic that day. She wonders if it was within her, the desperation of her scream hooking into and tugging out a thread out of time, unravelling her reality as she knew it.

Time stopped. The bodies around her frozen, the head of the train an inch away from Scott. She’d fallen to her knees, sobbing in dry heaves, squeezing her eyes shut.

Tessa. A voice, disembodied, had said. It had sounded like it was said from underwater, echoing in the crevices of her skull.

You can save him. But it comes at a price.

I’ll pay it, she had replied, voice a broken whisper, whatever the price is, I’ll pay it.
You don’t know what the price is yet. You might not be prepared to give it up.

I’ll pay it, *she’d said through gritted teeth*, Please, just save him.

Even if the price is every memory he has of you? A *pause*. It’s the only price that can save him.

*Her heart had broken when she saw him fall. Yet she had discovered that broken pieces can be shattered even further.*

I’ll pay it, *she had repeated*. The *thought of Scott forgetting her carves every niche and hollow of her body, but she’ll always, always choose a world where he’s alive. Even if she still has to lose him in the end.*

Tessa. *The voice had said again, something like a sigh filling her ears*. There’s a way for him to remember all his memories of you.

*Tessa hadn’t answered. She’d been too afraid to hope.*

If he can figure out your name, without you telling him, he’ll remember you.

—

It takes a week of shared glances before he actually finds the bravery to talk to her.

It also takes a serendipitous bump that somehow dislodged her stance and she falls into him. It’s just due to his quick reflexes that he’s able to catch her with a palm between her shoulder blades, careful to keep his hold gentle but firm. It’s a lot all at once to see her this close.

“Hi.” The word falls from his lips, a little anticlimactic after he’s spent more than he’d like to admit admiring her from afar. It’s short and he wishes he’d said something more charming, but at the same time—it feels like it’s what he’s meant to say.

“Hi.” The faintest pink colours her cheeks.

He lets go immediately as soon as she’s steady. His face warms when he notices how close he is to her. He tries to step back to give her space but it’s public transport during peak hour. There isn’t much space to step back into.

She ducks her head and tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Sorry about that,” she says, glancing up at him quickly.

“It’s okay, don’t worry about it.” He grins, “To be honest, the train’s packed enough that you’d probably still be standing.”

She smiles a little at that, the beginning of a not-quite laugh. “That’s true,” she concedes. “Still...thank you. For catching me.”

“Anytime.” He finds the bravado to wink, as if his heart isn’t beating erratically in his chest. It draws out a soft laugh from her.

As he studies her this close, he notices something he hadn’t before. There’s some sort of fragility surrounding her, cloaking her, and a sheen of something like sadness. Nothing outright, but she moves with a heaviness in the lift of her arm, the turn of her neck.

He wonders what’s got her so sad. He wonders if there’s anything he can do. He wonders why he wants to make her smile when she’s a stranger.
“Hey, so uh, how’s the book that you’re reading?”

Somehow, the question seems to make her sadder. She tucks her bottom lip in and looks away from him, blinking rapidly.

“It’s good.” She swallows and tries to smile. "The way the author describes the setting is like I'm right there with the characters.”

"Yeah? Would you recommend it?"

She narrows her eyes a little. “I don’t know,” she muses, “I don’t know what type of books you like to read.”

“Eh, I’m open to trying anything.”

She gazes at him for a beat or two before rooting through her bag for her book. It’s worn and the spine’s folded in multiple places, some more than others. Those must be her favourite and most read parts.

“Clockwork Angel,” he reads the title aloud, “sounds intriguing.”

He’s able to coax a little more conversation from her, prods at her favourite parts of the book until she gets lost in recounting this particular scene and her eyes are shining.

The announcement that her station is the next stop sounds over the din of the crowd. She tucks her book back into her bag.

He realises that amidst their entire conversation he’s still missing a key piece of information about her. “So, uh, all this time we’ve been talking and I still haven’t found out your name,” he says.

A flash of something skirts across her eyes. “What about,” a playful smile teases her lips, “we play a game. You have to guess what my name is, and I’ll guess yours.”

He raises an eyebrow. It’s a little odd but all he wants is to get to know her better. “Okay, deal.” He holds out his hand.

The coyness of her smile dissipates the moment he agrees, something a little more smudged but also a little more real replacing it. He prefers this one more, but he thinks his favourite would be a smile that lights up her entire face.

She slips her hand in his and shakes. “Okay.”

—

“Virtch!” Scott’s running towards her as the PA system announces that the train is leaving in one minute. She raises an eyebrow as he reaches her, a hand on his knees as he’s exaggeratedly puffing. At least, she assumes he’s exaggerating. Looking at his very red face, she thinks that maybe he’s not.

He holds a cup out, “For—you.” His breath is still catching. Yeah, maybe he’s not exaggerating.

“Thank you,” she plucks the cup from out his hand before frowning, “wait, where’s yours?”

He stands up straight again, waving his hand. “No big deal, I realised I’d only grabbed enough change from my car for one coffee. I didn’t want to spend any more time looking for my card—my wallet was somewhere in my bag. We both know how much you love your coffee.” He grins at her.
“Oh.” The word is soft and sweet and somewhat shaken. “Thank you.” A tremulous smile spreads across her lips, settling into the one she knows she reserves only for him.

“You’re welcome.” He brings his hand up to brush his thumb against the corner of her mouth. “Coffee foam,” he explains.

It doesn’t explain why his hand lingers longer than necessary. It doesn’t explain why she doesn’t stop him.

—

He walks up to her the next morning, hoping he’s not overstepping their—acquaintanceship? He doesn’t know if one conversation is enough for that, but he knows he’d like to do whatever it takes to earn her friendship. He wonders how wonderful it must feel to be that lucky.

She’s sipping from her silver thermos, eyes half-shut. He guesses she’s not a person who lives for mornings and he doesn't know why he finds it endearing but he does.

Her eyes blink open wide when he nears. He hesitates a little, unsure if she would want him around this early. If she’d prefer her mornings to be a sanctuary on her own, he’d gladly respect that. But she gives him that same smudged smile and it's an invitation and exasperation, both at once.

"Hey." He's got his voice lowered to a murmur, a blanket of quiet between them even as the station's starting to fill.

She sips her drink and let's out the softest of sighs, somehow encircling melancholy and relief in the simple sound. Her fingers tap out a random rhythm on the surface of her thermos as she holds her drink. There’s nothing that necessitates him puncturing the silence but he finds himself asking her a question, if only to hear her voice.

"What are you drinking?" he nods towards her hands wrapped tightly around her thermos.

"Tea," she says, "peppermint." She breathes in quickly once, not quite a sniffle.

"Always peppermint?"

She shakes her head. "Sometimes chamomile, sometimes green, sometimes black…"

He tilts his head. He wonders—

"What?" She touches her mouth. "Do I have something--"

"Oh no, no. I just thought you'd be more of a coffee person." He grins to let her know it's a joke.

She laughs softly. "No, you're right. I usually am. Just...a friend gave me a lot of tea once and I haven’t gotten around to drinking it. I guess I figured I might as well start now.” Her laughter peters out like a heavy rainfall slowing down to a light drizzle. Her eyes unfocus, like they’re holding a photo album of memories and it tugs at something in his chest.

“This friend means a lot to you?” His question is slow, a little worried he’s overstepping. He closes his hand in his coat pocket, thumb tucked into his fist.

“He was the best.”

—
“Happy birthday, happy birthday, happy birthday to you!” Scott’s voice warbles in her ear, dragging out the sound of ‘you’ like the child that he is.

“Scott!” she tries to say his name in an admonishing way but she’s sure the smile on her lips and the blush on her cheeks betray her. She whacks his shoulder lightly, although he still pretends like the action hurt.

“Happy birthday.” This time it’s a statement and it’s a gentle puff of air on the skin between her cheek and her neck from how close they have to stand together on the train.

“Thank you,” she answers, looking up at him but looking away almost as quickly before she can get lost. It’s like she’s a teenager infatuated and not a grown woman. Well, she’ll admit she’s infatuated, but that doesn’t excuse the giddiness currently occupying her body.

The train stops at the next station and all the bodies collectively heave in one direction. She feels something poke her side and looks down to see Scott’s bag weirdly misshapen. She gives him a quizzical look.

“Oh!” He opens the flap, and pulls out something haphazardly wrapped. He reddens as she looks at his, um, masterpiece. "Sorry, um, I found it hard to wrap your present." The paper's starting to open and it's taped in various angles and yet—

—It's possibly the most beautiful thing she's ever seen.

The train's hit the stretch where it's moving smoothly so she assumes she can let go of the handle to take the present from him. His hand goes to her waist, automatically, and her heart flutters in response.

She peels back part of the paper.

"Tea?" She smiles up at him bemusedly. There's several boxes of different sizes and types of tea. "I thought we'd established that I'm a coffee person." He knows that from when they've taken turns buying each other coffee in the mornings.

"Tea for T," his eyes crinkle at the sides, proud of his joke. She laughs, probably too loudly for the crowded space. She shouldn't find it funny but she does, of course she does, if only because it came from him.

"Well, thank you," she says, pressing the peeled back paper and smoothing the tape down, although it's lost some of its stickiness. Impulsively, she presses a kiss to his cheek.

She's rarely a creature of impulses, preferring to overthink everything, tossing and turning thoughts in her head like she tosses and turns at night. She can't find it in her to regret this though. She bites her bottom lip and her cheeks pinken and she glances up at him. There's a softness to the colours in his eyes and god—he must know the way she feels about him, like there's a thread from her heart to his like the make-shift telephone that kids make from two plastic cups, and every beat is an ardent confession.

She finds she doesn't mind.

She's still holding on to her present, fingertips pressed against the boxes, the cardboard depressing underneath her touch. He sweeps a strand of hair off her forehead before she can. The way her hair falls on her face tends to irritate her to no end and he must have noticed.

He gives her the smile she's come to think of as hers, and it's obviously not the first time that he's
smiled at her like this, but it’s the first time that she’s let herself consider the possibility that maybe he could feel for her what she feels for him.

What’s that poem? ‘My thoughts are wing’d with hope, my hopes with love’? Something like that. If hope is a bird then that must be what’s fluttering in her chest.

(It’s a little too soon to touch that other four letter word.)

It’s not something she’s quite ready to say, but she’s not worried. They’ve got time.

—

He's got 'This is Halloween' from 'The Nightmare Before Christmas' stuck in his head, the staccato melody tapping out in his brain because of course it's only that line that he remembers and none of the rest of the words.

He was babysitting his niece the previous evening as a favour for his brother and he adores her, truly, but watching the film twice through in one evening has meant that a significant portion of his brain capacity is now dedicated to that song.

"A little early for Halloween, isn’t it?” someone says at his shoulder and he knows who it is before he turns to look.

"Hi.” He sounds a little in awe, like she’s a bird he’s spent months trying to tame—not to capture, but to trust in him, and she’s finally come to alight on his shoulder, the brush of her silken feathers a balm on his skin.

“Not that early, it’s already October.”

She raises an eyebrow.

“Okay, maybe a little early.” She looks triumphant and victorious at his concession, like she’s won a gold medal at the Olympics. He’ll lose as many arguments as he needs to to see her smile like that again—he knows that there’ll never be a need to let her win because he just knows even with him trying his best, she’d still best him. “But I was babysitting my niece last night and she insisted on watching the movie twice through.” He’s chuckling softly. “I thought we’d only watch it once but all she had to do was give me her puppy-dog eyes and a ‘pwease Unca Scott’ and the next thing I know I’m pressing play again.”

“That’s so sweet...she’s got you wrapped around her little finger. She must adore you.” She takes a sip from her thermos. “‘Unca Scott.” She emphasises his name, and at first he finds it a little weird that she’s saying it like that but then he remembers.

The deal.

His expression of realisation must be downright comical because a honk of a laugh escapes her. Her eyes are squeezed shut and she’s got a palm pressed to her chest. “Oh, Scott.”

He rubs a hand over his face, but he can’t help but laugh at himself too. He really walked into that one. Damn, he didn’t think he was that unintelligent.

“Is there any chance you’ll take pity on me and just give me your name?” He peeks at her through his fingers and she shakes her head. He groans, but pleads, “What about a hint?”

“Nope. You gotta work for it a little, Scott.” She brings her drink to her lips and takes another sip.
Apparently, she’s going to insist on repeating his name as many times as she can. “Besides,” she winks, “how do you know I haven’t already given you one?”

The train pulls up at their station. After some maneuvering and dodging, Scott manages to find a seat. He taps her on the arm and nods in the seat’s direction. She shakes her head, saying that she’d rather leave it for someone who actually needs it.

“Why don’t you show me photos of your niece instead?” she prompts, and he’s so thankful Charlotte insisted on selfies on his phone, as well as an impromptu photo shoot after she persuaded him to play dress-up. He scrolls through the gallery on his phone. She gives the most delightful ‘awww’ when she sees his niece, a loud bursting ‘ha!’ when he reaches the photos of him draped with plastic jewellery, and the softest smile when he reaches the last photo which Charlotte insisted on taking herself, him and her grinning at the camera clearly tired but happy.

She reaches over to scroll back through the photos and stops on one of the braid he gave Charlotte. Charlotte had asked for a photo so that she could judge his work. His niece had sassily declared it ‘okay’, before conceding that it was actually quite good after he proceeded to tickle her. “That’s pretty,” she murmurs. “You did that?”

“Yeah,” he answers. Actually, he’s a little confused that he managed to braid Charlotte’s hair. He swears he doesn’t remember ever learning to braid someone’s hair, but Charlotte asked and it’s like his hands just knew what to do. It wasn’t perfect, and it could have been a lot neater, but he’s just thankful he was able to make his niece smile.

She continues to look at the photo. “You did a good job,” she swallows, “you’re a really good uncle, Scott.”

“Charlotte’s easy to love.”

He thinks about how he’s starting to think that she’s not the only one.

While their friendship began on a train, it began to bleed into other parts of their life as well, like the way the pigment from watercolour pencils bleed into each other once you stroke over them with a damp paintbrush. It starts slowly, in the little things like text messages, growing to random phone calls at 2 am, and then unfurls and spreads until the original picture has completely changed but you can’t find it in yourself to care because you like this new one better.

Case in point is the way Scott is sitting on the floor even though the couch is there, legs sprawled out and a hand in a tub of popcorn. She’s taking advantage of the space by lying across the couch, sinking into the cushions with a sigh because her entire body hurts from her day. She probably should be a better host. She wonders if Scott knows about her predicament and that’s why he’s letting her have the space. She might be inclined to wonder if he’s on the couch because he doesn’t want to be in close proximity with her but his other hand rests on her leg that’s half-hanging off.

(Later, she’ll muse on whether this casual sort of tactility is normal between friends, and maybe it is, but the way she feels like she’s floating when she remembers his palm against her skin probably isn’t, though she’ll ignore that train of thought. The Nile isn’t just a river in Egypt.)

They’re watching some rom-com he picked and she’s been annoying him by shouting out all the tropes as they’re about to be used in the movie, which earns her more than one piece of popcorn bouncing on her forehead, disappearing into the recesses of her couch. She likes the way it makes him laugh, and she laughs along even though it hurts some of her muscles.
It’s not long until the end credits are showing on the screen. Scott rolls his head back, landing against her waist. She’s tired and a little sleepy and that’s what she’ll chalk it up to later when her fingers tangle in his hair. It’s so soft.

“Yeah?” Scott tilts his head back more to look at her. She must’ve said it aloud. She can’t muster up the effort to care she just continues to run her fingers. He closes his eyes. She can only describe his expression as blissful.

“Hey, Tess,” he murmurs.

“Hmmm?” Her fingers still.

He opens one eye. “Can you teach me to braid your hair?” He sits up straighter, propping an elbow on the couch. “My nieces are always pestering me and they’re so disappointed when they find out I still can’t.” He widens his eyes and juts his bottom lip out, just a little. “Please?”

She groans because the thought of getting up is painful and she sees Scott frown a little so she smiles at him in reassurance and says, “Just help me get up? Then I can teach you.”

He’s still looking a little worried but he’s got a hand at the small of her back. To be perfectly truthful, she’s probably overexaggerating the pain and it’s really not so bad, but maybe that’s because of Scott’s gentle touch.

He settles in behind her. His skin radiates warmth and she’d feel jealous of how hot he runs because of how cold she usually is, but it feels too good, even at this distance that would easily fit a person and a half between them, and she barely suppresses a blissful sigh.

“So, I’ll show you how to do just one French braid because I think that’s the simplest?” She takes three strands of hair close to the front of her head. “If you master this one, I can teach you other styles if you want.” She throws him a smile over her shoulder. “That way, you can be their favourite uncle.”

“Thanks T, that’d be great.” His voice is a lot closer than what she expected. “Although I’m pretty sure I’m already their favourite.”

She twists awkwardly to dig an elbow into whatever part of his torso she can hit, and she barely manages to skim the fabric of his shirt but he still exaggerates his groan. “Careful with that bravado, Moir.” She shakes her head. “You don’t wanna be all talk.”

“Oh, I’m never all talk.” He says it in a low murmur. Her breath hitches slightly but before she can process it he’s changing the subject with a cheery, “So, how do I start?”

She braids her hair on her own first, explaining what she’s doing, when the strands cross over and where he needs to add more hair. She tries to explain it as slowly and in the clearest terms she can. Even without seeing him, she can picture the way he’s frowning, the way his fingers are tapping on his legs as he’s trying to remember what she’s doing with her hands.

She turns to look at him when she gets about halfway down her head. "Do you want to try now?"

He nods. He’s still frowning a little which makes her smile. "You’ll be fine," she reassures him, "it’s alright if you don’t get it on the first go." She faces away from him and starts to unbraid her hair when she feels his hands on hers, stilling her movements.

"May I?"
She nods dumbly, like she's no longer the one in control of her body. She takes away her hands from her hair, tangling her fingers together in her lap instead.

There aren't meant to be any nerve endings in your hair but as Scott slowly unravels her braided strands she swears she feels every single graze of his fingers. His touch is gentle, maybe even hesitant at first, in a way that makes her feel almost breakable.

“There,” he whispers, once he finishes unbraiding, combing a hand from the roots to the tips of her hair.

He starts by gathering the three strands of hair close to the top of her head like she showed him, and then weaves those together, adding more hair on the second pass.

Tessa feels him pause.

Her eyes open. She hadn't realised she'd closed them. "Scott?"

"Can I—can I come closer? I can't reach your hair properly and I don't think it'll be secure enough…” His voice trails off.

She answers by scooting back. He's got one leg bent and pressed against the back of the couch, the other foot on the floor, and she fits in the space in between. Her back isn't flush against his chest because that'd be too close and not the right distance for braiding, and she's at once grateful for the space and yet also craving for it to disappear.

"Thanks Tess," his voice curls around the letters of her name, the breath that carries them hitting the shell of her ear. She digs her nails into the tops of her thighs in an effort to fight her shiver.

His hands become more confident and sure as he keeps on going. It's quiet between them, just the sound of their breathing. She likes the way his lightly calloused fingertips feel in her hair, on the sensitive skin at the back of her neck, although it has her wondering where he's gotten those since she doubts it's from his office job.

He's slow like molasses and yet it still feels like a loss once he's at the tail end of the braid, the ghost of his knuckles against the grooves of her spine, skimming lightly.

And then he lingers.

"What do you think?" He's still holding onto the end, stopping the braid from falling apart, and yet she still feels like she’s about to unravel.

She has to take a moment to gather her thoughts, string them together into something somewhat coherent. She pats down along her head, feeling the work he’s woven out of her hair, out of her. “I think it’s good.” She twists to look at him. “Although, it’s a little loose so you could have pulled a little...harder.”

“Harder?” he repeats, low and murmured.

“I mean, tighter,” she rushes to correct herself. Her eyes widen as she says it, wondering why she keeps on suggesting words that hint at something intangibly more, the tension building.

Until she catches his eye and sees the gleam in his and bursts into laughter. He laughs along with her, tipping his head into the space between her shoulder blades.

"I'm sorry," she hiccups, "but you know what I mean."
"Yeah," his voice still muffled. "I'll do it properly next time." He straightens, "That is, if there's a next time? If you want."

She traces stars on the tops of her knees. "Yeah," she twists her torso to face him fully. "I want."

(If she dreams of what it'd be like if she burst into flames instead, if his mouth teases more than a laugh from hers, if his eyes gleam not just from amusement but from something decidedly...more, then that's not something she'll admit.)

—

He shows her what he’s bought the next time he sees her.

“A baby name book?” She looks at him amusedly, squinting her eyes and wrinkling her nose, a small smile playing at her lips.

“Yeah.” He opens it to the first page. “So, is your name ‘Abbey’, ‘Abigail’, ‘Ada’, ‘Addi’, ‘Adela’...” He gets through maybe ten of them before he stops because she’s shaking her head from trying not to laugh. “Are any of those right?” he jokes, but he already knows none of them are. He’s sure the moment he says her name, he’ll know in his bones that it’s hers, and none of those names have given him that feeling.

She shakes her head, mouthing 'No.'

He gives an exaggerated sigh, but he's accepting this defeat for now. He's about to launch into another litany of names, if only to make her giggle again, when she asks to see the book.

She flicks through it relatively quickly, not lingering on any section so he doesn't know whereabouts her name is in the alphabet.

She reaches the end, the pages fluttering from where she'd pressed against them with her thumb, and returns the book to him.

"Yes, so, um…my name's not there."

"What?!!"

She giggles, "My name's more of a nickname for usually a longer name? That's probably why. And it's a smaller book, so they only have the most common ones."

He groans, flexing his fingers in his hair. He's sure his hair is now sticking up in tufts.

“Don’t do that,” she rolls her eyes at him, “your hair’s a mess now.” One of her hands reach up like she’s about to bat his hands away from his hair, a subconscious gesture that speaks of familiarity, but she stops herself midway. Her hand curls in on itself, dropping back to her side. “Why do you always do that?” she asks instead, fond exasperation still evident in her tone.

He’s about to volley back with a joking retort about it being his hair but it dawns on him that she said the word ‘always’. ‘Always’ meaning that she’s seen the action enough times to know that it’s a habit of his to mess with his hair.

"‘Always?’"

“I—I notice you.” She looks away from him, like the quiet admission is more than what she wants to say.
“I notice you too.” He touches her arm lightly, trying to get her to look at him again. If she wants.

“I know. You aren’t subtle. At all.”

“Hey! Take that back!” There are other passengers looking at him at that outburst, and his cheeks are turning pink at the knowledge that his passing glances were actually not as inconspicuous as what he thought they were, but it’s worth it to hear the loud laugh that bursts from her lips.

Her shoulders shake from the effort of trying to curb her laughter and he hears the ring of something hard against metal. He looks down to see an elephant keyring attached to one of the zips of her bag.

“That’s pretty.” He points to the gold elephant, intricately designed and decorated, colourful details catching the light and sparkling.

“Oh!” She turns to the side, twisting her bag in front of her. “Yeah, my niece got it for me. My brother took his family on a trip to Thailand and that’s what she brought back home as a present.” She shakes her head, in obvious fondness. “I got her to try to come up with a name for it but all she wanted to call it was ‘E’. For elephant.”

He has to smile at the thought of her with her niece. She’s always seemed alarmingly put-together, the sort of person who is competence embodied, someone who dares the world to challenge her plans. All determination and poise and grace.

And yet he remembers the way she had softened when he showed her photos of his own niece, the adoration in her expression as she’s recounting the story of how she got the tiny elephant keychain hanging off her bag, and the dichotomy between these facets of her is—endearing.

It’s like layers of tissue paper around something fragile and something precious, translucent and rustling and in a myriad of colours. It’s not his place to peel them back, but each layer she allows him a glimpse of is something to cherish.

“Well, I think it’s a nice name.” He wonders if he’d think the same thing once he finds out hers. He thinks he’d use a litany of other adjectives, a lilting purple prose as he tries to find the one that’ll best fit.

She rolls her eyes again. “Poppy’ll like you then.” Her hand grips the handle of her bag a little tighter.

“I’m sure we’ll get along perfectly, if I ever meet her.”

There’s a pause. In the background, he vaguely hears footsteps as people are walking and pacing on the platform, the shuffle of fabric as people’s clothes shift as they move, the low murmur of voices in conversation. What he’s most aware of though, is the way she rapidly blinks, looking up to the sky, or at least where the sky’d be if the roof of the station wasn’t in the way.

Her eyes are impossibly green when she looks back at him. “I think you would.”

—

It’s Scott that has the (supposedly) brilliant idea once she confesses that she’s ruined her plan to cook dinner on the evening she’s been tasked with looking after her niece.

(She accidentally forgot to buy groceries. It’s an honest mistake, okay?)
She had frantically called him once she’d realised the depth of her predicament. (Although she’ll idly wonder later at what point their acquaintance on the train had shifted to actual friendship. It had happened so gradually that she’d barely noticed at all.)

“Scott.”

“Tessa! Hey.”

She’d gnawed on her bottom lip, more than mildly stressed as she’d looked at where Poppy is playing with her doll on her living room floor, thinking about how she has nothing to feed the poor child.

“I have a problem.”

She explains her predicament to him, and to his credit, he doesn’t laugh or poke fun at her, just listens and hums until the rapid barrage of words from her stops.

"T," the nickname falls rather easily, the first time she’s noticed it but it only vaguely registers in her stress-addled mind. "How do you guys feel about some Chinese?"

He texts her the directions to and the address of a Chinese restaurant that he swears is like heaven on earth, and maybe she rolls her eyes a little but she’s also smiling softly and already preparing to get herself and Poppy out the door.

“‘Wok This Way’?” She stands in front of the flickering neon-green sign, half-surprised, half-amused, holding onto Poppy’s hand.

“It’s the best name, right?” She looks up and sees Scott walking towards them, lips quirked in a half-smile. “Hi.”

“Hi,” she greets back, tucking an errant strand of hair that had fallen on her forehead behind her ear. Poppy half-hides behind her, gripping onto the strap of her backpack, a little shy. “This is Poppy,” she tells Scott, smoothing a hand over the young girl’s hair. Poppy gives Scott a tiny wave.

Scott crouches down so that he’s eye-level with her. “Hey, Poppy. I’m Scott. It’s so nice to meet you.” He holds out his hand and to Tessa’s amazement Poppy barely hesitates to put her own small hand in his and shake. She supposes it shouldn’t surprise her though. Scott radiates genuineness and warmth, and even with someone young like Poppy, he’s not patronising at all.

“What do you say, Miss Poppy? You ready to go inside?” Scott asks her. Poppy nods, smiling, still holding onto Scott’s hand.

Scott’s gentle conversation slowly draws her usually shy niece from her shell until she’s a chatterbox telling Scott all her stories about her doll, Ellie, and about what she did at school that day and did Scott know that the blue whale is the biggest mammal that can weigh over 200 tons?

It warms her heart to see him so kind with someone she loves.

A lady wearing a stained white apron and the loveliest smile approaches their table. “Scott!” she greets, obviously familiar.

“Mrs Han!” Scott says, standing up to give her a hug. He pulls back and gestures to her and Poppy. "Let me introduce you to my friends Tessa and Poppy."
Tessa stands up and offers her hand to shake, except Mrs Han opens her arms, "No handshakes for me, sweetie. Too formal, like business. How do you feel about hugs?"

And while Tessa usually prefers to maintain her own personal space, something about Mrs Han exudes warmth and joy and love that she agrees.

Mrs Han introduces herself to Poppy, who gets a big hug of her own, and insists that Tessa and Scott sit back down.

Once both she and Scott are seated again, Scott asks, “How are you? How is Mr Han?”

“Good, good,” she props a hand on her hip, a fond roll of her eyes, "The man is still trying to get me to take day off."

"It's because I love you!” Someone says as if on cue. A man sticks his head out from the door that must lead to the kitchen, the lines on his face deepening as he grins at his wife.

"Yes, yes, but what do I do now my babies are all out of the house?” Mrs Han throws back over her shoulder. She turns back to their table. "My little Ling just left for college."

"Really?” Scott claps his hands. "What is he studying?"

“Music Composition.” The only way to describe Mrs Han’s smile is proud. “He used to always say he wanted to study law, but I knew his heart wasn’t in it. My relatives ask me, ‘Don’t you want your son to be a lawyer?’ I tell them ‘Pah, no, I don’t want my son to be a lawyer. I want my son to be happy.’” She shakes her head, "Enough about me. What are you having tonight? And not your usual, Scott, Tessa and Poppy deserve something more special.” She offers them a teasing wink.

"Hey!” Scott says, poking his head up from the menu. "I wasn't going to. It's a special night tonight, ladies, so I think I'll order some kung pao chicken, sweet and sour pork—oh, definitely your special Jiaozi…”

Tessa makes a mental note of making sure she pays for at least half the bill, especially since Scott seems bent on ordering ninety percent of the menu.

There's a moment where Scott's distracted by Mr Han, conversing about a recipe that Scott had had a suggestion to improve and how it was a genius idea, and Tessa takes that moment to quietly ask what Scott's usual is.

“His usual? Definitely the wonton soup.”

Tessa notes that it's not one of the things Scott’s ordered.

“Can we add it to everything else?” she asks, eyes darting to look at Scott. He’s still engrossed in his conversation with Mr Han, thankfully.

Mrs Han smiles her lovely smile, both brilliant and soft like candlelight. “Of course.”

“And can I please make sure I pay for at least half of what Scott’s ordered? I think he’ll try to pay for everything, and Poppy and I are sure to eat more than what he will.”

Mrs Han just pats her shoulder and doesn’t give a guarantee. “I think the boy might fight me if I try to stop him if that’s what he wants to do.” She squeezes Tessa’s shoulder. “But I think you should talk to him, if that’s what you want.”
The pair of them leave Scott and Tessa and Poppy. Scott puts the menu back in the slot, the plastic clacking against the wood.

"So ladies, I don't know about you but I am starving." Scott makes a big show of patting his stomach which makes Poppy giggle. He grins, telling Tessa that that’s the response he was aiming for. He makes easy conversation with them until the food arrives. She doesn’t know if the short time between them ordering and the food arriving is because the kitchen is superhumanly quick or because she hadn’t noticed the time passing because of Scott.

Scott, whose questions had never felt probing or demanding, yet had gotten her to talk about her her job, the work she likes about it and the people she doesn’t. Scott, who had gotten Poppy to reveal the extent of Tessa’s culinary ability—or rather inability—and she can’t find the room in her heart to be mad because he jokes to Poppy that it’s lucky that that’s what happened because he’s gotten to meet her.

He had looked up at her and smiled then, and she hasn’t known him for long, doesn’t know him well other than a distinct impression that he’s a good man, and yet she feels certain that the look in his eyes doesn’t say anything other than that he’s glad to have met Tessa too.

And the food. The food is delicious. Actually, delicious doesn’t even begin to describe the incredible flavours that burst on her tongue as she takes a taste of each dish, small bites that turn into more and bigger servings. When Scott said this place was like heaven on earth, she hadn’t realised he wasn’t exaggerating.

“Scott,” she thinks she whimpers his name as she takes the first sip of the broth. She can’t formulate anything else in response.

“I know,” he replies, eyes just as wide as hers. “They’re insanely good at what they do.”

Tessa turns to Poppy who’s happily munching on her spring rolls, while also pretending to feed them to her doll. She knows that her adorable niece isn’t the easiest to coax into trying new food but she barely had to entice her into trying something new.

Scott puts his spoon back into the soup, taking another spoonful. “Mrs Han says it’s because the two of them cook with a lot of love, and that a lot of their love finds it way into the food. I get that, I think,” his eyes crinkle as he smiles at her, “it...tastes like my mom’s hugs, my dad’s smiles, my brothers’ teasing.”

“It tastes like home.”

“Yeah.”

Mr Han drops by to check on them as the evening passes, even as the restaurant gets busier and busier. He brings them a stack of take-out containers to pack the food in when they reach the point where they can’t eat any more food. Tessa wonders if she’ll even need to attempt to cook for the rest of the week.

Both she and Scott leave with a bag of neatly stacked containers. As they walk out of the restaurant after saying goodbye to both Mr and Mrs Han, the latter of whom gave them all hugs before they left, Poppy yawns, cuddling into Tessa’s side.

Scott crouches down. “It was so nice to meet you, Miss Poppy.” Poppy smiles sleepily at him. “And you too, Miss Ellie.” Poppy makes her doll do a small wave.

“It was nice to meet you too, Mr Scott,” Poppy replies, his name swallowed a big yawn. Tessa
wraps an arm around her niece’s shoulder and squeezes affectionately.

“We really should be going. I still need to drop Poppy off at my brother’s.” She looks up at Scott, the glow of the streetlight illuminating his face. “Thank you so much for tonight. You saved us both from starving.”

“Anytime,” Scott tucks his hands into his coat pockets, ducking his head. She thinks his cheeks tinge the lightest shade of pink but she’s not quite sure.

They head their separate ways, Tessa and Poppy to her car and Scott on foot back to his apartment. Tessa offers her brother some of the take out containers as he carried his slumbering daughter from out of Tessa’s car, but he shakes his head, saying that she’d probably need the food more than he does. She rolls her eyes, but concedes. She’s not going to be giving up the Hans’ delicious food unless she needs to.

She’s putting the containers into her fridge when she realises she hadn’t remembered to pay for at least half the meal. Her heart drops, guilt enveloping her. She searches for her phone, hastily texting Scott, apologising for not having paid her part.

‘It’s nothing T,’ is his swift reply. ‘As long as you and Poppy had a lovely evening.’

‘I feel guilty though,’ she sends back.

She’s about to add something else but he replies even quicker, ‘Don’t be. We’re friends right?’ ‘If it makes you feel better I bet I’ll need a favour soon because of something I messed up, haha’ follows it.

Her thumb hovers under the word ‘friends’. She likes that. She’s not the most forthcoming person when it comes to friendships, definitely prefers quality over quantity, but Scott seems like exactly the type of guy that one would be lucky to have as a friend. Of course, her gut feeling could be wrong—it has before in the past—but she wants to believe it’s not.

‘Sure thing’ she replies. ‘Good night Scott’.

‘Night T, sweet dreams’.

She catches sight of her reflection as she’s brushing her teeth. She studies the way her eyes are shining and her lips are curved in barely there smile, but a smile nonetheless.

She’s still smiling as she falls asleep.

–

He finds her bopping her head a little to the music that must be playing in her ears, earphones plugged in, the wires slightly tangled in front of her blouse.

He dodges a hastily walking businessman, and a frazzled mom trying to corral three kids, to reach where she’s standing. He notices that she tends to stand pretty far from the edge of where the tracks are, further than where everyone mills around and waits, even further than where parents and their kids choose to wait for fear of their kid standing too close to the edge.

She looks up just in time to see him approaching and the sight of him startles a smile out of her. She takes out one of her earphones. "Hi."

"Hey," he says. "What are you listening to?"
She offers him one of her earphones in response. He takes it carefully and brings it to his ear.

"That's not my name/That's not my name/That's not my name," the lyrics blare, and he can't be blamed for how loud he laughs.

She breaks out into the widest grin, obviously proud of her joke.

"How long have you been listening to that?"

"Pretty much on repeat. Until you arrived." He admires her dedication. He takes back that time he teased her about not being able to land a joke properly and tells her so. She grins at him, but then wrinkles her nose, "I'm kinda sick of the song now, though."

He hands her the earphone back, and she takes the other one out. The movement of her head brings her attention to the delicate earrings she’s wearing. They’re silver like starlight, curved into two matching S-like shapes, the shape held by a thin chain hooking the top to the bottom.

"Your earrings are really pretty," he blurts out, and she blushes lightly, a fingertip coming up to touch the end of the one hanging on her left ear.

"Thanks," she says quietly, meeting his eyes only for a moment, "I just...felt like putting on something nicer today."

"You always look nice," he says without really thinking.

She blushes even deeper. "Thanks, Scott."

He likes that, he realises, likes the way she says his name, likes the way it sounds. It’s only five letters, one syllable, less than a second for her to say, less than a moment for him to hear and yet it sounds like the universe.

He’s overwhelmed by the want to be able to say hers, wonders how many letters, how many syllables, how many moments it will take for him to say and for her to hear, wonders how many eternities and infinities he could embody in that one word.

He wants to ask her again, but he can’t bring himself to. Somehow, he’s got a distinct feeling that there’s a reason why she hasn’t told him. And while the desire to know it burns in his chest, bright and white and hot, he chooses to trust her even though she hasn’t necessarily given him a reason to.

He doesn’t know her well at all, hasn’t known her long enough to understand every nuance of the way her face shifts to mirror the emotions she feels, and yet he feels certain that the look in her eyes can’t be saying anything other than Thank you.

"Oh!" he remembers suddenly. "I have a question to ask." The announcement over the PA system says that the train is coming in two minutes.

She looks at him quizzically. He’s a little nervous to ask her, to tell the truth, because she could say no, which is perfectly fine because she’s under no obligation to say yes but—he’d really like her to.

"Will you go trick-or-treating with me?"

“What?”

Her expression is startled and he understands. Halloween is in just over a week—he supposes it’s not a huge amount of time for her to prepare.
“I promised some of my nieces and nephews that I’d take them. It’s kind of become a family tradition for us. I’m the only one that still doesn’t have kids, so it gives my brothers and their wives a break. You can come with me? If you want?”

She doesn’t answer for a while, and he’s just about resigned himself to her kindly saying no, when she asks, “So, what will your costume be? Or will I just have to wait to see it for myself?”

He looks up to see her smiling softly. His heart feels like a hot air balloon that’s just taken off, soaring and floating and light.

“I think I’d rather you see it on Halloween.” The way he wants to smile feels like a cup that’s overflowing—happiness spilling in the way he can’t stop his lips from curving.

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Tessa loathes being late.

Which is why she has a set routine each morning to make sure that she gets to the train on time to make sure she’s not late for work. This is how it goes: three alarms to set fifteen minutes apart to get her out of bed, a two-minute shower, her outfit that’s been picked out since the start of the week, and a coffee (black, one sugar—at least that’s her order for this week) bought at the coffee place at the station to wake her up fully.

She likes rhythm and she likes routine. She likes it when things go according to plan, exactly the way she wants it to. It’s not that she’s not flexible or that she can’t adapt to a stressful situation if need be—but if she doesn’t have to, she’s not going to complain.

It’s not an out of the ordinary day.

She gets to the train station on time and the train’s not running late, which she’s grateful for. The two-tone sound preceding the PA system announcement has classically conditioned her to sigh even before they’ve apologised for yet another inconvenience caused.

She sips her coffee, closing her eyes in momentary bliss. She sends a silent thank you to whoever invented coffee, and to the universe for making caffeine a thing.

The train pulls up at her station and it’s slowly filling up with passengers. Men and women in suits and frowns, school kids in uniforms and lugging heavy backpacks, a mom trying to soothe her baby, pairs of people who stand a little close—the ones that make her wonder if the secret smiles they give each other hint at something a little more than just friends.

She shakes her head. She doesn’t think of herself as a hopeless romantic—preferring the pragmatic and the realistic and the practical. Maybe she was when she was a lot younger, a little girl who read fairy tales in storybooks and watched princesses in movies with wide eyed dreams.

But fairy tales and movies don’t show what happens after happy ever after, didn’t prepare her that sometimes things don’t work out the way they used to. She remembers standing in the rubble as her parents’ marriage crumbled, wondering if there was anything she could’ve done to save it. She thinks of the few relationships she’s had, remembers the giddiness and the hopes in the early days, thinks of how she gave them as much of herself as she could in the hope of being enough, remembers how tired she felt after they never met her halfway or even a quarter of the way, and how empty she felt when they left her behind anyway. A glass half-full of loss, half-empty of happiness.

She’s since resolved to focus on herself. She doesn’t need someone to complete her. She’s since
learned that she is enough on her own, that she doesn’t need to bend over backwards to satisfy others whether that’s in her career, or romance, or her family and friends.

If herself is a seed planted in the ground, a sapling growing slowly but with the best of intentions, she’s since learned what she needs to grow. She’s learned to water herself with respect, to nourish herself with forgiveness, to give herself the room for humility and to make mistakes. She’s learned to surround herself with people who want the best for her.

It’s a continuous journey and the fates know that there are days when she has setbacks, but when she allows herself to reflect on her efforts, she’ll slip into a proud smile.

And maybe there are moments where she’s still that little girl that wishes for a fairy tale, one where she’ll find someone who’ll respect her as their equal and love her for all her strengths and weaknesses. A moment such as now as she watches an elderly couple in front of her, watches the woman tuck something into the backpack that the man’s wearing, their hands immediately searching for and finding each other after, interlacing the way kids on the playground would tease you for.

But she knows she doesn’t need it. If it happens—well, it’ll happen. It’s not like she’s about to meet someone on a train anyway, randomly bump into some guy with stars in his eyes and the universe in his fingertips. Life isn’t quite like the way romcoms like to lead people to believe.

(He still secretly enjoys watching them though, in all their cliche predictability. There’s still something sweetly satisfying about watching two people fall in love.)

She’s thrown her coffee cup in one of the bins before she’s gotten on the train. There’s a couple of spare seats but she’s long developed the habit of leaving them for someone who needs it. There’s a mom getting on with a clearly grumpy toddler and Tessa gets her attention and points her towards one of the seats that was still miraculously free. She gives Tessa a grateful smile.

She takes out her book that she’s in the middle of once the train’s started moving. It doesn’t take long before she’s lost in the mystery paperback, tense and fraught as it’s just getting to the part where they’re about to reveal who —

The train suddenly stops. Most likely due to an issue on the track or the previous train which is what often happens.

Yet Tessa’s not really thinking about the reason for the train stopping as she’s been thrown off balance, her grip on the handle slipping and she’s tensed her body in anticipation of falling if not for someone’s hand catching her in the space between her shoulder blades.

She looks up and sees—she’s not a poet, so she doesn’t know how to describe the colour, doesn’t know whether it’s the warm brown of melted chocolate or the burnt gold of fall leaves—but if irises could hold universes, maybe that’s what they’ll look like.

“Hi,” the man says. It’s a short, inconsequential word.

“Hi,” she replies. She tries to right herself as quickly as possible. “Sorry about that. I guess I’m a little clumsy.” She knows she’s blushing a likely unflattering shade of pink.

“Oh no, don’t worry about it.” He steps back to give her space.

“But still, thank you. I might’ve face planted if you weren’t there.”

He laughs even at her weak joke. “Well, I’m glad to have helped then.” He glances down at the

“That book?” She holds the cover up for him to see. “Yeah, it’s pretty good. I was just getting to the good part, actually.” She shakes her head, “But I’ve lost my place now.” She closes the book and tucks it into her bag.

He asks her a little more about the book, and anything else she’s read lately, and conversation shouldn’t flow this easily with a stranger but it does. It’s not long until she’s reached the stop she needs to get off at, and she lets him know. If a twinge of something like regret starts in her chest at the thought of saying goodbye, well, that’s for her to ignore now and examine later.

“Can I get your name?” he asks, just as the train’s about to stop.

“It’s Tessa.”

“Tessa,” he repeats. She’s never given much thought to her name, but why does it sound like a forgotten melody he’s just remembered when he says it like that?

“And yours?”

“It’s Scott.” He grins, eyes crinkling, “It’s nice to meet you, Tessa. Hope I’ll see you around.”

(He doesn’t let herself hope that they would see each other again, thinks that that one encounter was serendipity and fate intersecting for one perfect moment, so you can imagine her surprise when she finds out that she and Scott actually get on at the same station. She just hadn’t noticed him before.

She’s making up for lost time because she doesn’t stop noticing him now. It’s pages in books that go unread because of conversations that easily keeps on going like a train without brakes. It’s him noticing that and apologising that he’s been keeping her from her books and telling her to feel free to tell him to shut up whenever she feels like it.

It’s her shaking her head and admitting that she’d much rather continue whatever it was they’re talking about. It’s his answering smile that makes her feel like she’s just given him something precious.)

–

He has a nephew hanging off his arm and a niece attempting to clamber on his back when she arrives at the front of his brother’s place for Halloween. She gets out of her car in a flurry of skirts, her arms laden with bags of candy that he just knows is meant for all the kids, an eyebrow raise and a tilt of her head as she sees his costume.

He’s pretty proud of it, if he says so himself, even if scouring the depths of the internet to find it took a few too many late nights. He’s got the white suit with the gold detailing and the poofy pants, a red scarf-like thing tied at his neck. Plus, the flaming orange wig.

“Who are you meant to be?” She asks as soon as she’s close enough for him to hear. “Hi.”

“Hi,” he’s sure his smile is dopey. “And I can’t tell you. You have to guess my name.”

He watches the realisation dawn on her instantly, the answer clicking into place. “Rumpelstiltskin?” She grins, wide and bright, clearly delighted. “That’s from that one of the movies with that green ogre, right?”
“That green ogre is Shrek. Are you saying you’ve never seen it?” His nephew manages to elbow him on the nose. “Ow!”

She barely covers up her snort but he still catches it and he narrows his eyes, pretending to be offended. “No, I haven’t,” she pauses thoughtfully, “I haven’t watched a lot of movies I probably should have.”

“Like what?”

“Aladdin. Lion King. A lot of Disney movies…”

“We’ll have to remedy that.” He turns to his nephew, who’s dressed like a pirate. “Are you going to get down now?”

The boy shakes his head, but gives in once Scott tickles him. Scott takes care to make sure he gets down safely on the ground and the two kids run back towards the house. Scott takes the next moment to study her costume. She’s wearing a brown dress in the style of the first settlers in America from Britain, complete with the white apron and cap. A fiery ‘A’ is emblazoned on the front of her dress.

“‘It is to the credit of human nature that, except where its selfishness is brought into play, it loves more readily than it hates.’” he recites. There’s a flash of something in her eyes, and in any other context he might interpret that as want, but he doesn’t want to jump the gun. Her cheeks are lightly pink.

“Hester Prynne, Scarlet Letter, yeah? Some things from high school lit class I can’t forget.”

She nods. “Yeah. Weird choice, I know.”

“I was going to say interesting,” he jokes and it’s weak but she still laughs. “I’ll leave it up to you to explain your costume to the kids if they ask.”

“I’ll distract them with chocolates and candy if they ask,” she says wryly.

“Good idea,” he bumps her shoulder. “And I just had a question to ask—can I introduce you as ‘T’ to my brothers and their wives? And to the kids as well?”

She stops, one of the packs of chocolate almost slipping from her grasp. “T?”

He scratches the back of his neck. “Yeah, uh, after the tea that you like to drink? ‘T’ for tea? I couldn’t think of anything else...unless you something else in mind?”

She adjusts her carried candies and Scott takes some of the topmost ones to lighten her load. “No,” she says softly. “It’s perfect.”

They’re bombarded by the kids then, not just the two from earlier but everyone that’s going to go with them, his brothers and their wives coming out. It’s a menagerie and it’s definitely going to be crazy and wayward and a lot to handle, but she’s already got at least three of the kids wrapped around her little finger as she introduces herself, giving them pumpkin baskets to collect their treats in.

His brothers give him the most obvious teasing looks when he introduces her to them and he’s blushing because he knows he’s obvious but do they have to embarrass him?

The evening doesn’t go perfectly smoothly—his youngest niece nearly trampling Mrs Schuen’s
prize roses basically gave him a heart attack—but as Halloweens go, it’s one of the best he’s had. The air’s a little sweeter, everyone’s smiles are a little brighter, the treats all the kids have amassed filling their pumpkin baskets as full as can be.

T’s holding hands with the quieter ones, gently pointing out decorations they pass and asking to see what they’ve received from their generous neighbours, while he corrals the more boisterous kids, matching their energy and knowing when to calm them down.

It’s a successful night. He catches T’s eye as they’re walking back to his brother’s and he knows this is a memory he’ll treasure.

They’ve handed the kids off to their respective parents, all utterly enchanted by T and unwilling to say goodbye; in particular, Charlotte, whose braid she had complimented. It sparked a discussion on the different styles that Charlotte had heard of and ‘Can T do this one? Or that one?’ She had gone along good-naturedly, admitting which styles she knew and ones she didn’t but that she’d be willing to learn. Charlotte had hugged T before running back inside the house, the quick burst of affection easy from a little girl who wears her heart on her sleeve. It’s hard to see clearly considering it’s dark but he’s sure T beams because of Charlotte’s gesture.

Once it’s just the two of them left at the front of the house, he’s hit with this overwhelming sense of not wanting the night to end. She’s fiddling with the sleeves of her dress when he looks over, and she looks up at him and asks, “Do you want to go for a walk?”

“Yes,” he breathes, gentle as the moonlight that basks them.

She takes off her cap and he takes off his wig. He’s enthralled by the way her hair spills like dark ink as she tilts her head back and shakes out her hair, the curve of her neck graceful.

She asks him about the jerk in his office that he likes to complain about, if only to make her laugh with his exaggerated impressions of the guy. He regales her with the latest incident involving a broken stapler and the printer and she laughs on cue. He asks her about her presentation that she was nervous about even if it wasn’t obvious. It had gone without a hitch, she tells him, quiet pride showing in her voice and her face, and he wishes she didn’t feel like she had to be modest around him.

He’d shout her achievements from the rooftops if he could.

The words between them cease, but not in a bad way. When you’re with the right person, he thinks, silence is a comfort and not a burden. He likes the way it feels like it’s just the two of them, all the trick or treaters either in bed, or in busier parts of the neighbourhood.

“I wish I could say your name.” He says it like it’s a secret, and maybe it is because it’s something he’s never admitted. He’s surprised by how he can talk to her and has gotten to know her without using her name. There’s more to a person than their name, he’s learned, but he’d still love to be able to form the letters and the syllables, hear the cadence and the sounds, see it written.

She bites her bottom lip and the moonlight catches in her green, green eyes. “I wish you could too.”

It’s a strange admission considering it’s her that’s withholding her name from him, but it’s Halloween, when everything feels a little spookier and little more magical, and it’s not hard to imagine that there’s some greater power behind her decision.

He catches her hand and she lets him. She holds on tighter than what he expected.
Do you need to know someone’s name to fall for them? Do you need to know someone’s name to think that this is someone you could love?

“T,” he whispers, touching her cheek lightly. Her eyes close, soothed.

T, He repeats in his head. He wonders—wait, no, he’s probably overthinking this, but what if?

T, for the tea that she carried in a silver flask.

E, the nickname given by her beloved niece for an elephant keychain that dangles from her bag.

S, S, for a pair of silver earrings, beautiful but not as beautiful as the woman who wore them.

A, emblazoned on her chest, in a Halloween costume of a woman with a secret that she couldn’t tell.

In the next moment, perhaps, she’ll surge up to kiss him, unable to wait a second longer to show him exactly what she feels. Perhaps he’ll repeat her name in breathless awe, a melody or a song that’s just as familiar as the woman he holds in his arms. Perhaps they’ll cry with twin tears, only the shining moon their witness.

Perhaps.

In this moment, he only says her name, with every memory of her attached to every letter.

“Tessa.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, you can find me as stardust_echoes on twitter and as echoesofstardust on tumblr

Hope you’re as excited as me for the rest of the fics from all these phenomenal authors! Wishing you a lovely day <3
the most decorated and the most annoyed

Chapter by Walkinrobe

Chapter Summary

Scott would defend Halloween’s honour with his dying breath. This makes Tessa want to punch him in the throat.

Chapter Notes

• Rating: E

• Additional Tags: gratuitous fluff, trick or treating, toddlers in dog costumes, spooky noises, ignorant Englishmen, cranky Tessa, kissing in hallways

• Word Count: 8.6k

Why, hello Spooktober readers, it’s very exciting to be part of this Halloween extravaganza. The previous two fics have been exquisitely crafted supernatural stories about love crossing time and space. Um, this chapter is not.

I’m a one trick pony. I am staying in my lane and bringing out some old So Dramatic friends to play this Halloween. Feel like dipping into Scott Moir and his search for the perfect Virtue-Moir family Halloween costume? Want unnecessary fluff and cliched family trick or treating excursions? Toddlers dressed as cute dogs? Happy to read a bit of smut and tipsy hallway kissing? Well, right this way please!

Looking for a return to mythical creatures and magic? Best come back tomorrow when Rookandpawn will knock your socks off.

An important warning about this chapter: it contains mentions of pregnancy loss.

Thanks to Rookandpawn and lapetitemort20 for the plot assistance. You guys are bomb diggity. And to The Writers Guild for the kind invitation.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

September 2028

Competitive figure skating demands that you spend an immense amount of time wearing costumes. At a quick calculation, she’d guess that she and Scott have each worn about two hundred and fifty costumes. That’s roughly five hundred costumes that fall into two distinct categories - a whole throng of disappointingly mediocre costumes and an equal number of exceptionally beautiful costumes.

Admittedly, the latter have been the ones she’s chosen herself. Alongside Mathieu, she’s spent
countless hours thinking about fabric, cut and color. But it’s not just that, it’s how a costume will look at centre ice, the way it could look different on the TV monitors, the effects of harsh lighting, whether the intricate details will be noticed in a darkened rink and estimating how many quick-changes it could survive.

The perfect costume is an absolute game changer – it gets you into character, sets the mood and enhances the performance. The mediocre costumes, well, they are just..meh.

Perhaps this explains her reticence to wear costumes off the ice. Which is a recurring source of tension in her marriage. Admittedly, it’s playful tension, well, passively aggressively playful tension, because her husband loves one particular type of costume.

And she does not.

*

46 days until Halloween

It’s only mid September and yet every single morning this week Scott’s asked her about what they should wear for Halloween. Their boys - Thomas, James and Oliver - are just as bad. Holy shit, the nagging. It’s Olympic level.

Even Ashlynn is getting in on the act. She had hoped to find an ally in their little lady. Ash is almost two and is way too young to fully comprehend the Halloween palaver. Yet there she was yesterday, asking repeatedly on the way home from the grocery shopping, ‘A dog, pease Mommy. A dog a ‘ween pease Mommy’.

She feels like she’s living in a mad house.

Scott has infected their kids with the Moir’s Halloween-loving gene. She suspects he got it from Alma, she’s always been a fully committed Halloweener. Joe, not so much. Scott and his mom are gale force Halloween advocates. It’s decoration overload, it’s sugar highs and it all ends with overtired kids.

It makes her want to punch him in the throat.

*

29 days until Halloween

It’s a good start to Thursday morning.

Tess is spread out below him as he fucks her, slowly and deliberately, taking his time to make them both feel good. It’s 5:35am and their kids are sound asleep. He’s just licked a delicate line up her breastbone, making Tess groan with gratitude. It makes him smile. He places his mouth to her cheek to whisper, ‘I like listening to that’.

‘Convenient,’ she hums in response, ‘I like making that noise’.

Pulling her upwards, he moves to rest on his shins. Tess comes too and she turns around so she’s facing away from him. He settles her down onto his cock, wrapping one arm around her waist, pressing her warm back to his chest. Keeping them tightly fused together his other hand snakes between her legs, slowly circling her clit, just the way he knows she likes it.

‘This is the best way to start the day,’ she murmurs, parking her hands on his thighs, enabling
herself to better control her movements.

‘I want to hear your more of your appreciation,’ he kisses the nape of her neck.

She twists her head to look back at him, ‘Isn’t that only for special occasions, like when we’re in hotels and far away from our sleeping children?’

‘All four of them are out like lights,’ he chuckles, ‘I checked on them before we started. The bedroom door is closed. Please, Sweetheart. I want to hear you’.

Tess gives a delightful, resigned sigh and he knows she’s acquiesced to his request.

He speaks into her ear; retelling her about the first time they fucked this way. That was a million years ago but he can recall it in specific detail. He hasn’t forgotten about the nuances and minutiae, how he felt like the luckiest bastard alive to be fucking Tess. Nowadays, it makes him feel overwhelmingly lucky to have this incredible shared history together. Tess laughs when he tells her he had to recite the alphabet backwards to stop himself coming too early.

The intensity of their movements ramps up a notch and suddenly no one is laughing. Least of all Tess, who is now making delicious, sinful noises. He’d claim that they’re the kind of noises that drive all the blood from his brain to his cock, except he’s pretty sure all the blood is already in his cock, warm and hard, sheathed deep into his wife’s cunt.

Sometimes in the movies, you watch a sex scene and there is shrill moaning and a lot of ‘yes, yes, yes-ing’. That is not what’s going on here. The noise Tess is making is low and fierce. It’s hot as fuck as she edges closer to her orgasm. She is hot as fuck. He wants to shout from a mountaintop that his girl is hot as fuck.

Tess is breathing deeply, and it’s not words coming from her mouth, its just sounds. Sounds full of desperation and want. She pushes herself harder and harder against his cock and he knows she’s aching for the perfect friction against her clit. She moves into the zone where inhibitions are forgotten and she is loud and eager and appreciative of how he’s making her feel.

He loves this part of their relationship, loves that they get to do this together. This woman, she’s the center of his universe, he could not ask for anything more. She’s his soul mate.

When Tess comes she is utterly silent.

*  

29 days until Halloween - minus thirty minutes

Their backs have just hit the bed in a puddle of perspiration and panting when Scott starts to speak.

‘Any more thoughts on our Virtue-Moir family Halloween costumes?’ he puffs.

‘Oh my God, are you really harassing me about this right now?’ she kicks his shin in disgust.

‘What do you mean? Asking you about this right now is an intentional strategic move. I’m hoping to catch you in your post orgasmic glow so you’ll agree to anything I suggest,’ he waggles his eyebrows at her and kisses her sweaty brow.

‘Fuckity fuck, I hate Halloween and I hate Halloween costumes. It’s the crappiest part of motherhood,’ she whines at him, stretching out like a starfish, wiggling her fingers and toes.
Scott rolls over and settles on top of her, her legs parting to accommodate him. He's resting with his elbows on either side of her head, his hands sweeping the clumps of damp hair from her forehead.

‘Listen up,’ he says before placing a swift kiss to her lips.

She rolls her eyes.

‘Dressing up with the kids and I is a completely non-negotiable part of being married to me,’ he gives his sexy smile, the one he uses to get his way, then kisses her cheek.

‘Which you know better than anyone, because you’re the only one married to me and have participated in every single Virtue-Moir family costume since 2019’, he kisses her other cheek.

‘So harden the fuck up Tessa Jane and help me decide on what we’re going to wear,’ he plants a firm kiss on her lips.

‘Motherfucker,’ she groans, ‘I find it so difficult to like you in moments like this. Why do you insist on this family costume bullshit?’

‘You’re hurting my feelings, Virtch,’ he pouts.

She can’t help but kiss his lips. He’s an charming, ridiculous man. She hates Halloween costumes but she loves his enthusiasm for the things that make him happy.

‘Right now the only thing keeping this relationship going is the orgasms,’ she smirks then quickly kisses his mouth again.

‘Not the laughing?’ Scott asks as he kisses her neck.

This makes her smile.

‘Not our four very cute mini-Moirs?’ he kisses her neck again, ‘They’re the best things we’ve ever co-produced’.

This makes her smile too.

‘Not even the dancing?’ he sucks at her collarbone.

He comes up from where he was nestled in her neck and looks her straight in the eye. He grins at her before kissing her nose.

‘I’ll concede the dancing is pretty amazing, even after all these years,’ she grins back.

‘So, will you please help me decide on our costumes?’ he asks.

‘Yes,’ she grits out, ‘Fine. I will help. In fact, I already have the perfect idea’.

‘You do not!’ he scoffs.

‘I do’.

Scott scrambles out from between her legs and sits up. He’s like a puppy. A naked puppy. She gets up off the bed and throws him his pyjama pants.

‘I’m all ears,’ he declares as he tosses her own pyjamas to her across the room.
‘That movie we watched with the kids last night. We can be the six main characters’.

‘Six?’ Scott asks, confused.

‘Ash can be the dog. Being a cute dog is every toddler’s Halloween dream. Plus she’s desperate to be a dog and we already have the costume’.

Scott ponders for a minute. Then he starts nodding, ‘I get to decide which character each of us will be’.

‘Well, obviously I’m the female character, but sure, you can decide which characters you and the boys will be. You also have to source the costumes. I refuse to help in any way, shape or form’.

‘Deal,’ he states as she scoops her up and she wraps her legs around his waist. ‘See how easy that was? I don’t know why you fight me on this kind of stuff,’ he sighs dramatically. ‘And thank you for telling the kids you love Halloween even though you don’t’.

She rolls her eyes again.

‘I’m still only in this relationship for the orgasms,’ she laughs.

*

29 days until Halloween – minus 2 hours

‘Dad, I think our house is haunted,’ nine-year-old Thomas announces out of the blue on their drive to early morning hockey practice.

‘You think what now?’ he replies, coughing up his coffee all over the steering wheel. Shit, that’s gonna be a bitch to clean up.

What the fuck? Is this some kind of hidden camera trickery? It’s his worst nightmare to be on one of those stupid shows.

‘I said, I think our house is haunted’.

‘Yeah mate, I heard you, it’s just the most ridiculous thing you’ve ever said. What? Why?’

‘I heard some weird noises, in the night. It was like a ghost calling out, like you see on TV’, Tom states matter-of-factly.

This is just bat-shit crazy. He can’t fathom what Tom could be talking about. Then he works it out.

‘Ah, got it, that’s just our house being old. It’s creaking caused by the house contracting in the cold night air, then expanding as the sun rises. It’s something all old houses do. I can promise you the house is not haunted,’ he asserts.

‘If you say so,’ Tommy responds with all the incredulity only a pre-teen can muster.

*

29 days until Halloween – minus 3 hours

Their kitchen is the brightest room in the house. In the morning, the light streams through the huge glass doors that overlook their yard. It’s a hardworking kitchen, coping with the comings and goings of six busy people. It’s definitely not one of those kitchens that always has a neat and tidy
kitchen countertop. Their countertop is home to a steady stream of empty drink bottles, kids’ artwork, car keys and laptops.

It’s almost time to do the school run. She has shooed Oli and Ash upstairs to clean their teeth and is just thinking about cleaning the breakfast dishes from the countertop when James gets up off his chair and plonks himself in her lap.

‘Mommy, are you and Daddy going skating today?’

‘No baby,’ she kisses James’ forehead, ‘we have some work to do here at home. Daddy and I are going to watch lots of video of our teams skating’.

This kid. He’s such an angel. He is her thoughtful, kindhearted boy. So like his Dad. She can tell how James is feeling by simply looking at him. He doesn’t wear his heart on his sleeve - he wears it everywhere.

‘Are you taking us to school today?’ James asks, his sticky hands snaking around her neck.

She squeezes him around his waist and whispers ‘I love you, Jamie’ in his ear before stealthily removing the jam-stained fingers from her neck. She achieves this without James noticing what she’s doing; she never wants her kids to think she doesn’t want their cuddles.

The yearning, the deep-seated desire for their children to feel safe and loved is sometimes too much. Having four little people to nurture into considerate, happy humans is hard and wonderful and fun. So fun. Doing all that with Scott has been the unexpected joy of her life. Scott joked this morning that their kids are the best things they have co-produced. Without doubt.

‘I sure am,’ she kisses his hands before passing him the washcloth she keeps in the kitchen during breakfast. This is not her first sticky fingers rodeo.

‘Can Dad come in the car too, when we go to school?’ her gorgeous middle son asks.

‘Absolutely. I think he’s in the shower. Do you want to go and ask him?’

James stays rooted to the spot, furiously shaking his head in disagreement.

‘Oh, why not, baby?’

‘I’m scared,’ squeaks their seven-year-old.

‘Of Dad?’ she asks slowly. This is an odd turn of events. She cannot discern any reason why James would be scared of Scott. She’s definitely missing something.

‘What about Dad?’ Scott appears in the doorway, his hair wet from his shower.

She can’t help but smile when she sees him. He’s still as good looking as he was ten years ago, more so even, his chest is broader and his face has more character. She never imagined she’d love him this much. He dashes forward, scooping up James, hoisting him onto his shoulders.

Jamie sits up tall, grinning with pride.

‘Mommy wanted me to go upstairs to get you. But I said no’.

Scott raises an eyebrow in her direction, silently telling her that a disobedient James is completely out of the ordinary. She concurs with a head tilt.
‘Daddy, Jamie is scared of something,’ she clarifies.

Scott pulls James forward and rotates his body so it flips over and James lands on his feet on the floor.

‘It’s so cool when you do that to me Dad, it’s just like when you lift Mommy on the ice,’ James gushes. Scott beams and ruffles James’ hair.

‘What ya scared of Jamie?’ Scott asks. He looks to her again and she shrugs her shoulders. She has no idea where this is going.

‘The noise in the night. I think it came from that closet near your bedroom’.

‘What noise?’ she asks, pre-emptive mortification flooding her heart. Oh my God, please don’t let it…

‘The scary noise from last night. Like a monster or ghost growling’ James declares, interrupting her mounting shame.

She and Scott instinctively lock eyes, he gives her a scandalized look and eyebrow waggle. He’s such a motherfucker. This is entirely his fault.

‘Ah, it’s all good. Tom mentioned it to me too,’ Scott slowly nods and bites his lip to stifle a laugh.

Christ on a cruise ship. Tom mentioned the noise too? Nope, this can’t be happening. She’s going to mothering hell where there is no sex and constant Paw Patrol reruns.

‘It’s just the house creaking in the night. Nothing to worry about,’ Scott continues.

James lets out a huge sigh of relief.

‘That’s good. I was worried. It’s almost Halloween so I thought it was something spooky’.

She gathers up James in her arms and kisses his sticky cheek. She really should have got him to wipe his face earlier too.

‘We promise you it’s nothing spooky and I don’t think you’ll hear those noises again,’ she glares at Scott. ‘Run upstairs, baby, clean you teeth and get dressed please’.

As soon as James leaves the rooms Scott sits at the kitchen table, turns to her and gives an overdramatic gasp, ‘Mommy, you trouble maker’.

‘YOU are in so much fucking trouble, Moir. You told me they were all asleep. I should never have listened to you,’ she glowers.

‘Excuse me, they were asleep. This is not my fault. YOU woke them up with your raucous sex-appreciation symphony. You are scary as fuck. Literally’.

At this, all she can do is laugh so hard she doubles over. Scott starts laughing too. She collapses into his lap. He kisses her and wraps her up tight in his arms.

When she’s finally able to speak, she proclaims, ‘From now on, in this house, it’s silent sex only’.

*  

21 days to Halloween
'Why does my girl look like the cat that got the cream?' he cautiously asks Tess from their bedroom door. Down the hallway he hears the fall of blocks and a peel of laughter from both Oli and Ash.

Tess is sitting cross-legged on their bed, her hair wrapped in a blue towel. She’s madly typing on her phone.

When she hears his voice she turns to him and her face lights up.

‘You’re back, you’re back!’ she sings before springing off the bed and jumping into his arms.

He can’t help but kiss her. He has no idea why she’s so happy but she’s beyond adorable right now.

‘I only went to get bread. What’d I miss in the whole seventeen minutes I was gone?’

‘I have the BEST news! You and I are going to do something together that you’ve wanted to do for ages,’ Tess shimmies in his arms.

He furrows his brow in question.

‘This better not involve a skating comeback or another baby because I have already ticked both those off my bucket list’.

Tess smooshes his face in her hands and kisses his nose.

‘Not even funny, Moir. We are way too old for those things. And you’re too young for such clichéd jokes,’ she grins.

He mimes placing a stake through his heart.

‘Soooooooo...’ he drawls.

‘You know that huge Halloween party put on by PJ and Nick’s radio station?’

PJ and Nick are their friends who host Ontario’s most popular breakfast radio show. Tom goes to school with PJ and Nick’s son, David. There’s a third couple in their little clique, Mel and Justin, their daughter Chloe is in the boys’ class too.

He gasps. Please let Tess say what he thinks she’s about to say.

‘The infamous one, with the big sit down dinner, that’s invitation only? The one we missed last year because Ash got the stomach flu?’

‘The very one,’ Tess nods with wide eyes.

‘Tell me we got invited again this year,’ he implores.

‘We got invited! And so did Mel and Justin’.

Holy shit. Yes! This event has become legendary since it’s inception five years ago. It combines all his favourite things: great food, dancing, wine, friends and Tess. They’ve only been once before and it was amazing. It also means staying overnight in London, which is a very, very attractive thought. He’s never one to knock back the chance to get Tess alone in a hotel room.

There’s only one thing to say.
‘I’ve gotta start thinking about our costumes’.

*

15 days until Halloween.

Opening her eyes she finds Scott on his back, one hand behind his pillow and the other caressing her arm. Her head is on his bicep and her arm is slung low across his torso, her hand snuck under the waistband of his pyjama pants, toasty-warm against his hip.

She doesn’t say anything, just slightly turns her head and places a kiss below his heart. This chest of his, it’s more familiar than her own. She knows every muscle and every ridge, knows exactly where to place her head so she can hear Scott’s heartbeat, dependable and strong in her ear.

‘It is the sixteenth of October,’ he announces in a flat voice.

‘Yeah, my love,’ she exhales ‘I know’.

‘It’s been five years but it still feels sad, eh?’

She turns to looks at his face. She loves that he has never forgotten this anniversary.

Outside the window the sun is rising, just like every other day. To the world, today is just like any other day. Except it’s not. October 16 was the due date of the baby she miscarried between Jamie and Oli.

Over the entirety of the Virtue Moir existence there has been a lot of ups and downs. Most of the downs relate to their skating career. Losing the baby was the most challenging personal tragedy they have grappled with in their relationship. Even now it feels a little raw.

‘I still think about it sometimes,’ Scott confesses as he moves his hand from behind his head to wrap around her body, pulling her so she lies on top of him.

‘I think of that little life we made together and what could have been. Then I stop myself because if we had that baby we wouldn’t have Oliver. And Oli’s perfectly Oli, and perfectly made for our family. I love that kid so much, and I can’t imagine us without him. It’s a weird a conflict between mourning and being so fucking grateful for what we have’.

Scott rubs her back with both his hands. She knows what he’s doing; trying to physically convey everything he’s feeling right now. It makes her want to comfort him, to tell him it’s OK to feel all these things.

‘I think that’s really normal,’ she soothes before kissing his mouth, one side, then the other, finally softly in the middle on his lips. ‘I think about it too. Not as much as I used to, but every time I stop at those traffic lights on the way home from the airport. The ones where Tommy told you I’d been crying while you were away and you worked out we’d lost the baby. I think of how devastated I was in that moment and how sad I was afterwards. How horrible it was to tell our families’. Her voice cracks during that last sentence.

Scott squeezes her tightly and kisses her forehead.

‘I still wish that had you called me when it all started, so I could have come home and we could have been together through everything,’ he mumbles against her cheek.

‘Hey,’ she runs her fingers down his chin. His face is stubbly. He needs to shave but she likes the
way it feels under her fingers. It’s gritty and imperfect, just like their life. ‘It’s OK. Please don’t worry about that anymore. Promise me you won’t worry about that anymore. When you got home you took such good care of me’.

‘I’m thankful for everything we’ve done together, Virtch. Even the crappy, sad parts,’ he half smiles with unshed tears.

Her heart clenches. She knows she is fortunate to be with a person who loves her like this. She strokes his brow and mouths ‘I love you so much’ to him before kissing him slowly and sweetly.

Once they pull apart he gives her a wink, a signal that it’s enough sadness for right now. She maneuvers the conversation into less heartbreaking subject matter.

‘Even that time Tom had an allergic reaction on our camping trip in outback Australia and vomited into your mouth?’ she gently teases.

‘For fuck’s sake,’ Scott squeezes her so tightly she squeals, ‘you are the worst wife ever. We promised to not to talk about that again. That NEVER, EVER happened. Right?’

*  

Two days before Halloween

He’s not stupid. He knows Tess would rather take a bullet to her foot than participate in their family Halloween costume. But he couldn’t care less as he sees the six of them reflected back in the huge mirror that leans again their bedroom wall.

They look fucking spectacular.

‘I can’t believe you’re making us do a dress rehearsal,’ Tess mutters under her breath.

‘Sweetheart, you know better than anyone how important a tech run is to the success of a show. Stop your whining’.

She mutters again under her breath and all he catches are the words ‘orgasm’ and ‘indebted’.

‘Dad, these costumes are so cool,’ Tom states in awe.

‘I love my hat,’ four-year-old Oliver pipes up from down on the floor where he’s face first at the mirror, trying to take a closer look himself.

James joins too, ‘I don’t want to take this off. Do I get to wear my costume to school?’

Ashlynn barks, then announces, ‘I a doggy! I a doggy a ‘ween’.

Tess catches his eye in the mirror and she breaks out into a huge, genuine smile.

‘You are a doggy Lil’ Lady, the cutest dog we’ve ever seen. Tom is right, these costumes are great. Well done, Daddy’.

Tess’ eyes are soft, he can tell she means what she said. He feels relieved that he’s pulled off the exact group look he wanted. Mark down 2028 as a great year for the Virtue-Moir family Halloween costume.

He claps his hands together, ‘OK, all costumes off and hung up in your closets please. Only two more sleeps until Halloween!’
Tess grabs his hand as he’s shepherding their kids to their rooms. He turns and runs his eyes over her costume. She looks perfect.

‘I wanted to say that I appreciate all the effort you’ve gone to with our costumes, even if I do think Halloween sucks hairy balls’.

He tries to keep a straight face but her choice of words is so ridiculous all he can do is laugh.

‘Thank you. Sweetheart,’ he kisses her cheek. ‘Sucks hairy balls? Where the fuck did you learn to speak like that?’

‘Your brothers,’ she deadpans.

*  

Halloween - 3:30pm

It’s widely reported that she and Scott had a tradition of revealing their costumes to each other at the first competitive performance of the season. It’s true, they did. In a similar manner, Scott has a tradition of revealing the Virtue-Moir family costumes to Alma each Halloween. It’s over the top and cringey but also a little bit lovely. Did she mention how much these two love Halloween?

Their kids adore this ritual.

They’re all gathered in the lounge room when Joe escorts Alma in with her hands over her eyes. Scott and the kids countdown from three and then yell ‘NOW!’

Alma opens her eyes.

She is deathly silent.

It’s completely different to last year’s reaction, where she jumped up and down and told them how fabulous they all looked. This time she says nothing. Not one word, just looks at them all.

‘Ma?’ Scott prompts.

Alma bursts into tears. Real tears. Wet tears. Tears like she cried when she held their babies for the first time.

‘Oh, Scott. You’ve outdone yourself,’ she finally sniffs, ‘it’s magnificent’.

Scott gives a fist pump.

She loves her husband and mother-in-law so much. But seriously? Halloween makes them act like absolute lunatics.

*  

Halloween – 4pm

Ever since Tom has been at school they’ve gone trick or treating with PJ and Nick, their kids David and Claire, and Mel and Justin, plus their daughter Chloe.

Alma and Joe are coming this year too.

Everyone is meeting at Casa Moir for a stroll around the local streets. When PJ and Nick arrive and
see their costumes PJ shouts ‘There’s no place like home!’ at the top of her lungs.

‘Moirs, holy crap! You guys have knocked it out of the park this year,’ Nick cries.

There are hugs and kisses galore as Scott’s basks in the positive feedback. She fleeting thinks he hasn’t looked this proud since the 2018 Olympic podium but she quickly banishes the thought from her mind.

The kids are running around, screeching in delight and showing off their costumes. She’s gotta admit, they do look good. Scott did a really fabulous job. She’s not surprised, he never does anything by halves.

‘I a dog,’ Ash announces to PJ, ‘I Toto’.

‘I can see that darlin’, you look amazing!’ PJ scoops up Ashy and twirls her around.

‘Mom’s Dorothy, James’ is the Cowardly Lion, Oli’s the Tin-Man and Dad’s the Wizard,’ Tom proudly explains.

‘Which means you’re searching for your brains, eh?’ Nick jokes with Tom.

‘You got it, I’m the Scarecrow,’ laughs Tom, wiggling his straw filled gloves.

While everyone is fawning over the costumes Mel, Justin and Chloe arrive.

‘I knew we shoulda had more than one kid,’ Justin jokes when he sees them.

‘You guys look incredible,’ Mel sighs.

‘Yes, my two accidental pregnancies came in very handy today,’ she grins, kissing Justin’s cheek before moving to wrap Mel up in a huge cuddle.

‘Awesome work, buddy,’ Justin claps Scott on the back.

‘Righto, the clan has gathered. Let’s get cracking on this trick or treating!’ Scott commands.

The weather is beautiful - sunny and just the perfect temperature for an afternoon walk in their costumes. The kids have a ball and the adults swan about with a beer in hand, courtesy of Scott’s excellent preplanning.

They are full of candy and compliments about their Wizard of Oz get-up when they finally stumble up the porch steps. Her Mom is there to greet them; she’s kindly offered to babysit the kids so she and Scott can stay the night in London.

‘You guys look fantastic,’ her Mom says when she sees them. ‘Stay right where you are, I’ll take some photos, the afternoon sun is perfect’.

Kate takes a handful of photos. A couple of them even have the six of them all looking at the camera at the same time. And in one they’re all looking at the camera and smiling. It’s a Halloween miracle!

Eventually, that photo ends up framed on their lounge room wall.

* 

Halloween – 7pm
He’s got butterflies in his stomach thinking about this party they’re off to tonight. Butterflies of excitement. He’s not really sure why. Maybe it’s the thought of a kid free night with their best buddies. Or maybe it’s an evening with a four course meal and dancing. Perhaps a combination of the two.

The answer becomes clear when it emerges from their bathroom.

It’s Tess.

What else would it be?

Tonight’s theme is Dynamic Duos and they’ve decided to go as Bonnie and Clyde from the 1960s film starring Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway.

He’s wearing a grey three-piece suit with a diagonally striped tie and fedora.

Tess is looking smokin’ hot in a chocolate coloured, leather pencil skirt and a loose fitted, soft yellow, round neck t-shirt. A patterned silk scarf is elegantly knotted at her neck and her head is crowned with a brown beret.

Dorothy is definitely not in Kansas anymore.

‘Fuck me, Virtch. You look incredible,’ he groans.

‘Really? I’m so glad. You wanna touch me?’ Tess flirts. She moves right up into his space, placing her hands on his chest. She pats his vest, then smoothes his lapels. He slowly runs his hands down her back, resting his hands on her ass. Her leather skirt feels cold.

‘Yep,’ he breathes. ‘All the touches. Everywhere’.

‘I’d like that,’ she smiles.

From downstairs they hear Kate call out that Mel and Justin have arrived.

‘Be right there,’ Tess shouts.

‘Lots of touching later, I promise,’ he says smacking her backside.

They share a simple kiss on the mouth before he heads downstairs and Tess returns to their bathroom to put on her lipstick.

He spies Mel and Justin talking with Kate as he trots downstairs. They have their backs to him but he can immediately identify the characters they’re portraying.

‘So kind of you to come all this way from Rydell High,’ he laughs.

Mel and Justin spin around, revealing the front of their costumes. They look amazing, they’re Danny and Sandy from the big Grease dance competition scene. Sandy in her off white, full skirted dress and lace caplet. Danny in his black suit, hot pink shirt and matching pocket square. How Mel got her hair in that awesome 50s style in the short time since they wrapped up trick or treating is beyond him.

Tess appears beside him and snakes her arm around his waist.

‘You guys look so good!’ she squeals to Mel and Justin, ‘Danny and Sandy, born today hand jive, baby!’
‘So do you two,’ Justin nods, ‘I love hanging out with 1960s underworld figures. This is gonna be a great night’.

‘Damn straight,’ he fist bumps Justin.

Justin is a solid guy - loves his family, up for laugh, enjoys a beer. There’s a reason why they get on so well. It’s not rocket science - they have a lot in common.

‘What do you think, Mom?’ Tess twirls around for Kate.

‘I think you all look fantastic. Any ideas who PJ and Nick are dressing as?’ Kate asks.

‘She was being very tight lipped, which is unlike her,’ Mel offers, ‘it’s going to be mind-blowing, I can tell’.

‘Speak of the devils and we appear! We are here for our big reveal,’ booms PJ’s disembodied voice from behind their front door.

‘Stand ready,’ Nick orders, ‘we think we’ve really nailed this couple’.

They all turn towards the porch and Kate pulls open the front door with a flourish. There is a collective exhalation of swearwords when Nick and PJ are unveiled. Quickly followed by hysterical laughter.

‘You didn’t!’ shrieks Mel.

‘You cheeky assholes,’ he chastises.

There are Nick and PJ, proudly standing before them, chests puffed out, noses to the sky, wearing immaculately recreated Virtue-Moir 2018 Olympics free dance costumes.

‘Oh my God,’ cries Tess, ‘this is the BEST thing I’ve ever seen, your attention to detail in incredible’. She steps forward and runs her hand across the beading on PJ’s dress.

Tess turns back and mouths ‘Holy shit’ to him. He raises an eyebrow in reply.

‘You thinking what I’m thinking?’ he whispers while he bumps her arm with his elbow.

‘Always,’ she nods.

‘Give me two secs’, he says to the group.

He runs up the stairs, grabs what he’s looking for from a draw in their bedroom and jogs back down the stairs.

‘Tess and I think you need this to finish off your costume,’ he says as he hands a black velvet box to Nick.

Nick looks confused. Then the realisation of what he’s holding dawns on him, even before he opens the box.

‘Nah guys, we couldn’t’.

Nick passes the box to PJ who flips open the lid to reveal their Pyeongchang gold medals.

‘Ooohhhhhhhhh,’ she gasps. ‘No, no’.
‘Yeah, of course you can. Besides they’re just the ones from the team event,’ he jokes.

Kate interrupts.

‘You guys better head off, otherwise you’ll miss the pre-dinner drinks,’ she warns.

They gather their goods and chattels so they can pack them in the back of Tess’ car. He says a silent prayer of thanks that she got it detailed this week and it’s not full of apple cores and empty coffee cups. He’s already taken out the car seats in anticipation of using their people mover to move more grown up passengers than usual.

The kids run in from the kitchen to say goodbye. There are kisses, cuddles and promises to be good coming from all directions.

‘Alright you lot, we’ll see you at lunchtime tomorrow’ he nuzzles Ashy’s neck, she smells like her orange scented bubble bath. His longed for baby girl, she completes their family so beautifully.

‘Love do, Daddy’ Ash chirps.

‘Love you too, Lil’ Lady,’ he bops her nose.

‘Thanks so much for staying with our babies, Mom,’ Tess kisses Kate’s cheek.

‘Yes, thanks Kate, you are my favourite mother-in-law,’ he kisses her other cheek, handing off Ashlynn to her grandmother.

‘Have an enjoyable night,’ Kate calls as they walk out the door to the car.

He grabs Tess’ hand and brings it to his lips. ‘Let’s go have some fun, Tessa Jane,’ he winks to his partner in crime.

*

Halloween – 8pm

The cocktails at pre-dinner drinks are strong. She’s had two and is feeling tipsy. It feels nice.

It almost feels nice enough to ignore the bore of a man who currently monopolising her attention. Almost.

Angus is a new producer on Nick and PJ’s radio show. Young and brash and full of himself. He’s come over from England, armed with self-proclaimed good ideas and a bucket load of relevant experience. He’s gonna take their radio show from number one in Ontario to number one in Canada. She knows all this because he told her. Repeatedly.

Boring as batshit Angus also has no idea who she is. He’s not asked her one question about herself, skating or Scott. Not even her name. She usually loves it when people don’t recognise her. She and Scott are still mildly famous, even ten years post Pyeongchang.

In this case it’s clear he’s no idea that she’s one half of Virtue Moir by the highly unsubtle way Angus is hitting on her. It’s almost like he’s trying to club her over the head with an itemised account of his best qualities, hoping he’ll stun her into thinking what a catch he’d be.

The swarm of slightly intoxicated, animated people has made the room warm. Scott had disappeared to put their jackets at their table and she can see he’s got caught up talking to some hockey players.
She finally catches his eye and plays with her earring, setting off her time-honored signal that she needs rescuing. He gives a nod and immediately excuses himself. When Scott’s about ten paces away Nick taps Angus on the shoulder.

‘Well, thanks for the chat,’ Angus smiles. She’s gotta confess, he is cute in a boyish way.

‘You too,’ she replies.

‘I look forward to speaking again tonight. Um...,’ he has the audacity to wink at her as his drawn out sentence conveys an invitation to give her name.

‘Tessa, Tessa Virtue’ she states.

Not even an ounce of recognition flashes across his face. Nope, he has no idea who she is.

As Angus turns his back she feels her husband’s arms encircle her waist and his chin rest on her shoulder.

‘You needed rescuing, my lady?’

‘Yes, that guy is an idiot. A young, ignorant idiot, so I’ll cut him some slack. He has an over abundance of self-confidence and has no idea who we are’.

Scott looks momentarily confused. Then he gets it.

‘You never care that people... ahhhhh... he was hitting on you! Fuck yeah. My girl’s still got it!’ Scott high-fives her.

‘Oh my God. You’re tipsy,’ she accuses him.

The irony. So is she. She knows he can tell too.

‘Yep,’ he nods ‘but I’m going to hold myself in this pattern,’ he places his mouth to her ear, ‘because I have big plans for us later this evening’.

‘Don’t disappoint me, Moir’.

*  

Halloween 8:15pm

When they get to their table it takes him a sec to realise something’s amiss. He had thought he and Tess were seated together, in fact he knows they were because he threw his jacket on the back of his chair and placed Tess’ jacket on the back of hers. The chairs were next to each other.

Now somebody named ‘Angus Reid’ is sitting between them.

He glances at Tess and she mouths ‘The Idiot’ to him.

Just as he reaches over to swap back the place cards, a hand is placed on his bicep.

‘Do you mind, I’d love to sit next to Tessa,’ a posh sounding, English-accented voice drips from a head of exquisitely manicured facial hair.

‘Yeah buddy, I do,’ he glances down at the hand on his arm, Angus quickly retracts it. ‘I think they seated Tessa and I together for a particular reason’. He aimed for a jovial delivery but thinks he missed the mark and strayed into gruff. He doesn’t really care.
Angus might be an ignorant young buck but he completely gets why Angus thinks his wife is worth sitting next to. He’s gonna have a bit of harmless fun with this guy. He extends his hand towards Angus and gives his best media smile, ‘Scott Moir, great to meet you’.

‘Angus Reid, I’ve been brought in to help raise the profile of PJ and Nick’s radio show’.

He steals a glance at Nick, who is seated on Tess’s right. He sees Tess quickly whisper something in Nick’s ear before Nick gives a wicked smile and a very subtle eye roll. Clearly there are a few of them at the table thinking Angus is an idiot.

Without giving Angus the chance to object any further he swaps the name cards, returns his jacket to his own chair and sits down on Tess’ left.

Tess pours two glasses of white wine and passes him one.

Bottoms up.

‘So Scott, what did you do for a crust?’ Angus prompts, taking his original seat. They’re sitting at a table of eight. There is a vacant chair next to Angus but he can’t quite make out the name on the place card.

‘I’m a figure skating coach. And I dabble in a bit of sports commentary. What do you think of our Canadian sports, Angus? You a hockey fan?’

He feels Tess’ hand creep onto his leg, she gives a small squeeze, which he knows is a ‘Be on your best behavior please’ squeeze. He pats her hand, conveying an ‘It’s all good, I will be’ in response.

‘No, I’m a tennis fan. Not really interested in winter sports. Definitely not a fan of figure skating, no offence, it baffles me how a competitive sport can be judged rather than won on merit. But I can certainly appreciate the skill demanded in a game of hockey’.

Everyone at the table looks up expectantly as they cotton on to the fact that Angus has no idea that he and Tess were ice dancers or married. Beside him he feels Tess bristle, then she leans across him and aims fire, ‘Angus, the judging of figure skating is actually extremely complex. There are artistic and technical requirements. It’s completely merit based’.

‘Well, perhaps we could go to a competition together one time Tessa, you could explain it to me’, Angus flirts.

A stunned Mel drops her butter knife onto her plate. ‘My apologies,’ she gushes, ‘carry on Angus, I didn’t mean to interrupt you asking Tess out on a date’.

PJ snorts.

Angus gives Tess a fond smile. He’d almost feel sorry for Angus if he wasn’t blatantly hitting on his wife. He squeezes Tess’ thigh again under the table.

‘What do you do Tess?’ Angus asks in a semi-patronizing voice

‘I also coach figure skating,’ she takes a big sip of her wine. ‘But at the moment I primarily look after four of the world’s cutest kids’.

‘So you’re a nanny! How lovely. Children are our future and all that. Did you know PJ and Nick have kids. Do you coach children?’
'Oh, for fuck’s sake,’ Nick groans under his breath. PJ quickly places her hand on Nick’s arm. She is living for the speed this potential train wreck is gathering. And waiting for the inevitable crash.

Tess looks a little at sea.

‘Um, yes, I do know that PJ and Nick have kids. And no, I don’t coach kids, they’re actually....’ Tess says slowly.

Nick decides to step in and right the ship.

‘Angus, Tess is being modest. She coaches senior level athletes, her teams compete internationally,’

Angus looks at Nick like he has spoken in Martian. Nick forsakes any hope of getting Angus on the right page and abandons ship. ‘So, who are you dressed as tonight? Is Halloween a big thing in the UK?’

Angus laughs, he sounds a little nervous. Or is it self-righteous. Shit, this guy is a pain in the ass.

‘I don’t do costumes. I’m not a fan of Halloween costumes in particular. I think Halloween is an over-commercialised, faux holiday that has suckerised in gullible consumers’.

There is silence as the table digests Angus’ attack on Halloween. Who the fuck is this guy? He’s outraged on behalf of Halloween. Just as he’s about to defend Halloween’s honour Justin jumps in.

‘Tess isn’t a big fan of Halloween either,’ he adds from across the table.

‘That’s something you two have in common,’ PJ evilly encourages.

Angus gives Tess an even fonder smile. Alright, that’s it. He’s reaching his jealous husband limit. He stretches out for his wine. He sees the exact moment Angus spies his wedding ring. It’s the moment Angus gives a haughty little smirk.

‘What about you, Scott? Did you and your WIFE enjoy Halloween? Any rug rats to dress up today?’

‘Actually, my wife isn’t a big Halloween fan,’ he turns to Tess and winks. ‘But she’s a fantastic Mom so she pretends for our kids. We and our four kids dressed up as characters from the Wizard Of Oz. It’s our tradition to go trick or treating with PJ, Nick, Mel and Justin.

Tess eyes go soft and she rests her head on his shoulder. He kisses her hair.

Everyone at table waits for the penny to drop.

It doesn’t.

‘That sounds like it was fun,’ Angus replies. Disingenuously.

Maybe it’s the wine but he’s starting to feel sorry for Angus. He’s about to tell Angus that he is, in fact, married to Tess when Angus calls across the table to Nick.

‘Nick, I’ve been meaning to ask you, who are you supposed to be?’

‘Angus, you are officially the most ignorant person at this event,’ PJ sniggers.

‘What?’ he says, startled.
At that moment, the eighth guest arrives at their table. It’s the radio station’s promotions manager, Rebecca Vardy, he and Tess have met her a couple of times.

‘PJ and Nick, your costumes! That is beyond fantastic,’ she screeches, plopping herself between Justin and Angus. Rebecca takes one look at him and Tess and her face betrays her thoughts – you can see her promotional brain whir to life and she has a publicity idea.

‘You’re dressed as Canada’s sweethearts, while you are sitting across from Canada’s sweethearts. I need photos. Lots of photos’.

Angus looks confused, ‘Why are Justin and Mel Canada’s sweethearts?’

PJ snorts again.

‘Holy shit, are they your real Olympic gold medals?’ Rebecca yelps, looking to Tess.

‘Uhuh,’ Tess confirms.

‘You have gold medals?’ Angus probes Tess, ‘That’s amazing. What for?’

‘This is like one of those never ending, crappy comedy show skits,’ laughs Mel, ‘but I am here for it. Every last, tacky moment’.

‘Angus. You’re an ignorant, Pommy twat,’ Rebecca laughs.

‘It’s Tess and Scott who are Canadian royalty, they’re the most decorated Olympics figure skaters of all time. All of Canada loves them,’ Nick states.

‘Most decorated?’ Angus questions.

‘Medals, dumb-ass,’ PJ says as she waves the medal hanging around her neck ‘they have the most Olympic medals of any figure skaters in the history of the world’.

He suspects that PJ has crossed the drunk-line, and it’s now waaaaaaaay behind her. He can’t judge her, he’s had two glass of wine since he sat down, and so he’s standing with her shoulder to shoulder.

‘You and Scott skate together? How many medals?’ Angus asks.

‘Five, two silver and three gold,’ Mel adds.

‘Well, one silver and one gold were from team events, so that helped with the count…’ he feels compelled to clarify with Angus.

‘We were ice dancers,’ Tess offers, ‘we went to the 2010, 2014 and 2018 Olympics’

‘Wow, were you still working as a nanny while you trained?’

Tess looks genuinely baffled. Her mouth makes that endearing ‘O’ shape that it does when she’s confused.

‘We were full time athletes. No other jobs. We retired in 2019,’

‘That’s so nice that you both stayed in contact, do you two see each other often?’ Angus enquires of Tess.
He’s starting to genuinely worry about Angus, perhaps he has a learning difficulty. He is exactly like Andrew Poje, absolutely no ability to pick up social cues.

‘We see each other most mornings, when we wake up laying next to each other,’ Tess states matter-of-factly.

PJ and Mel laugh so hard they give that high pitched, crying noise they’re prone to make when they find something hysterical. Nick drops his head to the table. Justin spits his red wine onto his plate.

He wraps his arm around his wife, holy shit, she’s funny as fuck sometimes.

Angus looked puzzled. Tess spells it out.

‘Scott is my husband. The four cute kids I referred to earlier are the same four kids that Scott referred to in his story. We all dressed up as characters from the Wizard of Oz today. Our eldest son goes to school with PJ and Nick son’s and Mel and Justin’s’ daughter. Scott and I work together coaching elite ice dance teams’.

Angus pauses for moment. All eyes are on him as he processes everything Tess said. Finally, he speaks.

‘OK, I think that all makes sense. But how are you related to Canadian royalty?’

*

Halloween 11.45pm

‘How many hotel hallways do you think we’ve walked down together?’ Scott asks as she’s snuggled under his arm, the two of them meandering out of the hotel elevator toward their room.

She ponders for a moment, lacing their fingers together, ‘Hundreds, definitely hundreds. You?’

‘Yeah, that sounds about right. How many hotel hallways do you think we’ve kissed in, propped up against the wall, like this…’ Scott leans her against the wall and plants a chaste kiss on her mouth.

‘Not many,’ she retorts. Scott looks puzzled. ‘Not many because that kiss was way more G-rated than any of our other hallway kissing. Fire up, Moir! I want hotel management banging on the door at 3am asking us if we’ve heard the spooky groaning that the surrounding rooms reported to them’.

His eyebrows almost reach his hairline before he bursts out laughing. He picks her up and throws her over his shoulder. She’d protest but she’s enjoying it too much.

‘Careful what you wish for, Virtch’.

‘Walk faster, my love, we only have 9 hours until checkout. In that time I want an orgasm, a post-orgasm movie and at least 5 hours of uninterrupted sleep’.

He squeezes her ass before kissing her waist where it’s folded across his body.

‘Do you think your Mom got the kids off to sleep OK?’ he questions, placing her back on firm ground and holding his hand out for their room key.

‘Absolutely. You worried?’ She can’t find the room key, but it’s definitely here somewhere. She ferrets around in her bag trying to find it.
‘Not really, just thinking about our little people. Kinda miss them’.

She unearths the key and passes it him. She misses their kids too. But she’s glad for this time with him.

‘Wait,’ she places her hand on Scott’s. He looks at her expectantly. Expectantly and lovingly. She loves him too. So much.

‘I want to say thank you’.

‘What for Sweetheart?’

He steps forward and gathers her to his chest.

‘For walking me to my hotel room all those years ago at the 2016 Autumn Classic, for kissing my cheek and depositing me in my room. But then coming back and starting this great, big adventure with me’.

She kisses him. And it’s definitely not G-rated.

He sighs.

‘Best decision I ever made’.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for having me!

Enjoy the rest of Spooktober xox
For a Charm of Powerful Trouble

Chapter by rookandpawn

Chapter Summary

Scott Moir has always been able to make things happen. The grade, the game, the job. Life has always been easy for him. If he wishes for it, he can make it happen. Funny thing about magic; you want to think you can control it.

But you can’t.

Chapter Notes

It was so much fun to write this story. Thanks as always to my fellow writers who take their time to help with reading, advice and editing.

And especially the readers, who stick around, comment and support us.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Scott Moir has always been able to make things happen. The grade, the game, the job. Life has always been easy for him.

Not because of his looks, though he has those in spades.

Not because of his charm, although that and his looks certainly explains his luck with the ladies.

But because of his magic. If he wishes for it, he can make it happen.

Funny thing about magic; you want to think you can control it.

But you can’t.

He wakes up groggy, with a sticky mouth and an even stickier brain. He can’t remember the last time he drank that much. Definitely not since he turned thirty and decided to be a grown up. Maybe not since he was in university. There were a lot of mornings like this when he was in university.

University Scott is actually the reason that he’s in this predicament. Despite his decision to be an adult, when his buddy from Western, who had definitely not decided to be an adult, called and invited him out for drinks, University Scott thought that sounded like a great idea. Even when Adult Scott listed all the evidence to the contrary. University Scott also thought the shot of tequila was a great idea, despite their complicated history together. He was also responsible for the second shot, the third and however many that followed after. University Scott was bad at math, in addition to his poor decision making skills. He’s a terrible influence.
At least he’s not puking. He’ll try and see that as personal growth.

He remembers why he has a complicated relationship with tequila when the hot water from the shower hits his face and his brain shifts from neutral to first gear.

Tequila makes him break rules. Or maybe just gives him permission to break rules.

And he broke a big one last night. He wished for her.

Because despite the drinking and the dancing and the two girls who offered to go home with him, he got into bed alone. Worse, he went to bed lonely.

He could have a girl, that’s never been a problem, but he’s tired of just any girl. He wants the girl. The one who’s perfect for him, who wants to get married and have a dog and children and a quiet life in the country. Everyone around him seems to have found someone. He went to eleven weddings this summer. All of his siblings are married. Danny has three kids and Charlie has one and another on the way. Scott’s ready for all of it, he just hasn’t found the right woman to make his dreams come true.

So the night before, just as he was about to go to sleep, he did the the thing that he absolutely positively shouldn’t do. He wished for her.

The perfect woman.

He can almost see her in his mind. Beautiful, obviously, because if you’re wishing for the perfect girl she might as well be beautiful. Long dark hair and unexpected eyes, he thinks. Maybe a dimple or two.

But more important than beautiful on the outside is the beauty on the inside. He’s met plenty of girls with outside beauty, been fooled into thinking they might be the one only to discover that the beauty was all there was to them.

He wants a real partner, someone kind and compassionate. Someone who makes him laugh and genuinely finds his terrible jokes funny. Who he can cry with and grow old watching Jeopardy with. Someone who will challenge him and match him, he wants an equal.

And it wouldn’t hurt if she were fantastic in bed. You know, if he’s wishing for the perfect girl.

And oh fuck he did.

Last night, just before he closed his eyes, he wished for her. Wished for her in a way that he’s never wished for anything in his life.

He can’t even blame the alcohol, because he’s been far, far drunker and he’s never made that mistake before.

And it is a mistake, because you can’t use magic like that. You can’t make someone fall in love with you when they weren’t meant to.

Terrible, awful things will happen. He’s not sure what exactly, because he’s never been stupid enough to do something like this before.

He’s so panicked that he shuts off the shower, grabs a towel and sits on his bed to calm down. Tries to regulate his breathing as fear climbs down from his brain and into his heart. His hands are shaking and he’s not sure what to do. Maybe call his mom? She knows more about magic than he
could ever hope to.

“Scotty?” She’s surprised. He really should call more often. Guilt makes him exchange pleasantries instead of jumping right into his question.

“Just wondering,” he tries to sound casual. “Can you unwish something. Like say you wished for something by accident?”

“You know you can’t,” she answers, disappointment laced through every word. “Please tell me you don’t have a cheetah in your living room. That was a real pain to deal with last time.”

“No, no nothing like that.” The cheetah incident, which happened when he was five, is funny in retrospect but was terrifying at the time. It was also the first time that the Moirs realized that Scott’s magic might be a little more powerful than the rest of theirs. No one else could make animals appear when they were in kindergarten. They still couldn’t. “I was just…”

He doesn’t get a chance to finish because he’s interrupted by a sharp knock on the door.

A knock which is equally surprising and terrifying.

No one ever knocks on his door.

“I have to go.” He hangs up without listening to her answer. Drops his phone on the bed and heads for the door, braces himself for what he might find. He almost wishes for a cheetah. But not actually, because wishing is what got him into this mess in the first place.

He opens the door to find a woman.

He does a quick check for cheetahs because you can never be too careful where cheetahs are concerned.

So it takes him a moment to take in the woman standing before him.

Not just a woman, but a gorgeous woman.

A gorgeous woman wearing an adorable pair of penguin covered, pink pyjamas and the sweetest smile he’s ever seen. Her dark hair is falling out of the bun perched precariously on her head and she has a streak of flour on her cheek, forehead and nose.


Tessa, he thinks, might be his new favourite name.

“Oh,” he manages, because words don’t seem to be working their way from his brain to his mouth.

“I was wondering if could borrow a cup of sugar?” she asks and holds up her measuring cup. Her eyes sparkle. They’re green, his mind registers. Gorgeous green.

“Oh?” It seems to be the only word he’s capable of.

“I decided to make cookies and then I realized I didn’t have any sugar and that seems like an important ingredient,” she smiles and her face lights up. “I didn't mean to get you out of the shower.”

“Oh!” he says for the third time, but this oh shakes him out of his stupor. He hadn’t realized he was still just in his towel until that moment. “Why don’t you come in and I’ll grab some clothes.”
“Sure.” She follows him into the living room and perches herself on his couch with a smile. “Hey, this is comfy!”

“I’ll be right back,” he says carefully, not convinced that she isn’t going to vanish if he leaves the room. She just smiles in response and holds up her measuring cup in a salute.

He’s in such a race to get dressed that he falls over trying to get his foot through his boxer briefs,

“Everything ok in there?” the mystery woman calls as he’s laying on the floor with his underwear half on and his dick blowing in the wind.

“Yup!” His voice cracks. Great, now he sounds like a sixteen year old boy. “Don’t come in!”

“Ok!” she answers with a giggle. It’s the best giggle he’s ever heard. All of the good things from his childhood suddenly come flooding into his brain, as soon as he hears her giggle.

Unfortunately, he doesn’t have much time to lay on the floor and ruminate in her giggle, because he’s naked and she might leave.

“Sorry that took so long,” he’s out of breath but back. Also, his shirt might be inside out, but he’s not going to worry about that. “So, sugar. Brown or white?”

“Does it matter?” she asks as she follows him into the kitchen.

“Have you ever made cookies before?” He stops short at the counter and turns around to find her lingering at the door, the ridiculously cute smile still on her face.

“No, but today seemed like a really good day to start,” she says brightly and he can’t help but laugh.

“Why don’t I lend you a cup of brown and a cup of white and then you should be good to go.”

She offers him the measuring cup and when he takes it their fingers brush for just a moment. It’s like a bolt of electricity runs up his arm and straight into his chest. She must feel it too, because her eyes go wide and she exhales a tiny little gasp. The gasp goes straight to his groin.

“Thank you,” she answers, her voice a little shaky.

He tries to calm himself, as he carefully measures out the sugar, and manages to get both his breathing and his dick under control.

She looks a little dazed as he turns around but she accepts the sugar, which he puts into ziplock bags for her. They’re both careful not to touch each other again.

“Anything else?” he asks hoping desperately that there is something else, anything else that will keep her around a little longer.

“I don’t suppose you have eggs, milk and butter I could also borrow?” She pinks a little at the request. Like everything else she’s done since she walked into his life, it’s both adorable and sexy.

“Do you have any of the ingredients you need?”

“I have a bowl,” she says proudly. “Oh! And flour.”

Then a brilliant idea occurs to him.
“Why don’t you bring your bowl and flour over here and we can make cookies together?”

He hopes like hell that the invitation won’t seem weird or creepy especially given that they’ve only know each other for ten minutes.

“I would love that!” she says and scampers towards the door. “I’ll be right back.”

He takes the opportunity of her brief absence to make sure the house is spotless. He's a pretty tidy guy but something about her makes him want the place to look perfect.

“I have chocolate chips too,” she explains as she burst through the door, brandishing said chocolate chips like a trophy. “I think that’s why I decided to make cookies in the first place.”

She still wearing her pjs and the fact that she didn’t bother to change, makes him happier that almost anything else.

“One other thing,” she says as she presents the chocolate chips like she’s giving him a gift. In a way, he thinks, she is. “What’s your name?”

“Scott.”

He extends his hand, reflexively and when she takes it the electricity returns, runs up his arm and straight into his heart. He revels in it for a moment, feeling it caress him, before he removes his hand from hers.

They chat as they work. It quickly becomes clear that she really has never made cookies before and that she is a menace in the kitchen.

After the third dropped egg, he suggests that maybe she could watch and learn, so she plants herself on the kitchen counter with a smile.

He learns she’s a kindergarten teacher as she tells him stories about the funny, crazy and sweet things her students do. She describes them with such fondness, even the ones that drive her crazy, that he imagines she must be the best teacher in the world.

In turn, he tells her about his job as a project manager working with a bunch of computer programmers. They both agree that their jobs have remarkable similarities as he also has to deal with temper tantrums on a daily basis.

When the first batch of cookies go into the oven he suggests the watch TV while they wait and when they find a Night Court marathon, she squeals with delight. He gets to hear her whole belly laugh as they watch, and he thinks that laugh might be enough for him to propose to her on the spot.

They eat the first batch of cookies while the second batch bakes. They dunk them in milk and her face ends up covered in chocolate, she spills milk down the front of her pyjama shirt which is buttoned incorrectly and just laughs. He burns his tongue on a too hot cookie and she thinks he’s hysterical as he jumps around the room trying to cool his tongue.

When the cookies are baked and carefully nestled in his Tupperware (that way he gets to see her again when she returns it, never let it be said he isn’t smart), there really is no reason for her to stay.

“This was fun,” he says as they linger near the door. It’s lame, but he can’t think of anything else that might keep her in his apartment longer.
“So much fun,” she sparkles when she talks. “Oh, hey. Are you doing anything tonight?”

“Me, no, no plans.” He fails utterly at sounding casual. He might be embarrassed if he wasn’t thoroughly enchanted by the woman in front of him.

“Do you like hockey?” Does he like hockey? It’s only his second favourite activity.

“Because my friend cancelled on me at the last minute, and I have an extra ticket for the game tonight. Do you want to go?”

“Yeah, yes, sure.” He tries to lean casually on the wall and almost falls over. “That would be cool.”

“Awesome.” She stands on her tiptoes and gives him a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll pick you up at 6:00, why don’t we get a beer and some wings before the game.”

She leaves with a wave and a smile that shows both her dimples. He walks to the couch and plops down in almost a trance. She’s perfect.

And with that the spell is broken.

Shit.

The perfect girl walked through his door right after he wished for her.

Shit.

This is definitely not good.

“You can’t make someone fall in love with you, Dickhead,” his brother, Danny is completely exasperated on the other end of the phone. “That’s magic 101.”

“But…”

“Didn’t you listen to anything Mom said when she explained all of this to us?” Danny sounds pissed, but that’s standard.

“Yes, but mom also didn’t think you could make cheetahs appear and we all know how that turned out.”

“Man, you were so scared. I thought you were going to pee your pants.” Danny is laughing in that obnoxious way of his. He should have called Charlie. He would have laughed too, but less annoyingly.

“Danny, this is an actual problem.” God, he hates his asshole of a brother. Well, not actually, but in this moment, he does. “I wished for the perfect girl and she showed up at my door. And she asked me out on a date.”

“No, your next door neighbour showed up at your door, as next door neighbours do, and you used your magic to charm her. Frankly, magic is the only explanation for how you’ve managed to be successful with the ladies despite that honker of a nose.” Danny laughs at his unfunny attempt at a joke, before he continues. “You can’t make them feel any differently than they would normally. Idiot, you know this. We’ve all tried.”
Danny’s right of course. Wishes don’t work like that. You can’t change someone’s feelings with a wish. Sometimes you can use the power of a wish to get around a situation, to use it to your advantage, but you can’t take away someone’s free will.

His kindergarten teacher, Miss Elway, did not want to marry him, no matter how many times he wished for it.

“But what about her asking me out?” He knows he’s being ridiculous, but he can’t shake the feeling that he made this happen. While he’s thrilled that Tessa is interested in him, he doesn’t want her to be because he unwittingly forced her to.

“Didn’t you say you met her while you were wearing a towel? Maybe she just wants to get a better look at the Scottyconda.”

“For fuck’s sake, Danny!”

“I’ve seen you naked, I know you’re packing. All of us Moirs are. Maybe it’s the reason for the magic,” he says like he actually believes the validity of his statement.

“I can’t believe I called you for advice.”

“Whatever. Go out. Enjoy your perfect woman, maybe let her experience the magic that is the Scottyconda…”

“Danny…” he’s never calling his brother again.

“But you didn’t make this happen because of some wish. As unfathomable as it seems, maybe she just likes you for you.”

He can hear Danny laughing as he hangs up on him. He really should have called Charlie.

But as much as his brother is right, and he shouldn’t worry about something that’s not even possible, he worries.

A lot.

His worries disappear when he opens the door to find Tessa in a Leaf’s jersey on the other side. How could he possibly worry when she’s smiling at him like that? How can he possibly think when she’s smiling at him like that?

“Ready to go?” she bubbles, and he can’t imagine anything he’d rather do.

And clearly he was being crazy thinking that his wish was responsible for her. No wish is powerful enough to make someone return, she came back on her own, so she must like him for him. In some ways that’s even more terrifying.

They walk to her favourite bar, which also happens to be his favourite, and consume more chicken wings than any humans should. Tessa eats with her whole body and gets bbq sauce all over her face and inexplicably her nose. Even better, she doesn’t seem to care about the mess, but barrels on ahead with her stories and her magical, perfect, ridiculous laugh.

He limits himself to one beer, and notices that she does too. But even with the limited alcohol intake he feels tipsy around her. The best kind of tipsy, where everyone is your friend, life seems
perfect and your feet barely touch the ground.

He buys them each a beer at the game, the least he can do considering she won’t let him pay for the ticket, and they happily bicker over who the Leaf’s best player is. They don’t agree, but it’s the fun kind of disagreeing where you feel alive from the argument.

They do agree that the New Jersey Devils are in fact evil incarnate. Which is something they absolutely have to agree on.

As the game starts, he notices a faint orange stain from bbq sauce on her nose and he’s never thought anyone more adorable in his life.

When they both leap up at the same time and yell, “Are you kidding me!” at the ref, he thinks she might be the sexiest woman he’s every met.

They walk home, holding hands and singing “I Want It That Way” and it starts to snow. He knows, even though it doesn’t make any sense at all, that he might be in love with her.

“Would you like to come in for a drink?” he asks, like the cheesiest guy in a terrible rom com, when they arrive back at their apartment building.

“Scott, are you really asking me in for a drink?” she levels a gaze that is so devastatingly sexy that his mind short circuits. “Because I can think of so, so many things I’d rather do than drink.”

He can’t even voice his agreement, just swallows and swings open the door to his apartment.

The only light inside comes from the window and Tessa looks positively bewitching in the moonlight. She bites her lip and looks at him like she wants to consume him. He feels exactly the same way.

They stare at each other for a few minutes, stalking each other. He’s not sure who’s the predator and who’s the prey and in that moment he really doesn’t care. When the tension has built to the point that he doesn’t think he can take the waiting anymore, she reaches for the hem of her jersey and pulls it over her head. She drops it on the floor and licks her lips.

The clock ticks over to midnight, just as he closes the space between them. He pauses for a moment as he rushes to kiss her, because as soon as his lips are near hers that almost familiar jolt of electricity passes between them. When he finally does kiss her, it’s like nothing he's ever experienced before. Once he starts kissing her, he can’t stop. He’s addicted after his first hit of Tessa and he never, ever wants to come down from this particular drug.

Their hands find each others hair at exactly the same time. As he tugs hers out of the pineapple shaped bun on the top of her head, he thinks he's never felt hair more silky, that ran through his fingers as easily. He’s impressed that he can think at all, as he luxuriates in the feeling of her fingers massaging his scalp, tugging at his hair.

He’s never kissed anyone like this before, even when he was young and kissing seemed to be the greatest invention that the world had ever seen. But kissing her reminds him of his youth, when kissing wasn’t a means to an end but the whole event. Kissing her is like all the pleasures of childhood, cotton candy and local fairs, swimming pools and staying up late on summer nights. He feels young and carefree and like all his worries have suddenly disappeared.

They kiss for an eternity, the room melts away and they’re floating above the earth, up in the stars. He’d never describe a kiss as magical but this one is mystical and otherworldly, but also like everything in his life suddenly makes sense. As if every moment in his life was leading to this. To
being with her. To the meeting of lips and people who were always meant to be together.

He could kiss her forever but eventually the hunger for more starts to build. She must feel the same if the way she presses her body against his is any indication. They mould together and she starts to feel like an extension of him.

“Could we?” she whispers into his mouth, her lips still pressed against his. He feels the same way, as if separating their lips would be a crime.

He nods, and leads her towards his bedroom. They kiss all the way there, but he finally lets his hands wander, exploring the soft skin on her muscled back. It feels like his fingers burn a path everywhere they touch her bare skin, marking her. She moans into his mouth. The breathy sounds that come from her are like a symphony and all he can think about is giving her more pleasure so he can hear her again and again.

“I need to take your shirt off,” she says as they arrive in his room and come to a stop at the foot of his bed. She already has the garment halfway up his ribcage and every place she touches sizzles like it’s been exposed to an electric current.

“We have to stop kissing.”

“So you see my problem,” she answers. He can feel her giggle on his lips and somehow that’s even better.

He breaks contact, and even though he feels a magnetic pull to her, he takes a step back. First he drinks in the sight of her in his bedroom. Her skin glows in the faint moonlight of his apartment, and she looks bewitching standing there in a pale pink bralette and biting that damned bottom lip of hers. Then he slowly pulls off his shirt. Gives her a little show, which she enjoys if her giggle, followed by a rumbling groan that he feels in his heart and his groin, is any indication.

He’s not sure how they end up touching again, maybe he moved, maybe she took the first step but suddenly the space between them is gone. His hands are on her back while hers on his chest. There’s an electricity between them. She writes a song into his skin, left behind in every place she touches. He marks her skin with poetry, sonnets and soliloquies. He thought he understood what it was to be touched, but he was wrong.

She gasps, as he works the bralette off her body, as his knuckles make contact with her nipples. He brushes them again and again. All he wants is for her to make that sound, until he finds ways of drawing other sounds out of her. Pinching and pulling, and finally his mouth. He’s never tasted anything sweeter than her skin on his tongue.

Her hands are otherworldly as she explores the peaks and valleys of his body. There could be nothing better, until her mouth joins their exploration. She finds all the places that make him dissolve. The skin on his neck, the shell of his ear and the low slope of his abs. He wonders briefly if the evidence of her will be there in the morning, if his skin will forever be transformed.

There’s no time to ruminate when she drops to her knees and slowly unzips his pants, plays with the zipper as if she’s about to unwrap a present at Christmas. She never breaks eye contact with him as she pulls his jeans and underwear down his legs. He hisses when she finally, finally strokes her delicate fingers over his aching cock and she smiles.

That smile, that smile is mesmerizing and makes him want to do anything in his power to keep in her face. He doesn’t have time to contemplate all the ways he can keep her smiling because her mouth is on his cock and her ceases to be able to think about anything. He can only feel. The way
her tongue sweeps across him, and around him, works his tip and then down to the base. Then her warm and enchanting mouth envelopes him. She never stops looking at him, those exquisite green eyes hold his gaze and he forces himself to return her stare.

When he feels his orgasm start to build, he hauls her up his body. As heavenly as she feels, as much as he wants nothing more than to watch her swallow him, that’s not how this evening is going to end. He’s desperate to feel her surround him in a different way, but first he needs to return the favour.

If he thought her skin tasted sweet it’s nothing compared to the addictive flavour of her folds. He finally understands what the bible meant by forbidden fruit because he would do anything to taste her again and again. His tongue teases and torments her, until she grabs his hair and comes with a gasp and a flood. He drinks her dry, lazily works her until she stops convulsing. When, she finally settles with a sigh, he thinks he’s never been prouder of himself.

Barely a moment passes, before something flares in her eyes, something dangerous and otherworldly. Something he is so, so ready for. As he makes his way up his body, she wraps her legs around his waist and pushes him onto his back. He wasn’t expecting her to be so strong, but he loves it. The press of her thighs into his hips, how she takes control, they way she straddles his abs and grinds a little.

Her cheeks are pink with the remnants of her orgasm and her hair is wild, but it’s her eyes, those striking green eyes, that shift colour with every thought and emotion, that he can’t stop looking at. Those eyes tell stories he wants to hear and know and be an intrinsic part of.

“Scott,” her silky voice pulls him out of his thoughts and hypnotizes him. “Are you ready?”

He can only nod, all his words are lost in his throat. She just smiles and sinks down slowly on to him.

God.

There

Are

No

Words.

No thoughts, just feeling. Because the feeling of being inside her, of being surrounded by her can’t be explained.

It overwhelms him.

“Are you…” she pants out as she starts to move. “Can you feel…”

He nods and takes both her hands in his as they move together. It’s not awkward like it should be. They find the same rhythm almost immediately. And when their eyes lock the world melts away. He can only see her, can only feel her.

His concentration on her makes him last, even when all he wants to do is come and satisfy the ache that builds in every part of him. But he wants her to come with him, he’s never wanted anything in his life they way that he wants that. Watches as the blush builds on her chest, as her moans turn into groans and when he can feel her start to flutter, he pushes her harder, wills her there.
There’s no holding back when she starts to orgasm, he falls with her. She collapses on top of him and they ride out the aftershocks, his hand in her hair, hers resting on his chest, where she seems to will his heart to slow down with hers.

They finally part enough to lay down beside each other, still a mess of tangled limbs. The last thing he sees before sleep claims him is her beautiful smile and those enchanting eyes.

She’s gone when he wakes up.

At first he thinks he imagined her, dreamt her, because she’s perfect.

And then he remembers.

Charlie is even less helpful than Danny, which he wouldn’t have thought possible, but his brothers were always overachieving assholes.

“You can’t use magic to make someone love you, douchebag,” Charlie says instead of hello.

“I guess this means you talked to Danny.”

“Made fun of you with Danny is more accurate, but sure.” Charlie sighs, and continues. “But seriously, you can’t magic someone into loving you. If you could, Nicole would be over the incident with the couch already.”

“Tell Scotty I’m never going to be over the couch incident,” he can hear Charlie’s wife’s voice through the phone. “And that he’s fucktard.”

Clearly his brother married the woman meant for him.

“I don’t think I magicked her into liking me…”

“Thank God, I was starting to think Danny dropping you on your head when you were a baby really did cause some brain damage.”

“Wait, when did Danny drop me on my head?” He forgets what he was about to say for a minute.

“It’s not important, because there was no visible damage and we never told Mom, so therefore it never happened. The same way we’ll never tell her who really pooped on her roses, right Scotty?” Charlie’s voice takes on a warning tone and since his Mom still laments the death of her prized roses, he knows not to ask any further questions.

“So you’re still freaking out about this girl. Is she that good in bed?”

“She’s amazing…”

“Wait, she slept with you on the first date? Maybe she’s the one with the brain damage.” Charlie scoffs and he can hear Nicole laughing in the background.

The level of abuse he has to suffer at the hands of his family is the reason he moved an hour and a half away. Regardless, he charges on ahead, because they are literally the only people in the world he can talk to about this, “It was incredible, like she was made for me, and now I’m worried. Charlie, what if I wished her into existence?”
There’s a moment of silence on the other line and the Charlie burst into hysterical laughter. That’s it. He’s getting a new family.

“You can’t wish someone into existence,” he says when he finally stops laughing.

“That’s what everyone said about the cheetah,” he’s nearly hysterical.

“A cheetah isn’t the same thing as a person,” Charlie says but Scott can tell that he’s taking the conversation a little more seriously. “And that was just the one time.”

“Well…”

“Is there something you’d like to share with the class?”

“You remember Magoo?” Magoo was their dog when they were kids, a stray they found sleeping in their backyard when he was nine.

“Scott,” Charlie sounds worried now. “You swore you didn’t.”

Except he had. He wanted a dog so badly, but his mom said no, and his dad knew better than to disagree with her. He asked, he begged, he bargained, but the answer was always no. One night when he was nine, three things happened at the same time, there was a full moon, it was Friday the 13th and he was running a fever of one hundred and four. So he thought about the perfect dog, he’d be shaggy and friendly. Love his mom best so she’d keep him, but Scott almost as much. He’d want to play all day, wait for him to come home at the bus stop and then cuddle with him at night. And then right before he fell asleep he wished for him.

The next morning when he woke up, his fever had broken and his perfect dog was in the backyard.

“I thought it was just a coincidence!” Plus he was nine and really didn’t want to get in trouble again.

“You magicked up Magoo!” Charlie sounds like he’s been betrayed.

“I don’t know, maybe, probably not.” He’d convinced himself that he’d had nothing to do with Magoo’s appearance, had completely forgotten about it, until this maybe mess with Tessa.

“Anything else?” he’s whispering now, obviously doesn’t want Nicole to know.

“Ummm…” he really doesn’t want to answer this one.

“Asshole! What did you do?” Charlie barks at him.

“Remember the rabbits?”

“YOU FUCKER!” he shouts.

“What’s a fucker?” he hears his niece ask.

“Go ask your mom,” Charlie responds, and Scott knows he must be panicking because that is not a question anyone should go ask mom, especially at Dad’s suggestion. “You swore that wasn’t you. Like on the bible.”

It was the summer before he started high school and he and his brothers were in an ongoing war about whose turn it was to mow the lawn. So they made a bet, a bet that he does not want to speak about ever again, but needless to say he lost. The idea of having to mow that feces-covered (Magoo
was a prodigious pooper) jungle of a lawn was just too much. So when he saw a shooting star he couldn’t help but wish for some help.

The next morning, the front lawn was trimmed courtesy of thirty-seven bunnies.

“Damn, this is bad,” Charlie says and for the first time he’s genuinely worried. His idiot brother never expresses concern.

“What am I going to do?” he whispers back.

“Charlie Fucking Moir, did you tell our precious flower of a daughter to ask me what a Fucker was?”

“Gotta go.” Charlie hangs up and he sits there with the phone to his ear for several minutes.

He has no idea what he’s going to do.

And that terrifies him.

As soon as Tessa walks through his door, he forgets about the phone call with Charlie and all his panic is gone. Instead, all he can think is how cute she looks with her face scrubbed free of make up and her damp hair piled up on top of her head. She’s wearing pyjamas again, but this time they’re blue with koala bears. Miraculously, she’s carrying two steaming cups of coffee.

“I was hoping you’d still be asleep when I got back,” she beams at him and hands him one of the cups. “You were really out when I left.”

“Last night took a lot out of me.” He tries and fails to sound sexy, but she laughs and it doesn’t matter.

They both sit down on his couch and sip their coffee. It’s easy like he always wanted. They don’t have to speak, but there’s so much to say.

“I’ve never felt anything like that before.” They both say at the same time.

They both laugh and she spills coffee on the front of her pyjamas and then he spills coffee on his pants while he’s trying to help her, which makes them laugh so much that they both have to put down their cups.

“It was intense,” he says when they’ve stopped laughing and he finds her cuddled up under his arm. She fits as if that spot was made for her.

“And we… we weren’t careful,” she says, her voice full of worry.

“Oh,” He hadn’t even thought of a condom, he was so overwhelmed by her, so desperate to get inside her. But he’d never forgotten before. Not when he’d been drunk or stupid, he’d never forgotten about a condom. His mother had spent almost as much time explaining the importance of condom use as she had explaining the rules of magic.

“I’m clean and on the pill, so you don’t have anything to worry about,” she says looking at him through her lashes.

“I am too. I mean clean, not on the pill, but you probably already knew that.” He’s not sure why he turns into a babbling idiot when she’s around, except he’s never wanted to impress someone as
much as he wants to impress her.

“I did, but I think you’re cute when you babble.” She giggles and she tickles his ribs a little, which sends him into a round of giggles. Before he knows what’s happening they’re in a tickle fight that ends with her under him on the couch. His hands hold her wrists down over her head and they’re both trying to catch their breath. “We just have to be more careful next time.”

“I couldn’t think clearly. It was like being drugged or under a spell or something,” he says and her face changes for a moment. Gone is the sexy, stormy look that was there and it’s like she remembers something she’d rather forget. It’s there and then gone so quickly, that he thinks he might have imagined it.

“We just have to be more careful this time,” she says and kisses him, and he forgets all his worries.

They are careful but not by much and he still feels like he’s not quite in control when he’s with her. Like she isn’t quite real. Even though she feels real and solid under him, and around him, and…

Which is why he gets her cell number, he has questions and he can’t focus long enough when he’s around her to get answers.

S: How about we hang out at your place tonight?
T: My place is still a mess from moving in. There are boxes everywhere.
S: How long have you lived next door?
T: Oh! I don’t suppose you want to help unpack?
S: I’m good at heavy lifting.
T: That you are, but it’s ok. I’m the only one who can put things in the right places. I’ll bring over take out and we can Netflix and chill.

It isn’t until the next day that he realizes that she never really answered his question.

So he tries again.

S: Are you free on Saturday?
T: I’m free most of the time. Especially for you.
S: A couple of my buddies are heading out to the pub and I was wondering if you and a couple of your friends wanted to join us.
T: Oh, my friends aren’t really pub goers.
S: Something else then? Mini golf?
T: How did you meet your friends?
S: Patrick and I grew up together and Charlie and I met in the weirdest way…
T: Tell me all about it!!
By the time he finishes his story he’s made her laugh so hard she sends him a picture of the smile on her face, but he’s no closer to finding out anything about her.

S: So I have a half day off this week and I was thinking I could drop by your school and take you out for lunch.

T: That would be nice, but I’m on playground duty at lunch.

S: Everyday?

T: Well, no but I only have a half an hour to eat so, it’s not really worth it.

S: I can bring something with me, then I’d have a chance to see where you work.

T: Oh, I forgot to tell you, a tree fell in the parking lot today, crushed two of the teachers cars!

S: Are you ok? Is your car ok?

T: I don’t even have a car. But it was very exciting. The grade ones saw the whole thing happen and it’s all anyone can talk about.

S: I bet.

Texting isn’t working, but maybe a date might. A date somewhere that there’s no chance of forgetting his mission. A date where there’s absolutely, no way they can end up having sex.

He invites her out for ice cream. It’s a safe and wholesome activity, where nothing can go wrong.

Only he never considered the ramifications of watching her eat ice cream. The faces she makes while she eats ice cream are eerily similar to the one she makes, well, on other occasions. Those faces make it hard to focus on his mission.

Speaking of hard…

Thank God, they’re in a public place.

He sets to work on his ice cream cone. Licking it carefully and thoroughly. Trying not to think about licking other things.

Tessa is staring at him when he looks up, her mouth slightly open.

“What?” he asks, checking to see if anything interesting is happening behind him.

“Nothing!” she yelps and blushes, goes back to eating her ice cream with all the gusto she was before. He loves watching her because she eats like a little kid. Almost as if she’s never tasted ice cream before.

Wait! Has she never tasted ice cream before? Has she never tasted ice cream before because he wished her into existence, and why is her bottom lip so overwhelmingly inviting?

“You sure are enjoying that!” his voice comes out sudden and squeaky.
“I love ice cream,” she sighs. She sticks the spoon in her mouth, eats about half of what’s there, before she moans in contentment and takes a deep breath and finishes the bite.

His brain short circuits and he almost drops his cone.

“Eating something you like is almost like being under a spell. Like you’re not quite in control of yourself.” She puts the last spoonful in her mouth and licks the spoon clean. He can feel his own cone dripping down his hand, but there’s no way he’s going to stop watching her.

“Scott?”

“Scott?”

“What?” How long has she been saying his name? “Do you want to go back to your place?” she says, leans forward and licks a lingering spot of ice cream off of his lips.

He can’t get to his feet fast enough.

Obviously dates, like text messages, aren’t going to work. He still knows nothing about her, even though they’ve had sex four more times. If only the sex helped clarify things for him, made him believe that she was real, but every time they’re together it’s just so overwhelming, so incredible, that there’s only one word to describe it.

Magical.

Which is exactly the problem.

He needs help.

So he does something he’s never done before, he invites a girl home to meet his mom. Because if anyone will be able to tell him if he magicked Tessa into existence, it will be Alma Moir.

Upside, he’ll know once and for all if the woman of his dreams is real or not.

Downside, either way his mother is going to kill him.

But this not knowing is keeping him up at night, well that and the sex.

“Tessa,” Alma gushes as she opens the door to Scott’s childhood home. He can tell she’s itching to hug Tessa is but holding back.

“Alma, it’s so nice to meet you!” she throws her arms around Alma and that’s it, two members of his family are in love with Tessa.

Wait, what? Two?

Crap. Is he in love with Tessa? He barely knows her. And she might not be real. But maybe…

Crap. He’s in love with Tessa.

They’ve somehow made it into the living room during his realization, although he has no knowledge of how.
Tessa and his mother sit down on the couch across from him and he stares at both of them as they chat and charm each other.

“Scott?” his mother says and has that look that suggests she’s been talking to him for awhile and knows he hasn’t been listening. “I asked you how your Halloween was? Weren’t you going to go out with that friend of yours from University?”

It had been Halloween the night he went out with his buddy, his least favourite night of the year. As someone with actual magic he hated watching all the shenanigans around pretend magic, so he’d only agreed to go as long as they went somewhere with zero Halloween decorations.

“It was a special Halloween, you know,” Alma continues after Scott nods but fails to elaborate. “A full moon, and an eclipse.”

“Special things can happen on a day like that,” Tessa answers and her voice sounds like smoke and velvet. “Powerful things.”

“Mom,” he jumps up, panic propelling him out of his seat. “We need to make tea, right now.”

Alma looks confused, but follows him into the kitchen. When he looks back, Tessa waves to him from the couch.

“Scott Moir, what is wrong with you?” Alma smacks him as soon as the door to the kitchen is closed. “Why are you being so rude to that wonderful girl? She’s perfect for you.”

“That’s the problem,” he hisses back and starts to fill the kettle with water.

“Please don’t be a cliche.”

“I’m not! She’s perfect but she’s not real.”

“Scotty…”

“Mom!” He gets between her and the cookies she’s trying to plate, so she’ll actually listen to him. “I think I magicked her into existence.”

“You can’t…”

“I wished for her on Halloween. During the full moon and the eclipse and the next day she showed up at my door.”

“Oh.” He’s never seen his mom look this pale or this worried before and he and his brothers have given her so, so many reasons for both. “Like the cheetah.”

“Exactly.”

“But you can’t…” she says with a shake of her head.

“I wished for her and she showed up at my door and as far as I can tell she never existed before that moment.”

He tells her about all her attempts to find out more about Tessa and how he still doesn’t know anything about her. Alma just nods, but she looks more concerned, the more he tells her.

“Alright,” she picks up the tray laden with tea and cookies and starts for the living room. “Leave it to me.”
“So, Tessa,” Alma turns on the charm as she pours the tea. “Tell me about your family. Where did you grow up?”

“Near here actually,” Tessa says and her smile is so warm and inviting that he can’t think about much else. He’ll leave the interrogation to his mom.

“Would I know your parents?”

“Probably not. We come from a very small community. Not like you guys. It must have been so much fun growing up. Scott tells me you have a twin.”

He’s about to tell her all about his Aunt Carol, but Alma speaks before he can.

“Do you have any pictures of them on your phone? I’d love to see what they look like.”

“Actually, it’s a new phone. I lost mine on Halloween, so I don’t have any older pictures on it, but I do have some great ones from the night Scott and I went to the hockey game, would you like to see them?”

All he can think about is what happened after the hockey game, as Tessa’s hand slips into his.

“Maybe you could bring some old photos next time you come for a visit?” Alma smiles but her voice is ratcheted up almost an octave and Scott knows that’s not a good sign.

“I actually,” she takes a sip of her tea and her hand shakes a little as she puts the cup back in the saucer. “There aren’t any pictures of my family. There was a fire a few years back and we lost everything.”

He’s about to give her a hug when his mom grabs him by the collar and hauls him off the couch.

“We’ll be right back,” she says as she shoves him into the kitchen.

“Isn’t she perfect?”

“Scott, she’s a cheetah.” Alma says as she paces the kitchen.

“No, she’s not. She a woman.”

“She’s a metaphorical cheetah, you asshole!” she yells, and people wonder where he and his brothers get it from. “You wished her into existence.”

The news hits him hard. He knew. He did. But he was also hoping it wasn’t true.

“What am I going to do?”

“I think you have to tell her.” She gives him a quick hug. “Because we definitely can’t do the same thing we did with the cheetah.”

“What did you do with the cheetah?”

“Oh, honey. You don’t want to know.”
It’s a long drive back to his apartment because neither of them say a word to each other.

He really, really doesn’t want her to be a cheetah.

But if she is a cheetah does it have to change anything? Can you love a cheetah? A metaphorical one, anyway.

They barely look at each other as they enter his apartment. Sit down on the couch in silence. His right leg is bouncing to the same rhythm as her left leg.

“I have something to tell you,” they both say at the same time. Normally, the unison would make him laugh but the urgent need to tell the truth spurs him forward.

“I think I wished you into existence,” he says at the exact same moment she says.

“I’m a witch and I put a spell on you.”

“Wait! What?” he can’t have heard her correctly.

“I’m a witch Scott, and I know you won’t believe me, but on Halloween I cast a spell to find the perfect man, and spells like that aren’t supposed to work because you can’t make someone want you when they don’t, but then the perfect man was next door and I’m so sorry if I made you do something that you…” she babbles and then stops, looks confused and continues. “What did you say?

“I have magic. I wished for the perfect woman on Halloween and then you showed up at my door. I don’t think you’re real.” He can’t quite process what she’s saying. Did she just say she was a witch?

“Of course I’m real,” she rolls her eyes at him.

“You might think that. I’m sure the cheetah thought that too, but you’re not.”

“Did you hit your head? You’re not making any sense.” She reaches out and checks his head for bumps. She certainly feels real. Her hands are so soft and they way she pulls his hair… he has to stay focused. “Maybe this is some kind of side effect of the spell. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Tessa,” he stops her hands. Her skin feels soft and silky under his thumbs, so he immediately drops them. He needs to concentrate. It’s just so hard when she looks all cute and confused and like he should kiss her… He shakes his head to clear his thoughts. “You’re not real. I wished you into existence. I wished for the perfect woman and you showed up on my door step.”

“You think I’m perfect?” She smiles at him.

“I really do. I like absolutely everything about you.” Of course he does, she’s his perfect woman. He can’t figure out why his perfect woman thinks she’s a witch but he’ll worry about that part later.

“I like absolutely everything about you too.”

They inch a little closer to each other, their lips almost meet, and then he rememberers.

“But that’s because I invented you. You didn’t exist before November first. I’m not sure you exist when you’re not here.” He explains as he pulls back, has to force himself not to look at her lips.

“Of course I exist when you’re not around.” She gives him an exasperated look, but she notices that
her eyes immediately travel back to his lips.

“You don’t have any family or friends or an actual place of work and you wouldn’t let me see your apartment, so I don’t think that exists either.”

“That’s because I’m a witch!” she yells, jumps up off the couch and starts to pace. “And that tends to scare guys off.”

“There’s no such thing as witches.”

“Says the guy who thinks he wished me into existence.”

She has a good point, so he decides to shut up and listen.

“I didn’t want you to come to my apartment because I have all my spell stuff out and it’s hard to explain that away without telling someone you’re a witch and that really isn’t a third date conversation.”

“What about your friends, your job?”

“My friends are part of my coven, and let’s just say they’re introverts,” she says with a shrug. “And I told you about my job. You know I teach kindergarten.”

“But you wouldn’t let me come visit you.” If he can convince himself she’s a witch then what she’s saying makes some sense.

“Because I didn’t want people at work meeting you until I knew this was going to work. Which I wasn’t going to know until we had the whole I’m a witch conversation, because that tends to be a real relationship tanker.”

Maybe she’s telling the truth. Maybe she is real and a witch. Maybe she isn’t a metaphorical cheetah. Still…

“And there really was a fire at our house that destroyed all my childhood pictures, but it was started by improper cauldron use, so I like to leave that part out,” she explains, as if she can read his mind. “Do you really think you have magic?”

He explains it all to her. How he can make small things happen by wishing for them. And can sometimes make much, much bigger things happen under very specific circumstances. She seems a little dubious at first but it doesn’t take much before she believes him. He doesn’t even have to prove it to her, and that makes him even more spellbound by her.

“But I’m worried I made you want to be with me,” he says quiet, carefully, and dares to take her hand.

“I cast a love spell and met you then next day.” She gives his hand a soft squeeze. “I think I made you want to be with me.”

“But you said that love charms don’t work.” He needs this to be true, because now that he’s found Tessa, he never wants to let her go.

“And you said you can’t wish someone into loving you.” She takes his other hand in hers.

The world melts away.

They’re floating surrounded by stars.
“But powerful things happen on a night like that,” they breathe together.

Her hand finds his chest as his works its way to her shoulder and neck where he strokes the places he dreams about. And his lips soon follow the trail his fingers began. Her sighs and moans are like a symphony. The more she plays the more he wants to hear. She feels like everything safe and warm he’s ever wanted and he never wants to let her go.

“How can we ever know?” one of them asks.

“Does it matter?” the other answers.

Chapter End Notes

I'm rookandpawn1 over on twitter. Come by and say hi.
Chapter Summary

In which our favourite pilots (and their little one) go trick or treating.

Chapter Notes

A huge thank you to my guild friends who extended the invitation to me to write. I didn’t think I would be capable of this, but I have surprised myself!

This was originally meant to be a couple of paragraphs of epilogue to Tango Victor Sierra Mike…and was gonna be written way back in throwback week... but now here this is in all its 10k glory!!

I’ve very much embraced the ‘fall/autumn/Halloween holiday’ related option in the brief, and essentially this is a glimpse of family life. Nothing spooky, nothing scary, just a whole tonne of fluff.

Full disclosure that I verbatim borrowed a couple gags/lines from Cabin Pressure, so kudos to John Finnemore too!

Also thanks to C, T and all of the non-guild members for their help and cheerleading. Special thanks to LPM for smut help!!

“Look Grandma! I’m flying!”

Scott chuckles as he glides across the rink towards his mother holding Oscar, the three-year-old’s arms outstretched as he soars through the cold air, giggling away. Scott doesn’t think he could possibly tire of hearing that sound, nor seeing the look of joy on Alma’s face. He takes neither thing for granted and is thankful every day that he has so many precious people in his life.

He must have a pensive look on his face as he comes to a graceful stop at the boards, because his mother places her hand gently on his arm and asks him if he’s okay. He nods affirmatively and then yawns.

“Tired?” she asks. “Early start with this one?” She strokes her knuckles over Oscar’s rosy cheek and adjusts the strap of his helmet.

“Nah, this champ slept past seven for the first time in months.” He puts his hand out for a high five, which Oscar eagerly returns. “It was his mother,” he explains, rolling his eyes affectionately.

“Ah, yes. Ottawa hops today?” Alma knows the schedules almost as well as he does now, and is well aware that days such as this mean Tessa’s alarm going off not long after four in the morning.
“Yep, four hops today, and with a new first officer.”

“I look forward to hearing about it later,” says Alma. Scott chuckles to himself over his mother’s love for Tessa’s ‘cockpit confessionals’ and winces a little to himself when he remembers the evening not long after their engagement that his mother had pressed Tessa for every detail on their first day together in the cockpit. “You’re still coming over for hot chocolate after trick or treating, right? Your father has procured a rather nice whiskey to lace it with this year.”

Scott scratches at the back of his neck. “But there’ll be non-alcoholic stuff too, right?” he checks.

“Of course there will be, dear. We’ve got plenty of kids coming and they won’t be happy if the grown-ups get hot chocolate and they don’t.” She eyes him carefully, as if she’s trying to work something out and he swiftly changes the subject, prompting Oscar to tell her about what he did at play group that morning, all three of them fully engaged as he tells them all about it.

“Oh da-, I mean, oh gosh!” Scott catches himself a short while later as he spies the clock on the scoreboard at the other side of the rink, and he checks his watch to be sure he’s not seeing things. “We’ve got to go, little man.” Scott leaves Oscar sitting on top of the boards with Alma and makes his way to the exit of the ice.

“No, Grandma,” Oscar whines, sadly, as Alma lifts him down from the boards and onto a bench. “I wanna keep skating, I want Daddy to make me fly again!”

He feels sorry for the kid; he completely understands that constant desire to fly around the ice with the cool wind in your hair. Scott sits down on the bench next to his son and carefully scrapes the ice off his blades and gives his mom an appreciative smile as she does the same for Oscar. “But we have to go and get Mommy, Oscar,” he reminds him. “From the airport, remember?”

At the mention of the magic A word Oscar immediately brightens, then hurriedly bends down to grapple with the laces on his skates, nearly headbutting his grandmother in the process.

“Skates off, Grandma,” he says impatiently, but without malice.

“Oscar,” says Scott, in a gentle but firm tone. “That’s not how we ask for help is it?” He levels his son with a look and a raised eyebrow he hopes his wife would be proud of, and Oscar’s cheeks pink a little.

“Can you help me with my skates please, Grandma?” he asks softly. He sniffs mightily, not because he’s upset, but because the cold of the rink has caused his already disgustingly runny nose to run even more profusely. Scott whips a wad of clean tissue out of his pocket and moves quickly to stop the snot as it tries to journey from his son’s nose to his mother’s unwitting bent head. Unaware of her near (and horribly gross) fate, Alma laughs as she makes quick work of Oscar’s tiny hockey skates and helps him on with the cute yellow loafers he’s been smitten with since the end of summer and which will soon be too cold to wear again.

Scott’s barely got his own shoes on his feet before Oscar starts tugging on his sleeve, eager to leave.

“Planes, Daddy, we’ve gotta see the planes!”

“You better hope I don’t tell your mother you said that,” says Scott, hauling his son into his arms and offer his hand to his mother as she stands from her kneeling position on the floor. He kisses her on the cheek and Oscar blows her a snotty kiss of his own – definitely the preferable option right now.
He thanks his mother as she hands him their coats and bags. “See you later for hot chocolate!” he calls over his shoulder as he dashes out of the rink to go and pick up Tessa.

**

“Oscar! Stay where Daddy can see you, bud,” Scott calls across the concourse after his son, who is running over towards the windows that overlook the runway, wasting no time in pressing his snotty nose and the spit-soaked blanket he carries everywhere with him up against the glass. Scott sighs and looks over at Magdalena, the kindly cleaning lady he often bumps into here around this time, offering her an apologetic shrug which she returns with an affectionate one of her own before going over to Oscar and greeting him with a high five. She’s wearing a pointed black hat in honour of the day and Scott notices a traditional wooden broom and a plush black cat on her cleaning trolley.

Keeping an eye on his son at the windows he strikes up a brief conversation with the woman, handing her the flyer for CanSkate beginner courses at the skating club, which she’d enquired about a couple of weeks ago when he’d last seen her at this time and had been carrying in his coat pocket ever since. He wishes her a happy Halloween as she continues on her way and heads over to join Oscar at the expansive wall of glass.

“Mommy’s plane?” asks Oscar as Scott crouches down next to him, pulling out another tissue to wipe his little nose. He’s pointing at the nearest aircraft, its black tail proudly bearing Air Canada’s familiar red maple leaf.

Scott smiles at his bright, plane-mad son. “Maybe that one,” he says, tucking Oscar’s sandy locks behind his ear and out of his face. “Or maybe it’s that one over there?” He points to a different plane, having spotted and recognised its tail number as Tessa’s (and if he regularly memorises her tail number and call sign and tracks them throughout the day on Flight Radar, well that’s just helpful in these situations).

The lack of ground activity around the plane indicates that his wife’s arrival should be imminent, but Scott stays put and watches the planes for a moment, following one of WestJet’s new fleet as it makes it way to the end of the runway. His fingers twitch as it hurtles along in front of him before soaring smoothly into the air, and he keeps his gaze on it until it disappears into the clouds in the late afternoon sky.

He misses it sometimes, that part of his life, the freedom of soaring in the azure expanse of the atmosphere above them. His hand comes to twist the wedding ring on his finger, and he thinks back to the almost full year between their wedding and Oscar’s birth, about how much he missed flying with Tessa in particular, their marriage meaning they were no longer permitted to take to the skies together. It didn’t take him long to conclude that it was better to be on the ground rather than in the skies without her by his side.

He would trade it all over again, though, for what he has now. Supporting his wife in her career and getting to spend every magical day with his son since his arrival into their lives. It’s great to know that everything he thought he ever wanted turned out to be just that. The satisfaction of falling asleep each night (or, well, six out of seven nights a week due to rotas) next to the love of his life and waking up to his son’s eager voice asking if it’s time to go yet.

And it is always go, go, go! Playgroups, music classes, Mommy (Daddy) and me dance, and CanSkate taster courses. Precious time spent with his own mother coaching at his hometown rink – from little kids swamped by their new hockey gear to the handful of teenagers working through compulsory dance patterns and double jumps.

It hasn’t always been easy, this life they’ve made for themselves. Juggling their schedules at the
beginning so they could actually see one another after many weeks passing like ships in the night. Those multiple instances of sleep regression where Scott was sequestered to Oscar’s floor because Tessa’s job legally required her to sleep. And then Tessa coming to their rescue at three in the morning when Oscar, and, quite frankly, Scott, just needed to be held and rocked in her arms.

He knows it’s probably been harder for Tessa, though, over the years, juggling expectations of what she wants and what she feels she should be, both as a Captain and as a mother. He still remembers clearly the day Tessa returned to work when Oscar was five months old. He’d wiped every tear from her cheeks in the car park of London airport before lifting her hat to press a kiss to her forehead. Oscar was fast asleep in the back seat after a night of screaming into Scott’s ear, so she had only dared to brush the gentlest kiss to the tiny boy’s knuckles before striding away from them into the departure hall. They’d cried into each other’s arms later that night as they talked about their days; Tessa recounting how emotional she’d found it to pour the milk she’d expressed down the drain in the pilot’s lounge bathroom, whilst Scott had become upset when there was no suitable place for him to change Oscar at the supermarket so had resorted to changing him in the trunk of the car, which more than one passer-by seemed to have an opinion about as their son screamed bloody murder as he was wont to do at that age.

Scott chuckles to himself thinking back to Oscar’s first year and a bit. How often he had video-called his wife when she was working a stopover in Montreal or Ottawa and asked why their son’s favourite sound couldn’t be silence like hers was? Rest assured, silence was now Scott’s too, though it’s that much sweeter if it’s sometimes accompanied by soft snores and snuffles through the crackle of the baby monitor.

It’s quiet now. He realises it with a jolt, and he turns to see the space next to him very much unoccupied by his son. He stands so quickly that his head spins a little. He can’t have gotten far, he thinks, trying to remain calm. But before he can even begin to look around the vicinity he hears an excited, and all too familiar cry.

“Maaamaaa!”

**

Tessa is so engrossed in her conversation with Kaetlyn comparing the merits of Airbus versus Boeing in terms of cockpit specification that she doesn’t even register their arrival into the main terminal building until there’s a shrill shriek of “Maaamaaa!” and she staggers a little as her son comes barrelling into her legs.

She scoops him up immediately, kissing his cheek before settling him on her hip, masterfully dodging the corner of his blanket as it swings past her face.

“Hi, darling,” she says quietly, breathing in his scent and warmth and energy, her son’s presence truly grounding her back on solid earth.

“Mama,” her sweet boy murmurs contentedly as he rests his head on her shoulder, then begins eyeing Kaetlyn with wary interest. “Who is it?” he whispers, curiously.

“This is First Officer Kaetlyn Osmond,” she tells him. “She works with Mommy; we flew the plane together.”

At her explanation Oscar perks up, smiling widely at her. If he was a little older and had the vocabulary, she thinks he’d probably say that it was ‘cool’, much like Scott’s nieces do, but she knows that this particular smile on his face is one of excitement. “Will you say hi?” she asks him gently.
Oscar offers Kaetlyn a silent but enthusiastic wave, but Kaetlyn still looks perplexed.

“Kaetlyn, this is my son, Oscar,” she says, adjusting him on her hip, her growing boy already causing an ache in her back.

To her credit, Kaetlyn recovers herself, and waves back at Oscar with a genuine smile. “Hi Oscar,” she says kindly. “I like your sweatshirt.” She points to Oscar’s grey sweatshirt adorned with the face of a fluffy black dog. “That dog looks just like my puppy back home.”

Oscar rubs his hand over the soft material before shyly turning his head and resting it back on Tessa’s shoulder. She leans her head against his for a brief moment, inhaling his soothing scent as she glances back at Kaetlyn, whose expression is now unreadable, the epitome of the emoji with a horizontal line for a mouth. It fills her with anxiety, and she opens her mouth to begin to explain the situation, but Oscar interrupts her by suddenly lifting his head.

“Daddy!”

Barely a second later Tessa feels a familiar hand on her lower back and a comforting, warm presence at her side. It’s like her entire body sighs in contentment and reassurance.

Scott.

“Hello Captain Moir,” he says quietly before leaning in to try and peck her on the lips. She pulls back and playfully smacks his chest.

“In your dreams, buddy,” she chastises softly. He waggles his eyebrows in that familiar way that makes her laugh and whilst she’s distracted, he swoops in and steals his kiss.

They break apart and Oscar starts wriggling in her arms to get down, so Tessa sets him on his feet between them and he immediately reaches up and takes each of their index fingers in his small hands, looking back up at Kaetlyn with a smile.

Tessa feels a bit bad for her new First Officer, who looks like she’s replaying every conversation they’ve had today to see if she missed something. She opens her mouth to ask the question that’s clearly on the tip of her tongue, but Scott jumps in to rescue her before she can.

“Don’t worry,” he says, offering Oscar the finger on his other hand so that he can step closer to Tessa and wrap an arm back around her shoulders. “She really is Captain Virtue; this isn’t some imposter. She’s Mrs Moir when she’s not wearing her uniform, though, and it’s become a bit of a running joke in the family. You’d think by now I would have learnt not to tease a superior officer, eh?” He chuckles and Tessa smiles at him.

Kaetlyn coughs out a nervous laugh in response, but the poor thing still looks utterly befuddled.

“I’m sorry,” Tessa says feeling flustered now. “Kaetlyn, this is my husband, and former first officer, Scott Moir. Scott, this is my new first officer Kaetlyn Osmond.”

Scott removes his hand from her shoulder and offers it to Kaetlyn, exchanging a friendly handshake with her. However, Kaetlyn’s eyes flick back to her and Tessa swallows nervously as she undoes the buttons on her jacket and holds open the left hand side of it, revealing to Kaetlyn the two rings threaded through the large safety pin that’s pinned to the inside so it rests over her heart.

She relaxes as Kaetlyn’s expression softens and she smiles at her, feeling nothing but relief.
“I’m sorry,” Tessa starts to explain. “I... I like to keep things professional at work.”

“Please don’t apologise,” says Kaetlyn softly. “I totally get it.” Then, she reaches down and pulls a necklace from beneath the collar of her shirt, the chain of which holds a delicate and very pretty diamond engagement ring.”

Both women laugh then, and Tessa is comforted to find that she and Kaetlyn are even more similar than their flight together earlier had already demonstrated. She turns to smile at Scott too, but she feels her own face fall as she takes in the expression on his. He’s still smiling – Kaetlyn and even Oscar wouldn’t think there was anything wrong – but Tessa can detect the hint of a frown in his brow and the minute clench of his jaw. She goes to take his hand but he’s already reached around her to grab the handle of her carry-on, sighing in gentle exasperation as Oscar immediately jumps up to sit on it to get a ride.

“It was really lovely to meet you, Kaetlyn,” says Scott, and Kaetlyn nods in agreement. “But we need to get home to get ready to go trick or treating.”

“Oh, that sounds like fun,” she says. “I hope you have a great time!”

“Thanks,” says Tessa and Scott in unison, which, thankfully, leads to a boyish grin from Scott.

“Have a great evening, Kaetlyn,” says Tessa, reaching out to rest a hand on her first officer’s arm. “I’m looking forward to our next flight together.”

“Me too, Captain,” she says enthusiastically, before blushing a little at her eagerness. “And thanks for a great day. Bye Oscar!” She waves, and Oscar shakes his blanket back at her in farewell.

They’re both quiet as they walk towards the parking lot, though Oscar fills the silence with a rather ingenious rendition of ‘The Wheels on the Bag’, oblivious to the simmering tension between his parents. As they cross the road, she notices Kaetlyn waiting in the pickup area. A car pulls up right next to her and a tall, handsome young man jumps out and dashes around to her, scooping her up into his arms and twirling her around.

Her laughter carries across the noise of the cars and planes and Tessa smiles to herself, right as Scott’s hand finds hers and squeezes tightly.

She buckles Oscar into his car seat as Scott loads her suitcase into the trunk. His face is more serious when they get into the car, and she knows there are thoughts in his head right now that will need to be discussed when they get home. The guilt she feels must show on her face because he eyes soften a little and he reaches for her hand, gently kissing the back of it before shifting the car into reverse to back out of the parking space. He checks his mirrors carefully and freezes when he looks into the rear-view one.

“Oscar!” he cries out.

Alarmed, she turns in her seat to see that their son is contentedly sitting in his car seat, swinging his legs, and experimentally stretching his tongue up to lick at the snot that’s coming from his nose.

“Ewww, bud, use a tissue!”

**

Things are as busy as ever once they get home and in the door. Tessa dashes off for a shower whilst Scott rustles Oscar up a quick dinner, mindful that there’ll be more food and sweets later, and he feels fairly proud to get a few portions of veggies into his son via the pasta sauce he’d made
the night before. He’d already set the crockpot earlier to prepare his and Tessa’s dinner for when they get home later on, and it’s starting to steam gently, providing a pleasant ambient noise to go along with Oscar’s mostly off-key humming as he transfers a load of washing into the dryer, leaving Tessa’s work shirts to dry on hangers.

Tessa reappears not long after, dressed in just her bathrobe, hair scraped back messily to stop it getting wet in the shower, though a few tendrils have come loose and lie damp on her neck. He knows she knows he’s mad, and she avoids his gaze as she sweeps fully into the kitchen and sits herself down next to Oscar, gladly accepting a bite of his pasta and asking him how his day was.

He quickly puts the pans into the sink to soak and runs a cloth over the work surface before coming over to the table and kissing both of them on the cheek and making his way upstairs to grab a quick shower of his own, taking each step slowly as he listens to his two favourite people chatting away, each utterly intrigued by the happenings in the other’s day.

“I’ve left him to it,” says Scott as he returns to the kitchen a short while later, dressed casually in a faded pair of sweatpants and a ratty old hockey t-shirt. “He insisted he could do it all himself.” His raises his eyebrows, amazed and fearful in equal measures.

“He’s getting so grown up,” sighs Tessa. It feels like just yesterday that Oscar was a tiny baby in her arms and entirely dependent on them both.

“So,” Scott says, elongating the word as he leans back against the island, a glass of water in his hand. She knows she’s probably about to be reprimanded for earlier. “Kaetlyn seemed awfully surprised to see us today, Tess.”

Tessa hums noncommittally and continues to shred the cabbage for dinner, focussing harder than normal on the strokes of the knife.

“Almost like you didn’t mention that you were married and had a son.”

“It’s not that I…” she starts, but he stops her mid-sentence by snaking his arms around her from behind and pressing a kiss to her shoulder.

“I know you don’t wear your rings at work,” he whispers. She puts the knife down and leans her head against his. “And I fully support why you choose not to. And, sweetie, I’m totally okay with you waiting to share that information with new colleagues until you are ready to.”

She sighs deeply, here comes the but...

“But if you didn’t tell her about us two, then that means you didn’t tell her about this one either, huh?” His hands come to rest across her tiny bump that popped in just the last week. “Did you tell her?”

“No,” Tessa breathes, hanging her head, but also bringing her hands around to cover his. They’re dry from the rink and he’s chewed on the edge of one of his fingers until the cuticle as bled – a habit he seems to have developed over the last three years as he’s adjusted to no longer having the controls of an aeroplane in his hands. Their rings clink together on their joined left hands; her two white gold ones against his platinum.

She turns slowly to face him and is relieved to see an expression of loving concern on her husband’s face, rather than disappointment. He brings his hands up to cup her face before placing a kiss on her forehead.
“Tess,” he chides lovingly, and she shrinks down into herself a smidge. “Come on babe, this is a health and safety thing. If she’s flying with you, she needs to know.”

“I know,” she whines. “It’s just…” she thinks about meeting Kaetlyn for the first time this morning in the pilots’ lounge; how her eyes were bright but a little fearful, how she looked so determined during the whole flight, and how, as they disembarked, she had turned to Tessa and told her what an honour it was to fly with her today, and she was very much looking forward to their next shift together. Scott’s thumb caresses her cheek softly, and she sighs and drops her gaze. “I just didn’t want her to think less of me because of it,” she whispers.

“Oh, T.” He takes her whole face into his hands and tilts her head so she’s looking up at him, she’s tired and emotional and she feels her eyes filling with tears. “T, you didn’t see her when Oscar ran into your arms earlier. Yeah, she was clearly a little taken aback, but the awe in her face, at you, Tess. Trust me, she respects the crap out of you and, like me, she clearly thinks you’re an amazing woman.”

“Really?” she asks, seeing him wince at her doubt in herself before giving her one of his knowing looks and cupping her face with his hands.

“Tess, you’re a badass airline captain. Second youngest in the history of Air Canada, I hear. And you’re the most wonderful mother, and that was abundantly clear earlier.” Her heart flutters at the sincerity in his eyes as he stares directly into hers, his hazel and gold irises sparkling under the kitchen spotlights. “And, she’s what? Twenty-eight?”

“Twenty-four, actually,” she says with a small shake of her head.

“Twenty… Jeez! I’d barely been out of the simulator a month at twenty-four! What’s Air Canada feeding these kids?!”

She laughs. “Beats me, and there’s a dozen other like her knocking at the flight deck door.”

“Crazy,” he mutters.

She smiles as he leans in then and presses firm kisses to the apples of her cheeks and then a softer kiss to the tip of her nose. It’s a habit of his that Oscar has picked up on too, and it melts her heart completely when her baby places his (frequently inexplicably sticky) hands on her cheeks and kisses her in the same way too, though the little man always insists she does it in return as well, whereas Scott favours a nip underneath his ear.

So she does just that, and follows it up with a firm kiss to his lips, licking her way into his mouth, her blood pumping hot through her veins. The weariness of her first trimester had seemingly disappeared as soon as the tiny bump now between them had arrived, and she’d honestly thought about doing this all day, ever since her alarm went off, rousing them both from deep slumber, their son miraculously still asleep for the first time in months. Scott had looked so warm and sleep-rumpled and utterly fuckable as he’d pushed himself up to wish her both a good morning and goodbye; it had taken nothing but willpower and loyalty to her job not to push him back into the mattress.

She whines far more loudly and needily than is respectable as he pulls away from her a moment later. “Sco-ott,” she husks out, completely breathless. “Why…?” Scott scrunches his eyebrows, listening, so she quiets, and above the gentle rattle of the crockpot she can hear footsteps steadily coming down the stairs. She smiles at Scott’s look of concentration on his face, then watches as he raises three fingers, then puts them down one at a time before pointing at the door.
And sure enough…

“I’m ready!” cries Oscar as he dashes into the kitchen, tripping over his feet a little where the carpet of the hallway turns into tile. Tessa stifles a giggle and brings a hand to her chest as she takes in the sight of her little boy. One of his trouser legs is stuck up around his knee, revealing bright yellow hockey socks on his feet. His shirt is mostly untucked and the buttons on the adorably tiny Captain’s jacket her mother made for him are done up wrongly. His hat is straight, yet his nearly shoulder length brown-blonde hair beneath it is anything but, slicked back with what she’s praying is water and scrunched and stuffed beneath the collar of his jacket.

She gets down on her knees in front of him and begins helping him to smooth himself out, gently telling him what needs fixing and how to do it. She peels off his socks and tickles his toes whilst Scott retrieves a more suitable pair from the laundry room. Once Oscar is suitably suited and booted Tessa adjusts his hat and asks him, “What’s going on with your hair, little man?”

“I wanted it to look like yours, Mama,” he says, his green eyes wide and adoring.

Tessa finds herself unable to speak then, her eyes filling with happy tears as she gazes at her son.

“Well we can help you with that,” says Scott, pulling up the little step stool they both admittedly need to use to reach the top shelves of the kitchen cabinets, and sitting himself down behind Oscar. He gently takes the hat off his head and balances it on his knee before getting to work on combing back his son’s hair with his fingers, all the while maintaining eye contact with her.

See, he mouths at her with a wink. Amazing.

“I don’t think you’ve got quite enough hair to have a bun like Mommy does,” he says, smoothing Oscar’s hair back into a low ponytail and holding onto it whilst he peers around the kitchen counters for one of the hair ties that are always lying around. “How about a ponytail, hm? Would that be okay?”

His son thinks on this for a moment. “Okay,” he says eventually, nodding his head sharply and causing Scott to release his hair on instinct. “Oops, sorry Daddy,” he says, looking up at Scott.

“No worries, I need to find a hair tie anyway.” He makes to stand but Tessa interrupts him.

“Here,” she says, pulling the tie out of her own hair and passing it over to him. “I’ll need to use something different for my hair tonight anyway, because I’m not the Captain, now am I?”

“No, that’s me!” says Oscar, raising his hands. “Ouch Daddy.” He tries to reach back and rub at his head where Scott has just finished tying the ponytail and is pulling on both sides to tighten it a little.

“Well you’re not supposed to move when someone’s doing your hair, bud.” Says Scott, holding both his hands up and raising his eyebrows. “Just ask Mommy.” Her two special guys turn to look at her in unison, one eyebrow raised each in question.

“That’s right,” she giggles. She leans over to kiss them both on their foreheads before standing. “I’m going to go and get changed.”

“I’ll be up in a few minutes,” says Scott, as he stands and lifts Oscar up with him before sitting him atop the kitchen counter next to the dishwasher. She watches them as she leaves the kitchen, smiling as the two of them start chatting and Oscar passes him the dirty items to stack into the machine.
Scott leaves Oscar in the living room, happily pushing an assortment of cars and planes around on his road mat before dashing upstairs with his kit bag to get ready. When he enters their bedroom, he finds a very flustered looking (and very nearly naked) Tessa pacing back and forth in front of their mirrored closets, worrying her lip between her teeth, her arms folded tightly across her abdomen.

“Are you okay?” he says softly, rushing straight to her and bringing her to a halt with a gentle embrace, his heart pounding in his chest with worry. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m pregnant,” she says, closing her eyes and grimacing.

Scott steps away from her then, keeping his hands on her shoulders. “Um, T. Please tell me you already knew that. Otherwise, I have a lot of questions about our conversation earlier, and the doctor and ultrasound appointments we’ve been to.”

“No, I know. But I got up here and I started to get changed and I just suddenly realised how pregnant I look today. And the tutu isn’t going to fit; it was a bit snug a couple of weeks ago when Lucia first lent it to me, no way will it work now.” She crumples into the chair and puts her head in her hands. “Plus, my boobs have decided to balloon today and the wires from my bras keep digging in, so all that’s comfortable is my crop top, but I can’t wear it with those leotard straps. I’m just going to look like a bloated, fat mess.”

“Those are definitely not the three words I would use to describe you right now, T.” He kneels down in front of her and takes her hands in his and she squeezes his fingers tightly. Needily. He takes stock of the tension in her shoulders and crease between her eyes, thinks back to the flush on her cheeks when she had returned from taking a shower earlier, as well as the way she’d stopped and looked at him for a second longer this morning before she left, with that heated gaze that usually leads to things that end in the best way possible for both of them.

Now he knows what she needs.

He leans forwards, her legs opening so he can get closer to her. Her body is radiating heat and he runs his lips up her sternum and along her collarbone towards the juncture of her neck and shoulder. She lets out a needy whimper as he presses the softest kiss there, before sitting back and running his hands down her torso and hooking his fingers into the band of her underwear. Her hips move upwards swiftly to allow him to remove the soft cotton thong.

“Do you know what three words I would use to describe you?” he whispers, looking straight up at her, nearly coming undone by how dark and desperate her eyes are right now. He decides she needs to be put out of her misery.

“Really.” He leans forwards and kisses the inside of her right thigh.

“Fucking.” The left.

“Beautiful.” He tilts his head to press the softest kiss to the tiny bump, eyes flicking back to her as she lets out a quiet sob, which soon turns to a guttural moan as he licks a stripe right up the length of her.

He rests his cheek on the inside of her thigh as she regulates her breathing, enjoying the way she’s running her fingers through his hair and across his scalp. He raises his eyes and finds her looking at
him, cheeks still flushed a pretty pink, but eyes soft, looking relaxed and satisfied.

“Hi,” he says softly. “Better?”

“Much,” she breathes out, bringing her hand down to cup his chin, pulling his face towards her as he rises up on his knees. He quickly wipes his hand across his mouth before closing the distance between them. She kisses him deeply, her hand inching down to palm him through his sweatpants. Despite putting all of his concentration into getting her off, he’s still half hard in his pants, and if Tessa keeps going, they’re going to end up in a sticky situation.

“Later,” he husks out, pulling away from her and standing up, smirking at her look of disappointment. “We need to get going.”

“Okay, but I owe you one,” she says sultrily as she floats into the bathroom to clean herself up.

He gets himself dressed in his full kit (excluding the bits that really smell and should only see the light of the locker rooms and hockey rink) and starts to rummage through the bag of ballet clothes Lucia (who had taught Oscar’s ‘Pliés and Pacifiers’ dance class) had kindly lent to Tessa.

His wife returns from the bathroom a few moments later with an elegant bun far higher on her head than he’s used to, and soft make-up that accentuates her eyes. She looks breath-taking and he tells her so, but her smile in response soon fades when she eyes the leotard and tutu hanging in the corner.

“Don’t freak out,” says Scott, jumping up and over to her to try and stave off the stress he had so successfully (if he does say so himself) got rid of earlier. “I’ve been through the other ballet clothes and I think I’ve found an alternative.”

She takes a deep breath. “Okay,” she says.

“Okay?” he checks, and she nods. “So, I found this cardigan and this skirt.” He holds up a cropped, black knitted cardigan and a ruby red chiffon wrap skirt. “I figured the cardigan will cover your bra straps and this skirt will be more comfortable?” She continues to nod along. “And, I mean you don’t have to, but you’ll probably wear your coat for the actual trick or treating, right? It’s a bit cold out to wear only this.” More nodding. “And then, maybe, when we get to my parent’s house, we can just tell them about the baby when you take your coat off?”

Her eyes widen, but in a good way. “Oh Scott,” she says, sounding excited now. “Yes, that’s perfect. It will be a great reveal. I know we were going to wait and tell everyone all together next weekend at our anniversary party, but this would be lovely. Oh, I know exactly how to tell them!”

She’s buzzing with energy now and Scott can’t help but smile dopily at her.

“Wonderful.” He kisses her swiftly on the forehead. “Now put some clothes on, pretty lady, we’ve got trick or treating to do and a son downstairs who needs to be in bed on time.” He waggles his eyebrows at her before turning and running for the bathroom, but not before she manages to swat him on the ass.

“Brush your teeth!” she calls after him.

Tessa is busy tying ribbons around her ankles (having opted for a pair of regular flat shoes over traditional ballet slippers that would get ruined by the damp sidewalks) as Scott does his utmost to convince their son not to take his blanket trick or treating with him tonight. They’re doing fairly well at weaning it off him – he’ll happily leave it at home when they go to the rink now – but
Tessa is keen for him to only have it at night by the time the new baby arrives. She doesn’t want to have to deal with possessiveness, or any tantrums when it inevitably gets scooped up accidentally with a load of laundry.

She’s impressed by her husband’s ability to tie on his hockey skates whilst retaining eye contact with their son, though she’s shaking her head and internally wincing at the thought of him spending the whole evening walking around in them. Apparently, Mr Coach-of-the-year had lost a bet with his Junior Timbits team that he could do a lap of the rink wearing one figure skate and one hockey skate. Tessa supposes she should be glad that he’s not on crutches right now; she’ll take him moaning about blisters in the morning for that small mercy.

“Mommy doesn’t take her blanket onto the plane with her, does she bud?” Scott asks, and Oscar shakes his head, though the frown on his face remains. Scott stands, towering over his son even more in his skates, takes the blanket gently from him and begins to fold it up. “We’ll fold it up all neat and tidy, and we’ll leave it right here on the couch, okay? Then when we get home, we can take it up to bed, deal?”

“Okay Daddy,” Oscar sighs, his lips quirked in a way that tells them he’s not really convinced by the idea. But Tessa will settle for her son pulling faces rather than a straight up tantrum; she’s counting this as a major win.

“Did you know I keep one of his baby hats in my flight bag?” she asks her husband quietly after Oscar has turned his attention to the pair of wings that Scott has just retrieved from the box in his night stand (a box which also contains a diamond-studded eternity ring ready for next weekend) and proudly pinned to the lapel of his tiny jacket. His captain’s hat – a baby shower gift from some of the Pearson ground crew – slips forwards as he bows his head to fiddle with the shiny metal.

“I did,” Scott responds softly, pulling her close again and resting his hand on her curving waist. “Did you know I swap it out every now and then with one from his dresser so that it still smells like him?”

Her head whips around, a look of dawning realisation in her eyes. “I thought I was going mad!” She lightly smacks him on the arm, and he chuckles. “Last time I had an overnight in Ottawa I got it out before going to bed and spent about 20 minutes trying to work out if it had always had ears sewn to it.” She brings her palm to her face and shakes her head, “I’m such an idiot.”

“What’s an idiot?” asks Oscar, appearing at their feet and looking up at them with his hat askew, clutching the handle of the plastic pumpkin he’s hoping will be filled with candy later. Scott raises his eyebrow at her, a smug smirk on his face at knowing for once that it’s not him making his son’s vocabulary more colourful. Tessa blushes and is quick to change the subject. “I thought I was going mad!” She lightly smacks him on the arm, and he chuckles. “Last time I had an overnight in Ottawa I got it out before going to bed and spent about 20 minutes trying to work out if it had always had ears sewn to it.”

“Right, we should leave now!” She bends down to Oscar’s level and straightens both his hat and his pin before kissing the tip of his nose, making him giggle. “Are you ready to go trick or treating, baby?”

“Yeah!” cries Oscar, raising both hands in the air.

**

The contents of Oscar's plastic pumpkin bucket rattle and rustle as he runs up the path to the next house – a lovely, turn-of-the-century detached building with pale blue painted wood panel cladding, a beautifully maintained front yard, and a wrap-around porch that Tessa has been envious of since the three of them moved into this street a few months ago. She and Scott have only met their neighbour once; bumping into her on one of their rare afternoons alone together as they were
taking a stroll around the neighbourhood towards the end of the summer, Oscar off spending the
night with her mother on the other side of town so they could have a date night (which ending up
being quite a productive evening…).

She can see Mrs Ennis, the house's elderly owner, waiting for them in her doorway, happily sitting
in a camping chair with a blanket over her legs and a big bowl of candy in her lap. She's done a
lovely job of subtly decorating for the holidays; with her plant pots adorned with plastic spiders
and skulls on sticks and a row of simply carved pumpkins sitting on the steps up to the porch.

Tessa takes Scott's hand as they amble down the path, happy to let Oscar run ahead of them to their
final house, a great success considering he started the evening rubbing sleepily at his eyes and
reluctant to be out of Scott's arms. That is, until he realised that he would need to be in order to help
himself to treats. She hears Scott chuckle softly as they watch Oscar negotiate the steps whilst
holding onto the bucket's handle with both hands, and she covers her eyes when he nearly tips the
entire contents out by accident.

By the time their son has made it safely to the top of the steps they've caught up with him and Scott
crouches down to be on the same level as both Oscar and their elderly neighbour. Mrs Ennis bends
forwards to speak with Oscar, who is greedily eyeing her bowl of candy, and he plasters on his
biggest smile in the hopes that will get him extra treats. Tessa shakes her head and raises her
eyebrow at her wily almost-four-year-old, thinking to herself that he definitely gets that from his
father, though the man in question turns to look up at her wearing a similar expression, accusing her
of the exact same thing. So instead she waggles her eyebrows at him and smirks and he chuckles
quietly to himself, before pressing a quick kiss to the back of her hand where it’s come to rest on
his shoulder.

“Now what’s your name young man?” asks Mrs Ennis, and Tessa is relieved to see her son’s
attention switch from the candies to the woman speaking to him.

“Oscar,” he says without a hint of shyness – a trait he most certainly did get from the man next to
her.

“Well it’s lovely to meet you, Oscar,” she says. “Or should that perhaps be Captain Oscar?” Her
little boy nods exaggeratedly, looking delighted that someone has recognised his costume properly
– now that he definitely got from her!

(He had not been impressed earlier when the father of a boy from his play group had asked him if
he was a train driver and her precocious and whip-smart son had given him a detailed explanation
of the features of his hat and jacket that clearly showed him to be an airline pilot. Scott had offered
the man an apologetic look, meanwhile Tessa had hidden her proud smirk by adjusting the hem of
her skirt, before slipping an extra piece of candy into Oscar’s plastic pumpkin.)

“I love your costume,” she exclaims, glancing up at Tessa and grinning, and Tessa remembers that
she did mention her job to Mrs Ennis when they first met. “Is that what you want to be when you
grow up? A pilot?”

“Yeah,” says Oscar, nodding enthusiastically. “I wanna be like Mommy.”

“Well that’s wonderful, sweetheart. I’m sure you’ll do just that one day.” Oscar beams at her. “And
I’m sure your mommy and daddy will help you do that.”

“Oh, for sure,” says Scott, wrapping his arm around Oscar’s waist and squeezing him close. “We
are very supportive of this career aspiration.”
“It’s definitely a better than the one this time last year,” reminisces Tessa.

“Oh my gosh, yeah,” says Scott, chuckling.

“What did he want to be last year?” enquires Mrs Ennis.

“An aeroplane,” they say in unison.

Mrs Ennis laughs along with them, looking positively tickled by that information. She then holds out the bowl to them.

“You two should take a piece each as well, otherwise I’m going to have far more left over than I should think about eating!”

“Are you sure?” asks Tessa, her hand hovering over the bowl.

“Of course, I’m nearly done for the evening too. I need to warm up before Jeopardy starts!”

At that they both dive in, Tessa grabbing a mini packet of Jolly Ranchers and Scott opting for a fun-size Mars Bar, which she already knows will end up forgotten in his skate bag for months.

“Thanks Mrs Ennis,” says Tessa, gently placing her hand on top of hers. “We’ll see you very soon. Now I better get this pilot and this hockey player back to Granny’s for hot chocolate.” She raises her eyebrows at her boys and they both look thrilled by the prospect.

“Oh, wait, dear,” Mrs Ennis grabs onto her hand. “I haven’t seen your costume.”

Tessa smiles nervously as she straightens up and slowly undoes the zip on her winter parka, then pulls the sides apart to reveal the full outfit to her. The woman gives her a knowing smile.

“You look absolutely beautiful my dear. I think that maybe you deserve two candies?” She winks at her and Tessa feels herself blush as she reaches for another bag of the Jolly Ranchers.

“Thank you,” she says quietly.

“Enjoy the rest of your night, my dears,” Mrs Ennis says in farewell. Tessa smiles widely at her, then prompts Oscar to say thank you and goodbye, and he waves cheerily from where he’s perched on Scott’s back.

They make their way back down the path, turning to wave at Mrs Ennis one final time before turning towards home. “Alright team,” says Scott. “Are we ready to head to Granny and Grandad’s for hot chocolate?”

Both Tessa and Oscar nod enthusiastically. “Yes please, my toes are freezing,” she says, hopping from one foot to the other and making the little boy giggle.

“Ugh, my feet are killing me,” he groans as they reach the car and Tessa lifts Oscar off his back and takes his pumpkin bucket from him as he scrambles up into his seat.

“No comment,” she says, biting her lip to stifle her laughter.

“Jokes on you, Virtch. I can’t drive in these!” He lifts up one foot to indicate their predicament.

Tessa rolls her eyes and grabs the keys for the truck from him. She’s never really liked the thing; always quite glad she kept her little Acura to run herself around in most of the time. She rarely drives his car, and she huffs and puffs a little as she gets herself into the driving seat and starts
adjusting it to her driving position.

Scott fiddles with the heating whilst she’s doing this, then gets his phone connected and music starts blaring from the speakers. It sounds like an old style Hollywood score meets Spaghetti Western.

“What on earth…” she begins, but is interrupted by both Scott and Oscar beginning to sing.

“Up, down, flying around

Looping the loop

And defying the ground…”

She must look startled because Scott begins laughing at her whilst Oscar continues to sing along, oblivious.

“It’s from ‘Those Magnificent Men in their Flying Machines’,” he explains.

Ohhhh. She nods and starts to laugh herself.

“He’ll fall asleep on the drive over otherwise.”

“Oh yeah, good thinking!”

(Oscar Moir 101: don’t wake the kid if he’s sleeping, he’ll sulk and then hold onto you like a koala for a good hour afterwards if you do!)

“Alright then, my magnificent men.” She throws him a wink. “Let’s go!”

*  

It’s only a 20-minute drive out to Ilderton, but by the fourth repetition of the song she’s starting to lose the will to live.

“Please tell me there’s something else on that playlist, Scott.” She glances over to him, desperately.

“On your head be it, Virtch,” he warns, tapping his phone until Frank Sinatra’s silky voice fills the car. Fortunately, Oscar claps in delight from the back seat and chooses, mercifully, to quietly hum along to this classic.

“I’m sensing a theme in this playlist,” she says, dryly.

“Have you met our son?” Scott deadpans back.

She laughs for a moment before slowing to a stop as the Uber in front of them double parks and drops out its passenger. When it doesn’t move after a few moments, Tessa puts her indicator on and begins to manoeuvre around it. Scott sucks in a breath as she drives through the narrow gap between the Uber and the parked car on the other side of the road.

“What?” she squawks.

“I didn’t say anything,” he says, putting his hands up defensively.

“You made a noise.”
“You were just a little close to the Uber, is all.”

“There was plenty of space, Scott,” she reasons, trying not to get annoyed at him. She knows he means well.

“This car is just a little bigger than what you’re used to driving.”

“Scott,” she slows right down so she can turn to look at him in the eye. “I’m used to driving an aeroplane!” She shakes her head and begins to laugh at him.

**

The front door is unlocked when they arrive, so Scott lets the three of them in, slipping quickly out of his own coat and sighing as Oscar wriggles away from him when he tries to unbutton his little jacket.

“No Daddy, I need this on!”

“Alright, but you’re going to get hot and sweaty,” Scott warns, but Oscar merely shrugs and hurriedly pulls off his shoes so he can go into the living room.

“Hang on a second, wait for Daddy,” Tessa just about grabs him by the sleeve before he can go zooming off, then gets down on one knee in front of him. Scott watches the soft exchange between them, always in awe at the power Tessa has to hold someone’s eyes as she speaks to them, their young son no match for her dazzling green gaze. She slips an envelope into his bucket and says, quietly, “This is for Granny and Grandad. Can you go into the living room and find them and say, ‘do you want to see my treats?’ so that they get it?”

Oscar purses his lips in thought. “Do I have to give them my candy?”

“You know it’s kind to share, but you don’t have to if you don’t want to,” she says.

“Maybe if they ask nicely, then they can,” says Oscar, diplomatically, and Scott chuckles from the stairs where he’s sitting and finally removing his skates.

They enter the living room together and Oscar gasps in excitement at seeing his cousins and is ready to make a bee-line straight to them when Scott taps his shoulder and reminds him of his mission.

“Hello, dears,” says Alma as she enters from the kitchen and hands a mug of hot chocolate to Charlie. “Do you need to warm up, Tess? I can put the fire on?”

Scott notices Tessa pull her coat a little tighter around herself as if to play along with the excuse, though he actually suspects she’s quite glad of the warmth right now.

“I’m sure I’ll be fine in a few minutes,” she replies with a smile.

His mother is clearly about to return to the kitchen for more hot chocolate when Oscar appears at her feet. “Granny, Granny. Do you want to see my candy?” he asks sweetly, holding up his bucket with both hands, proudly.

“Of course I do,” says Alma, bending down to peer in the bucket and pausing when she sees the envelope with her and Joe’s name on it. “Oh, is this for me?” she asks, removing it from the bucket with a glance at him and Tessa.
Alma opens the envelope carefully, her expression curious and her fingers shaking a little. Scott wonders if she maybe suspects what's contained within the square bit of paper. She gasps as soon as she slides the ultrasound picture out of the paper and looks straight to them, her eyes shining with tears.

"Really?" she asks, a little breathlessly, reaching out for Joe's hand. Scott's starting to feel a little choked up himself at her reaction, so he just nods and smiles widely at them.

"We were going to wait until next weekend," says Tessa as she unzips her coat and Scott helps slide it off her shoulders. "But I didn’t really want to wear my coat all night." She shrugs and smiles shyly as she turns so she’s in profile and Joe and Alma can see the small bump.

"Oh, my dears!" She rushes over to them and hugs them both, followed closely by Joe, who turns to hug him before kissing Tessa's cheek.

"How far along are you?" his mother asks, her voice thick with tears, wiping them away from her eyes profusely.

"14 weeks," Tessa replies, her own eyes shining now and close to causing Scott to cry too. "So, I'm afraid you're going to have four of us for Canada Day."

"That'll be perfect," Alma says, softly, folding her daughter-in-law into another, longer hug, both women wiping at their eyes.

Oscar is glancing between his mother and grandmother, a look of growing concern on his face. He wanders over to his grandfather and reaches up to tap him on the thigh. "Grandad," he says, voice quiet. "Grandad? Granny is upset. Is she okay?" He sticks a couple of his fingers in his mouth, a nervous tick when his blanket isn’t around.

Joe immediately bends and picks him up, cradling the boy's fair head with his hand. "Oh, no, buddy. It’s okay, everything’s fine." He looks Oscar right in the eye. "We’re all very happy, not sad at all."

"Promise?" Oscar asks, seriously, looking over at his granny to be sure. Alma quickly dabs at her eyes with her sleeve one final time and smiles at him in reassurance.

"Everything is great," she says. "I promise."

Oscar holds out his bucket, which he is still clutching onto. "Do you want a candy, Granny?" he asks. "To feel better?" Scott, Tessa and Alma all bring their hands to their chests at his kindness.

"You’re so sweet, thank you." She reaches into the bucket and pulls out one of the LifeSaver mints, then tucks it into her pocket as she kisses his forehead. "Now, shall we go and get some hot chocolate?"

"Yeah!" Oscar practically growls, with an urgency that would make anyone believe he hasn’t been fed or watered at all today. He slips down quickly from his grandfather’s arms and takes Alma’s hand, trotting happily alongside her into the kitchen as he tells her about all the planes he saw earlier.

**

Oscar is fast asleep later when Scott carries him into the house, snoring softly against his shoulder and with a candy wrapper still clutched in his fist. Together they carefully remove his costume and get him into his pyjamas – a soft cotton pair with retro bi-planes on them. They kiss him goodnight.
as they tuck him into bed, and he mumbles something unintelligible as he sinks into his pillows and pulls his blanket up under his chin.

As Tessa retires to their room to remove her makeup, Scott runs downstairs and turns off the crockpot, and transfers the contents to another dish to cool – full enough tonight from the hot chocolate and blueberry scones his mother had made, and, frankly, hungry for something else. He locks the front door and switches off the lights before returning upstairs.

The bedroom is dark when he enters it, with only the gentle glow of a bedside lamp illuminating the room. His breath catches in his throat when he sees Tessa sitting back in the chair by the closet, completely naked and waiting for him. His mouth drops open as she acknowledges his presence by meeting his eyes and bringing her hands to roam across her body.

She raises one shapely eyebrow. “I think I have a debt to repay?”

Dumbstruck, he merely nods his head in eager agreement.

“Take you clothes off, Moir,” she says, spreading her legs, her hand making its way lower and lower…

(Let it be known for the record that Scott Moir never disobeys his captain’s orders.)

Later that night they lie tangled in bed together, his clothes discarded in a heap by the closet and the sheets in a rumpled mess at their feet. Tessa has just drifted off in his arms, having more than returned the favour from before. He runs his hand gently through her hair, which is wavy as always from being up in a bun, as he holds her close. He relishes these moments; intimate and peaceful, silent but for steady breathing and beating hearts.

Carefully he stretches over to turn off the bedside lamp, smiling to himself (as he often does) as he catches sight of his tattoo; the trail behind the little paper plane now snaking further down his wrist, picking up two hearts on its journey. He makes a mental note to contact the studio to arrange a third to be added next summer as he pulls up the blankets and snuggles closer to his wife. He synchs his breathing with hers and quickly drifts off into a peaceful slumber, dreaming of deep blue skies dotted with soaring white and red aircraft, their puffy white contrails wending their way home to him.
“So,” Scott says to the mirror. “Tee, Tess, T-Dawg, Virtch Birch--”

“Who’re you calling a birch?” Tessa asks, from the doorway.

Scott yelps, starting so badly he slams his hip into the edge of the counter, shaking the entire vanity and knocking the cup with his toothbrush off onto the floor. He straightens himself, wincing, and finds Tessa giving him an odd look—or perhaps not so odd, as Scott just screamed like a teenaged girl and practically climbed up onto a counter just because she spoke to him. “You… startled me,” he mutters lamely, scrubbing a hand over the back of his neck like he can rub the embarrassed flush away.

“It’s like you forgot what it’s like to have me around,” Tessa teases, letting the incident pass, and he smiles at her, grateful and fond.

“I’m saving all the sap up for our farewell tour.”

Tessa scoffs, turning and heading for the kitchenette. “Farewell tours are for geriatrics. We have at least twenty years and two failed marriages before we need to start thinking about a farewell tour.”

Scott follows her through the suite, leaning up against a cabinet while he watches her fuss around in the mini-fridge. “Failed? My two marriages will be thriving, thank you very much.”

“I’m sure that’ll keep you warm at night when you’re in jail for bigamy.” Tessa emerges from the fridge, looking judgmental. “You brought a filter with you to a retreat?”
“I’m sensitive to the chlorine in tap water,” Scott absolutely does not whine.

Tessa rolls her eyes. But she also drinks the filtered water, so Scott thinks it’s a little disingenuous of her. It’s exactly the kind of thing he missed, after their long time apart, the little pieces of her he gets to see when they’re living in each other’s pockets, the way she lets him be with her when all the filters are turned off. He flops onto the sofa and stretches his legs out. “You wanna hit the breakfast bar?”

“Mmm,” Tessa agrees, shamelessly taking the complimentary chocolates off their little fancy presentation plate on the counter and shoving them into her jacket pockets. “We don’t have anything to do today except be seen being here.”

“Momma always said I was too pretty to get paid for doing real work,” Scott muses, and a fancy chocolate sails through the air, bouncing off his forehead.

++

“Our last skate,” Tessa agreed, when Scott came to her hotel door at two fifty three in the morning on a Tuesday. The last tour closed, the last autographs given, everything packed away and the champagne long poured.

They creep out to the rink, the borrowed keys jingling in Scott’s pockets, their skates dangling by the laces from their fingers. The click-slam-whir of the lights and their breath puffing out light and cloudy.

Fingers laced together and noses pink, they skate around the rink like they’re twelve at a Christmas party, wobbly goofy spinning with their heads thrown back and arms flung wide; slower quiet spinning perfectly in synch.

“The yeehaw goose,” Scott says, hands clasped under his chin and eyes pleading. “One last time, just for us.”

“Honk,” Tessa whispers, just before he lifts her up, the wind whipping at her ponytail as they glide across the ice, and Scott’s shout of laughter echoes off the empty stadium seats.

++

“It’s kind of a weird place for a retreat,” Scott says, as they wait on the escalator. “Don’t you think?”

Tessa is absentmindedly tapping her fingers on the handrail, nails coral pink and white tipped, her sunglasses pushed up high on her head. “Yeah,” she agrees. “I thought they were in, like.” She makes a vague hand motion in the air. “Forests and stuff.”

“A beach,” Scott muses wishfully. “Sun, sand, water. Not…” he looks around as they reach the top and step off onto the walkway, all pristine white tiles and concrete pillars. “Who wants to get motivated at a mall?”

“Retail therapy is real,” Tessa tells him, distracted by looking for something in her pockets. “Have you seen my phone?”

There’s a popup stall on Scott’s left. It’s selling rice. “No thank you,” he tells the vendor. “I didn’t bring any buckets with me.”

“I left my phone in the room,” Tessa groans, shoving a chocolate into her mouth with a grumpy
expression. “I wanted to text my mom so she can wish me a happy birthday.”

“You can use mine,” Scott offers immediately, then frowns when his fingers plunge into his pocket only to discover nothing within them. “Damnit, I left it in the room too.”

They slow to a stop outside Moir’s Skate Shop. Scott squints through the glass window to see if he knows who’s working there—he didn’t know that they’d franchised—but all the lights are out. Must be closed. “Should we go back and get our phones?” Tessa asks.

“Sure,” Scott agrees. He doesn’t remember where they were going anyway.

++

“Scott? Can you hear me?”

“Yeah,” Scott says, clapping his free hand over one ear to hear her better, mashing his phone against his cheek and ear. “Where are you?”

“Paris, I think.”

“You think?” Scott laughs, easy and even, ducking into a side room for some privacy. “The tour got you that shook up?”

“It’s not a tour,” she grumbles, but it’s fond; the joke is running, and he makes it every time they talk.

“The Tessa Appreciation Tour,” he says in his grandest voice. “I got your postcards.”

“Good,” she says softly, and the white noise on her end lessens abruptly, like she’d also moved somewhere small and quiet, just to talk to him. “I know it’s not much, but you don’t like chocolate and that’s why we aren’t married, so—”

Scott’s bark of laughter drowns the end of her sentence out. “I miss the hell out of you,” he says, and she promises to send him another postcard.

++

“So,” Scott tells the ceiling, lying on his back in the dark and listening to the chiptune pop covers playing on a crackly loop from outside his room. “Tee, Tessa-the-Very-Besta, Virtue—”

“Really?” Tessa says from the doorway. “Do you do anything besides talk to me?”

“Trying to get you all caught up before we part ways again.”

Tessa sits on his bed, bouncing a little, legs crossed. “That’s your own fault; didn’t you say once I was worth the wait?”

“I also said we’d be best friends forever.”

Tessa’s eyes flash. “Touche.”

“Wasn’t aimed at you,” Scott says, linking his fingers under his head and frowning at a dark spot on the ceiling. “I know it was me that messed it up.”

“You keep saying that,” Tessa says. “You never listen.” She smacks his ankle companionably. “Wanna get a snack?”
Scott blinks. It’s dark outside, but they’re actually inside, so he guesses he could be wrong about it being late instead of early. “What time is it?”

“I’m not sure.” Tessa pats at her hip pockets. “Damnit, I left my phone.” She flops against his side with a sigh, leaning her head on his bicep, and he smooths her hair absently with the back of his hand.

Scott turns his head to check the time on the clock beside the bed, but the display is dark. Must have gotten unplugged. “Yeah,” he says, sitting up and bouncing his weight to make her grumble. “Let’s get a snack.”

++

“Do you think you could come out in the summer?” Tessa asks. “I’m not sure when I’m coming back to Canada, but there’s--there’s someone I want you to meet.”

“The baby’s not mine,” Scott says immediately, “I don’t care what she told you--”

Tessa is snickering, those low hehehe, a giggling chuckle that she thinks is unattractive but Scott couldn’t find more endearing. He finds himself smiling, besotted, sitting in the rink parking lot talking to her half a world away.

“And who am I to meet?”

“Someone important,” Tessa says softly, and he can tell how she must look, he can picture it in his head like she’s sitting in the passenger seat beside him. The way her eyes sparkle when she’s excited, the one bump in her ponytail that she can never smooth out. The gentle pink high up on the apple of her cheek. “I want you to like him.”

Someone important, Scott thinks, and remembers when it used to be him.

++

“It’s not like we have to eat healthy anymore,” Tessa muses, perusing the display case outside the Sbarro stall. “We could do pizza everyday, if we feel like it.”

Scott leans over the counter, half-crawling onto it to retrieve a few boxes of pepperoni slices. “Shouldn’t there be other people here? Working?”

Tessa is patting the pizza with paper napkins to soak up the grease. “What?” she asks distractedly. “Wasn’t there a veggie one back there?”

“Don’t have to eat healthy anymore,” he reminds her, and her eyes are furrowed, glassy.

Then she blinks, and laughs. “Right,” she says, and starts towards the Dippin’ Dots machine. “It’s not a birthday without dessert.”

++

“I think Tessa is dating someone new,” Scott tells Danny, in the middle of a long story about his niece biting some other child during recess. “Thoughts?”

There’s a long pause. “You... ‘think’?”

“I’m reasonably certain. Beyond a reasonable doubt. Rationally, I--”
“Why are you being so weird?”

Scott frowns. “I’m not being weird. I’m being normal. You’re being—nevermind. Let me start over. What do you think about Tessa’s new boyfriend?”

“I know him?”


“Oh,” Danny says, very gently. He sighs softly. “You poor stupid bastard.”

Scott scowls into the phone. “Thanks. You’re super helpful. I’m telling Dad who really stole his Playboy.”

“He’ll comfort himself with the thought that he has at least one son who can put together a complete sentence,” Danny shoots back, and Scott hangs up on him.

++

The mall has a skating rink. It’s small, dimly lit, and the gates are padlocked shut, but there it is in the middle of the mall, the cooling units humming along.

“The ice looks pretty good,” Scott says, tilting his head at it. “Like it’s just been zamboned.”

Tessa pulls at face at zamboned, which is exactly why Scott had said it. He sticks his tongue out at her and she rolls her eyes. “Well,” she allows, “it is an Olympic rink, so I guess the ice better be good.”

Scott blinks. Oh, he thinks, yes. He sees it now: the massive rink, the colored rings swooping across the ice, the expensive cameras set up off to the side, the spotlight lit up at center rink, waiting for them.

Pyeongchang, 2018

“Should we?”

Tesa frowns, biting her lip. “I don’t think it’s allowed.”

Right, Scott thinks, the padlocks. “There’s no one here, though.”

“Scott,” Tessa says, rolling her eyes. She links her arm through his and starts dragging him off towards the escalator again. “You know the rules. Come on, I want pancakes and it’s my birthday.”

“Okay,” Scott agrees. He’d like a photo though, he thinks, he likes the nostalgia the Olympic rings are giving him. But his pocket is empty, so he just lets Tessa steer him away.

++

It’s not the Eiffel Tower at midnight, because this isn’t a romantic story.

They meet at a McDonald’s in Avignon.

“He travels,” Tessa tells him, sipping at her fountain drink and wrinkling her nose at it. “The syrup’s out.”

Scott offers his own, and she accepts the swap. He sips at her drink—bitter carbonated water hits
his tongue and he grimaces. “Enough to cancel?”

“Reschedule,” Tessa corrects. “He made reservations at a Parisian restaurant, it’s good. Weird stuff for you, spaghetti for me.”

“It’s not weird,” Scott says, rolling his eyes a little. “Your palette is incredibly limited.”

“Your face is incredibly limited.”

Scott tosses his cup; it arches up and lands neatly in the trash can. A nearby worker gives him a slightly impressed, slightly dirty look. Scott scoops Tessa’s ice cream cone out of her hand, ignoring her offended noise, and walks backwards towards the door, licking at it as she chases him.

++

Tessa is practicing for her speech, and Scott is pretending to be the audience.

“Thank you for your support as I move beyond competition,” she says, from center stage.

Scott cups his hands over his mouth. “Boo! Talk about your partner more!”

Tessa props her hand on her hip. “And this is helpful how?”

Scott shrugs. He’s sprawled out in a plastic folding chair in the roughshod fake audience they’d constructed outside a Victoria’s Secret. “Were you honestly expecting me to be helpful? Remember the TED Talk rehearsals?”

“Be it that I could forget,” she mutters, making her way to him. “Do you really think it’s okay? Maybe I should change the intro.”

“Hey,” Scott says, “hey Tee, can I ask you something?”

“Thank you,” Tessa is saying, half turned away from him to face the empty chairs, “for supporting us through and beyond our journey here with you.”

“Tess,” Scott says, “when is your speech?” He’s not sure what day it is, suddenly, and he wants to check.

“--we had to ask ourselves, what is it that we want--”

“Tess,” Scott says. “How long have we been here?”

++

They walk along the river, lit up with twinkling lights, not a cloud in the sky. When he offers her the last bite of the ice cream cone she takes it from his fingers, her lips brushing his skin.

“Ah,” Scott says when they pause by a particularly pretty tree so Tessa can instagram it. “The city of love.’

“That’s Paris,” she reminds him, still engrossed in her social media. When she looks up he’s offering her a box, no bigger than the palm of his hand.

“I know we don’t do birthday presents or anything, but…” he shrugs. “Things change, eh?”

The paper peels under her curious fingers, revealing a small jewelry box, not unlike that for a ring.
Nestled in the crushed velvet is a small glass capsule, clasped and dangling from a gold chain.

Tessa’s eyes, shadowed by the night sky, the glow of the stars in her hair. The snap the box makes when she shuts it. “Yes,” she says quietly, “things change.”

++

“Tess,” Scott whispers, curled up under his covers with the pillow over his mouth, so muffled he can’t even hear himself. “How long have we been here?”

++

“You know,” he tells her in the pantry of her mother’s house, squeezed in and whispering amongst the canned soups and dry pastas, tucked away from the party. “Everyone thought I’d be the one to get married first.”

He can hear her breathing, smell her shampoo. The soles of her shoes squeak on the floor when she shifts her weight.

“It’s just funny,” he says. “Don’t you think? Everyone thought I was raring to go and that you were the one who needed time.”

“Scott,” she says quietly, and then her lips brush his cheek. The pantry door squeaks open, the light from the kitchen and murmur of the guests outside spilling into the small room before the door shuts again, leaving him alone in the dark.

++

“We’re the guests of honor,” Tessa proclaims, sweeping an arm out at the empty bar stools. “Go see if the jukebox has Hall and Oates.”

Scott ambles to the jukebox, patting his pockets down for change. He finds a couple of quarters, and nothing else. He groans. “I forgot my fucking phone again, I swear to god--”

“Beer,” Tessa announces, arriving at his side with a glass. While he’s preoccupied by it she slides past him, nudging him back with her hip.

Hall and Oates creaks out, quiet and fuzzy and then sharper, louder. Scott sips his beer and makes a face.

“I heard you,” Tessa says, half turned away from him, gathering her hair up into a loose ponytail. Scott’s beer tastes like peaches and he’s confused by it. “Huh?”

“Last night, when you said my name.”

_Tessa, how long have we been here?

Scott puts his beer down. “My beer tastes like peaches.”

“Scott,” Tessa says, turning to smile at him. “We should dance, right?” She wiggles her eyebrows at him. “Like nobody’s looking.”

The music’s changed; it’s slower now, softer. An older song, something his parents might listen to, something that might play in an old movie. “Like nobody’s looking,” Scott agrees, and lays his palm on her waist, the other hand on her upper arm, just like they’ve done a thousand times before.
Tessa lays her cheek on his shoulder, shuffling closer, and it’s more swaying than dancing, all the medals they’ve won for it and they’re barely rocking, pressed close and breathing quiet.

“It wasn’t last night,” Scott realizes. He almost doesn’t mean to say it aloud.

“It was,” Tessa tells him. “Because every night is the last night.”

Scott remembers, suddenly, that she should have a ring on her finger. The jukebox skips, like a record scratching, and Hall and Oates cranks back on. *Wait for me*, Tessa hums along, and smiles.

“Remember,” she says, “every time is the last time.”

++

*are you up?*

Scott stares at the text on his phone, leaning on the elevator wall, and sighs when the doors chime. The hotel is quiet, this early in the morning, so very early it may equally be described as being very late. The rap of his knuckles against the door sounds much louder than it is.

“It’s open,” Tessa calls out, and he slips inside, pausing to adjust the lock and shut the door properly behind him.

When he turns, she’s in her wedding dress.

“Oh,” he says stupidly.

Tessa rubs her palm on her thigh nervously. “What do you---do you think it’s too much?”

Scott doesn’t know shit about fashion, and even less about wedding specific fashion. He wore polo shirts to events until Marina pulled him into a back room at the rink and either gave him kindly advice or threatened his life. Or both, it was hard to tell with her accent. Either way, he has two good suits and one tuxedo, and he doesn’t devote any further brainpower to his look for black tie affairs.

“You’re stunning,” he says honestly. Then he raises an eyebrow. “I know you’ve got a thing about being punctual, but this is a little early even for you.”

Tessa’s nervousness cracks, then peels away. She socks him in the shoulder. “Jerk.”

Her veil is lying over the back of a nearby chair, and Scott picks it up, feeling the delicate lace against his fingers. “Why the dress rehearsal?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he can see her shifting, tense. When she speaks her voice is uncertain. “I’m… not sure. I just had to try everything on, just to…” she trails off, struggling to articulate her thoughts. “I just have to see it.”

Scott doesn’t get it, but he learned a decade ago he doesn’t have to get it, he just has to help her fix it. “Okay,” he says simply, and steps in close. “Look up for me?”

It takes a little bit of fumbling to get the veil attached just right, his fingers suddenly feeling too big and clumsy and rough against the gentle wisps of her hair, the lace pattern of the veil, the slope of her neck. “There,” he says, stepping back, and watches her look at herself in the mirror. “What do you think?”

He can’t read her expression, muted through the veil, and for once he’s not sure what her body
language is saying either. “Hold on,” she mutters, and crosses the room to her bag, digging inside it. She makes a noise when she finds what she’s looking for, pleased, and comes back in front of him. “Can you…” she offers him the small jewelry box.

The very familiar small jewelry box.

“Oh,” Scott says. In his most self-pitiful moments of wallowing, he’d imagined her throwing it away. But here it is, out of the bag she packed for her wedding night. “Okay.”

The capsule dangles when he picks up the ends of the chain, twinkling under the cheap yellow hotel lights. It fits perfectly into the hollow of her throat, like he’d chosen the chain length expressly for that purpose, the grain of rice in its tiny glass cylinder.

He’s very close to her now, stepped in to get a better look at the clasp, and he doesn’t move away, watching her watch him in their reflection. Scott swallows. He wants to tell her the rice is from the original bucket, that he was in the garage looking at the text she sent him, inviting him to the engagement party at her mom’s place, his mind swimming and equilibrium shifting, when he looked down at saw it, rolling out of a nook to bump against the toe of his shoe. A single grain of rice.

The garage, where he ripped open that bag of rice and dumped it into the bucket before driving to leave it at her door. The grain of rice had to have come from then, he realized, and he’d picked it up and gone to a custom jeweler before he’d had time to talk himself out of it.

He wants to tell her, wants her to know. All the little moments that make up their career, but that’s just a job, that’s just gold and silver and trophies and speeches. He wants to tell her about all the ways she’s made him himself. But then her hand moves, the light catching the ring on her finger. Not his ring, he reminds himself, not his place. It’s barely his place to be where he is right now, seeing her in her wedding dress.

“You look beautiful,” he says quietly. Her face flickers—disappointment? acceptance?—and she smiles, reaching out to take his hand and squeeze it once.

Then he steps away.

++

Tessa tastes like peaches and plum wine, hot and sour-sweet and the fuzz of her soft skin, the sunshine of her kiss. They’re stumbling backwards through the suite, tripping over the low furniture and their own feet, pawing ungracefully at the buttons of Tessa’s blouse and the buckle of Scott’s belt.

Tessa bounces on her back on his mattress, then crosses one leg over the other, arching her eyebrow at him. “Sassy,” he tells her, and tickles his fingers along the underside of her calves, making her giggle and twist, before gripping her ankles and pulling her down the bed, closer to him.

“Hello,” she murmurs, as he lays his weight against her, hip to hip, chest to chest. There’s a flush spreading down her throat, and Scott follows it with his tongue, across her collarbones, his impatient fingers stretching out the collar of her shirt. She makes the softest little moan when he nips at her chest, and her fingers grip his hair tight when he drags his teeth against her skin, leaving spit-wet red lines in his wake.

“Hello,” he rasps, and licks across the tip of her nipple, through her bra.
She jolts, her legs parting, and he slots between them, cradled within her thighs, her ankles crossing in the small of his back. Tessa yanks her shirt off, tossing it blindly to the side; Scott gets his own off while she’s fumbling at the clasp of her bra—finally they’re skin to skin, and Scott sighs out, long and soft, when he presses down to her mouth again.

He feels warm, sweat prickling at his hairline and down his spine, and their kisses are sloppy, their fingers fumbling. He has to roll off her to get his jeans off, muttering a curse as the laces of his shoes don’t cooperate, and when he’s finally naked, she is too.

He touches her, the skim of her ribs, the points of her hips. His fingertip at the dip of her bellybutton, his fingertips on the slope of her breast. “You look beautiful,” he murmurs, against her lips, and her tongue curls against the inside of his teeth.

“What’s wrong?” she asks breathlessly, when he’s slid inside her, flush, her hips rocking to grind her clit into his pelvis.

“I,” Scott says, motionless and head foggy. “I’m not--sure?” He blinks. “What was I saying?”

“C’mere,” she calls to him, fingers in his hair, and he answers, lowering himself down for a kiss. “Remember,” she tells him, “every time is the last time.”

++

“This is bougie,” Scott tells her. “I always knew you loved a brunch, but this is next level.”

Tessa, looking serene in a halter top and oversized sunglasses, sips at her highly alcohol cocktail. A comically large chunk of pineapple stuck onto a skewer bumps her nose. “We’ve always been bougie, Scott, you were the one who pretended to be a country boy.”

Scott steals her pineapple skewer, licking the alcohol away before sinking his teeth into the fruit. It bursts over his tongue, cold and boozy and sweetly biting, perfect for how high and insistent the sun is hanging in the sky.

“Do you think,” he says, looking out over the water. “That the multiverse theory is real?”

Tessa, mid sip, stops dead, sliding her glasses down and turns to look at him incredulously. “Excuse me?”

“You know.” Scott shifts his weight, facing her more openly in the two sprawling chairs they’re stretched out in by the lakeside. “Like the Avengers movies.”

Tessa’s mouth is slightly open. “Who are you?”

Scott shrugs. “Danny took me to the last one. But you know what I mean, right? So?”

“I think so,” Tessa says, “but not like in the movies.”

“Well,” Scott says, “yeah, of course. But I looked it up--”

“You looked it up,” Tessa repeats, amused.

“Shut up, this is important,” Scott says, but he’s smiling when she rolls her eyes. There’s a beer resting against his thigh, sweating condensation onto his fingers, and his hat is pulled low over his eyes. “I can’t remember all of it, and it’s not like I’m a scientist or anything, but it’s like, all the universes are more like ours than we think they are. Like we always jump to “what if someone else
won that war” or whatever, but it’s more like. The next universe over a firefly in Kitchener flashes just a second off from this one.”

“What if we go more than one universe over,” Tessa asks. “What if we jump sideways a hundred universe, what then?”

“How do I know, I’m not a scientist.” He lifts the beer bottle, squinting at the peach on the damp peeling label. “What is this anyway?”

“It’s artisan,” Tessa informs him loftily. “Answer my question.”

Scott looks out over the lake, the birds singing in the trees and brilliantly blue sky. Tessa’s lakehouse, finally revealed, fancy cheeses on crackers on a platter between them and cold drinks in their hands. “Yeah,” he says, “I guess things would be different if we go a hundred universes out from ours.”

Tessa leans her head back, tilting her face into the sun. "Better stay right here in this one, then."

++

“I figured it out,” Scott says, in front of a pretzel stand. It smells overwhelmingly of sugar and cinnamon.

Tessa dips a finger into an icing packet, then licks the frosting away. “Figured what out?”

“This mall. I remember it.”

Tessa makes a vaguely interested noise, absorbed in licking every last molecule of sugar out of the small plastic cup.

“Look,” Scott says, and picks up one of the nearby plastic chairs. He turns it over---yes, just there. T+S. "Remember?"

Tessa doesn’t look up. “I remember.”

“We were, what? Fifteen and sixteen? Something like that. Playing hooky.”

A smile plays around her mouth when she looks at him. “I told you it’s not hooky if it’s online class.”

“So I committed a little vandalism.” He grins at her. “To give you the teenaged rebellion you desperately needed.”

“How very selfless of you.”

“I try.” Scott puts the chair back. “Was that it?”

“One teenaged memory?” Tessa looks at him, chiding. There’s frosting on the tip of her nose. “Keep figuring, kiddo.”

++

“If you weren’t standing up there with her,” Danny tells him, “I’d make you sit next to me so you wouldn’t do anything stupid.”

Scott, trying to do up his bowtie and cursing it in the hotel mirror, barely spares Danny a look.
“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I know how you are.” Danny points a stern finger at him. “No objections!”

Scott rolls his eyes. “Get a grip and help me with this, I’m gonna strangle myself.”

Danny steps up, batting Scott’s hands aside and starting over with the bowtie. “Have you guys ever… you know?”

Scott glares.

“Not that,” Danny mutters. He smacks Scott in the chin with the ends of the bowtie. “Talked about it, I mean.”

Scott doesn’t answer for a long time. He remembers Japan, the way Kyoto was lit up and the twinkle of the lights in Tessa’s hair, the way her hand felt in his. Danny finishes, stepping back and looking Scott up and down. He reaches into Scott’s inside pocket and takes his phone. “For your own good,” he says, and Scott rolls his eyes.

“No,” Scott says finally. “Because it’s not a fucking fairytale. It’s just our lives.”

++

“New theory,” Scott announces.

“--on this journey--” Tessa pauses. Today she has a podium, and a mic. When she leans too close it squeals. “What?”

“New theory,” Scott repeats. He’s making spitballs with plastic straws and paper napkins from the food court. “Aliens.”

Tessa blinks. “Aliens.”

“Or Alien. Could be just you.”

Tessa rolls her eyes impatiently. “I’m not an alien.”

“You’re not Tessa,” he shoots back, and she glares.

“Ask me something only Tessa would know.”

He holds up one finger like he’s had an epiphany. “New theory: psychic aliens.”

“Thank you,” Tessa says into the mic, her gaze locked out into the distance. “For supporting us on this journey. As we neared the end of our skating career, we had to ask ourselves--”

Scott blows a spitball at her.

Her eyes snap to his. “What do we want out of this, in the end?”

“I want,” Scott says, “I want--.” He smiles, sudden and joyous, and stands so abruptly his chair clatters to the floor behind him.

Tessa Virtue, just how he remembers her: the barely-there freckles across the bridge of her nose and the roots showing in her hair. Scars on the backs of her legs and the deceptive slenderness of her, all the power and strength he can feel when he holds her close.
“Tessa Virtue,” he says, on one knee. “I want to skate with you.”

++

Everyone keeps looking at him, some hoping for answers, others outright suspicious.

“Don’t start with me,” he mutters at Danny. The whispers in the audience are getting louder, and a few guests have already called it, leaving with their phones in hand--it won’t be long before the media gets wind of the whole disaster.

“Have you--” Danny starts, but Scott sees Jordan slip out a side door into a back alley and he waves Danny off to follow her.

“Jordan,” he says, and she jumps, deer in the headlights with her phone against her ear. He holds out his hand and she hands him the phone, leaving without another word. “Tessa?”

He can hear her breathing, too quick and panicky.

“I put on a tux for this, you know.” Scott undoes the bowtie with his free hand, exhaling in relief. “Next time you leave somebody at the altar, go California Casual, okay? I’d take it as a favour.”

“Asshole,” she says, and her voice is wobbly and cracked, like she’s been crying.

“Hey,” he says, just like he’s said a thousand times before, their whole entire lives. “It’s just you and me. No one else is here, no one else matters. Breathe with me.”

Breathe with me, he says, and she does.

“Where are you?”

“The hotel,” she confesses, all in a rush. “I got in the car and I just--I was supposed to ride with Jordan but I said I needed a minute to clear my head and when I got in the car to drive to the venue I just…” She exhales, long and loud. “I drove to your hotel instead.”

Scott’s car keys are in his hand. “Do you want me to come get you?”

She’s silent for a minute. “Do you remember what you said, when we went up to my cabin?”

It’s Scott’s turn to be silent.


Scott can hear himself breathing, harsh and quickened. He’s moving, cutting through the gate and through the parking lot to his rental car. “I’m coming to get you,” he says. “Tell me not to.”

The engine rumbles to life when he turns the key in the ignition, and Hall and Oates is playing on the radio. “Everyone says we’re in a fairytale,” Tessa says. “I want the ever after, and…”

She’s breaking up, the connection dipping and cutting out. “Hold on,” he says into the static. He curses Jordan’s cell carrier. “Stupid,” he mutters, mostly to himself.

“... I think I want it with you.”

“I don’t have my phone,” he says, fumbling to open the maps feature and drive at the same time. The radio warbles along: *wait for me* crooned against the upbeat melody. “I left it--”
The click-slam-whir of the lights. The puff of their breath, light and cloudy. Fingers locked, standing at the edge of the ice.

“Will it work?” he asks her.

She shrugs. “Maybe. Does it matter?”

Scott squints out. Far in the distance, he thinks he can see a light. Yes, he thinks, it matters. Somewhere out there, it'll be Tessa's birthday soon. He means to be there for it. “I trust you,” he says, “Take me home.”

“You could stay,” Tessa offers. “It wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Scott extends the toe of one skate, presses until he feels it bite into the ice. The rink stretches out in front of them, endless and dark. Somewhere, The Tragically Hip are playing their curtain call.

“Here’s the thing,” he says. “I think I want the fairytale.”

She offers him her hand, and he takes it. When they push off onto the ice their skates sing.
Chapter Notes

Today’s my birthday, but I’m gifting this little story to all of you! This is rather different for me but comes from a deeply personal place. I hope you love it, because I certainly do.

Additional tags in the notes below for those of you who are sensitive to hospitals, accidents and surgeries, but please don’t let that turn you off this fic. I promise it’s not nearly as morbid as I’m making it out to be.

Lastly, I am so excited to be a part of #Spooktober (thank you to the Writer’s Guild) and to read all the exceptional fics from this project. Happy Halloween and happy reading x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Death, they say, is the Four Riders of the Apocalypse. They, whoever they are, couldn’t have been more wrong.

Death comes in the form of a woman. Known also as Grandmother Death, Teleute or Madame Mort, she is far from the lone scythe-wielding Grim Reaper persona one has become accustomed to.

First of all, she doesn’t appear old, even if she is the second eldest, and perhaps most important of The Endless.

Secondly, she’s never really alone. As she fulfils her duty, oftentimes she will come across her siblings. Dream, with his dark hair and even darker eyes, giving either a sense of calm for the end, or the regrets and nightmares known only to Morpheus and the dying. Destiny who charts all that is and all that will happen in his heavy book of fate. Many times it is Despair. Sometimes it is Delirium who accompanies her. The worst is usually Destruction, in times of conquest, plague and famine.

***

An older lady is lying in bed with her daughter stroking her paralysed arm. It’s a small gesture, caring and tender, but futile. The lady is in the terminal stages of pancreatic cancer and she hasn’t got long left.
“Do you think there’s work out there for someone like me?”

Her daughter looks up, curious. “What do you mean, Mom? You don’t need the money. We’ve taken care of everything for you.”

“My life has amounted to nothing,” her voice cracks. “I just want to make it count before I leave this world.”

Her daughter grips the hand she’s holding tightly, her heart breaking, not for the first time. They’ve had their issues, mother and daughter, a history wrought with alcohol abuse and neglect, but impending death brings perspective, maybe even forgiveness.

“How can you say that? You’ve raised three strong daughters on your own, in a time where it wasn’t acceptable for a woman to do so. We’re your greatest legacy!” she whispers fiercely.

A long pause. The old lady makes a soft choking sound, as if she’s trying to hold in a sob, “I never really saw it that way.”

They hold each other, in a fragile moment of peace. When she falls asleep the daughter steps in to the bathroom. She weeps unabashedly not only for her dying mother and the squandered years, intellect and talent she grieves for, but also for her own. She’s 38, with a young child, a cheating husband, and no claim to any personal achievement - on track to replicating this exact scene 40 years later.

She dries her eyes and walks down the street from the apartment to a café next door. The barista who serves her is a slim, dark-haired beauty with otherworldly green eyes and an unusual tattoo under her right eye.

When she receives her flat white coffee to go, the girl says, “Hey, take a fortune cookie.”

When she breaks it open back in the apartment, the daughter sucks in a sharp breath, because the words read: Death gives time all its value.

Two days later, her mother passes away. One year on, the daughter has separated from her husband, moved countries with her son, and is on her way to fulfilling her dream as a filmmaker.

***

She’s a delicate thing. With dark honeyed skin, and a shock of silver hair crowning her sharp features. Her eyes are swollen and rimmed red, she’s sobbing as if her heart were clawing out of her chest, trying to escape the pain that’s bigger than her frame. She’s currently pumping her breast discreetly beneath her shirt, the demands of her 8-week postpartum body not understanding the crisis at hand. She curls tightly into the hard backed chair almost willing it to swallow her whole.

“Are you losing somebody?”

“Excuse me?”

The gothic creature looks around them. It’s a hospital after all.

“My baby boy. He’s in surgery right now.”

“Ah, they’re removing his atypical choroid plexus papilloma? Don’t worry - he’s going to be peachy keen. It isn’t his time,” she shrugs.
The elfin-like woman just shakes her head in disbelief, her body wracking with convulsive gasps. “How- how do you know?”

“I just do. Do you trust me?”

There’s a weak nod in reply.

“Make sure you notice the collateral beauty of things around you.” And with that, she’s gone, a sound of beating wings left in her wake.

Seven hours later, her son is wheeled out of the operation theatre, alive, awake and breathing on his own. He spends four days in the Children’s Intensive Care Unit fighting seizures from the swelling in his brain, a continuous fever, and a blood clot in his femoral artery.

The doctors say the operation was a success. The tumour has been removed completely, and from the looks of it, is benign.

A temporary catheter is placed in order to drain the build up of cerebrospinal fluid from his brain, but the valve means she’s only allowed to take him off it for 20 minutes over the course of 24 hours to breastfeed him in case the hydrocephalic pressure builds up.

She’s never been religious, but she places her faith in the words of this figure cloaked in black, and prays to a god she doesn’t believe in. She begs to be taken instead of her child if it means a moment less of his suffering.

His condition improves, and two weeks after he’s been moved to normal ward care, he’s back home.


And oblivious to the battle he has won.

***

“Hey Al,” she calls out.

She gave him a fright. If he didn’t know any better, he would have said she popped up like Death. “You? What are you doing here?” he mumbles.

“I’m here for you, of course,” she smiles brightly.

“Where are we going?”

She looks a little different than when he saw her last. Then, she wore her hair short in a shaggy pixie cut. Now she has long, glamorous waves. It’s a glow up. She looks beautiful, but then again, she always did. Back then he was ready to go, sought it out, even welcomed it, but she didn’t take him. Refused to. Told him he had a lot more to do with his life.

“Well now, that’s not for me to decide. But you know. It was your life, only you know what you did with it,” she reasons.

“It was a good life,” he says, talking to no one in particular.

And it was. After his brush with her, he was reminded of why life was beautiful. He stopped the drugs, the reckless sex with both women and men, the savagery, the addiction to pain and anger, got clean and dedicated his life to his art. When people say there’s a fine line between genius and
madness, they’re not wrong. But the genius that you tap into when you’re lucid and sober is the closest to paradise he’s ever been.

He’s been spending the past 57 years chasing that high. And he’s never been more fulfilled. It feels a shame to stop now.

“It’ll be a good death too,” she promises. “Spectacular, even.”

He trusts her. She’s glad that he does. So many fear her, even when they don’t need to. Even when they’ve spent their entire lives dying to meet her.

She takes her role as a psychopomp very seriously. She’s there at everyone’s birth, and so too is she for their demise. He deserves a good sending off, especially for one as theatrical as him. Even those who don’t, merit a fitting end.

The crash is everything she promised him it would be. It’s a six car pile up on an interstate highway, complete with a fire that takes the firefighters three hours to put out. There are others who lose their lives too, she’s there with each and every one of them.

When the world learns of his passing, they mourn. They grieve for the sagacity of Alistair King, one of the greatest stage actors of his time.

***

Every century there comes a very special day. It’s the day that Death takes a holiday. Well, it’s not quite a holiday. But it is a break from her morbid duties.

You know how some cultures celebrate the day of the dead? Well, for her it’s the day of mortality. A day for living.

It’s the day she trades her immortality to taste the bitter tang of the power she wields and the high cost of taking a life.

She loves this day. She looks forward to it every hundred years. It’s when she can truly walk amongst the beings she’s become so fond of. She’s privy to so much - their hopes, dreams, disappointments, remorse, anger, passion, the complete range of their human condition.

But it’s an entirely different thing to actually live it.

She’s sitting on the side of a fountain right at the peak of Mont Royal Park. It’s early, too early for the mothers and children to be out on their play dates, but late enough for the gung-ho wannabe marathon runners training for some new-fangled rat race to be clocking in their miles.

She supposes she’s a bit overdressed for the morning, in her top hat and black leather jacket over a crop top, matched with a tulle skirt and cage heels, but what the hell. This day is like her birthday. You can bet your ass she’s going to have bells on.

She hears him before she sees him. You couldn’t not hear him. There’s a flurry of curses coming from his mouth because he’s just bumped into a trash bin and nearly tipped into the fountain.

He’s drunk, of course. Or more accurately, he’s coming off a huge hangover from carousing like a fiend from the night before. How he ended up here is anyone’s guess.

“Ouch.” He groans and rubs his head as he crumples down the side of the fountain.
It’s quiet for a while, but then she hears a snuffle. Is he weeping?

“Are you - are you alright?” she asks kindly, after an appropriate amount of time.

He jumps and scrambles up in surprise. “Fuck, I didn’t see anyone there! Jesus, warn a guy, would ya?”

He rubs his face to wipe his tears. He had been weeping.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

He peers at her curiously, no doubt taking in her strange get up and the tattoo beneath her eye.

“Well, you did,” he spits out rather maliciously. “What were you doing anyway?”

“I was busy minding my own business until you disturbed me,” she points out.

He opens his mouth as if to say something but then thinks the better of it.

They sit together quietly for a while.

The sky is deepening into a dark velvet black, the kind of inky darkness that comes just before the burnished light of magic hour. The view from the belvedere over the city skyline is close to preternatural. For now, he bites his tongue from the rush of questions he has.

They watch how night slips off her blanket of stars, only to reveal a gentle golden glow, with rays of light painting her surroundings in pinks, oranges and purples. It only takes a few minutes for the world to transform, but l’aube is the beauty of hope. That things can be renewed once again.

He clears his throat as if to say something.

She sighs dreamily. Then turns to him as if she’s just made a decision.

She has.

“You’ll do,” she states.

“I’ll do what?” he asks, confused.

“You’ll be my guide for the day.”

“Wha-? Do I look like some kind of tourist guide?” He’s sobering up quite quickly now.

He reminds her of her brother Dream in some ways. Those dark, intense eyes and feeling entirely too much beneath the surface yet pretending not to. But that’s where the similarities stop. She knows where she recognises him from now. She’s taken a few beloved from him through the years.

His brother, his best friend, his grandfather.

She remembers, because she was there.

After the second time, he took the cross off from the silver necklace he wears around his neck. He doesn’t believe in God anymore.

Symbols are important. They carry a sense of power. She, for instance, has an ankh that sways between her small breasts. An important part of ancient Egyptian iconography, it signifies the
power to sustain life and to revive human souls in the afterlife. It’s apt after all. Death isn’t an ending like everyone thinks. She’s a door to another realm.

“What’s your name?” he asks, when it’s clear that she’s ignored his previous question.

“I don’t have one. I mean, I do...but I’d much rather you give me one. What do you think my name should be?”

Who doesn’t have a name? This gothic figure is so strange but intriguing. It helps that she’s fucking beautiful too, so he decides to humour the mad (wo)man.

He thinks about the little girl who chose ballet over ice dancing with him all those years ago. His best friend, the one he’s never seen since. Except she’s now Canada’s most famous prima ballerina. So technically he has seen her, just only on TV, billboards, magazines and all over the internet. It’s funny, but this strange woman clothed in black looks uncannily like her.

“Tessa. Everyone should have a Tessa.”

“I love it!” she claps her hands in glee. “What a fantabulous name!”

“Don’t you want to know mine?”

“But I already do, Scott.”

His eyes go large, his expressive brows lifting in a mixture of fear and skepticism. He swears he didn’t introduce himself at any moment during this bizarre encounter. How hungover is he?

She senses his perturbation. “Can I let you in on a little secret?”

He nods, still unsure.

“I’m actually Death. It’s nice to meet you!” she sticks out her hand.

Okay, now he’s certain she belongs in the loony bin.

“Sure you are. And I’m Justin Trudeau.” He doesn’t take her hand.

“No you’re not, although you have great hair too. You’re Scott Moir. Three-time Olympic gold and two-time Olympic silver medallist, not to mention World Champion, eight-time Canadian champion and only male figure skater to achieve a Career Super Grand Slam winning in both Junior and Senior divisions,” she reels off.

She’s just confirmed that she’s a stalker too, he thinks.

“Alright, just wait a minute. Who put you up to this? Was it one of the guys last night? They paid you to freak me out a little?”

She’s biting her lip, cocking her head to the side, her gaze diamond hard, but amused.

If it were under any other circumstances, he’d say she was his type. She’s gorgeous and quirky, with a tumble of espresso curls beneath her top hat, crystalline green eyes, slight but strong frame, an unusual spiral tattoo beneath her right eye, and a rock chick aesthetic.

Except his type doesn’t include being a deluded stan. He’s just very recently found himself single, having broken an engagement with a woman he knows isn’t The One. It was mostly his fault though, jumping into a relationship right in the throes of a post-Olympic crash, leading himself to
believe she might have been able to fulfil his dreams of a family. Hence the drunken night and eventual tears.

He’s definitely not looking for a rebound or casual thing. Or god forbid, a long-term relationship.

“Nopex.”

“Okay...If you’re Death, and let’s just say I believe you for a moment, and you know everything...do you know if I’ve made the right choice?”

“There are no wrong or right choices. Only the choices you can live with. Can you live with this one?”

And there it is. The question of the century.

He doesn’t answer, not knowing what he feels about it all.

“Right!” she gets up suddenly. “I think it’s time for breakfast. But first, you’re going to go home and get showered. Because I can smell you from here, and I’m not going around the entire day with someone who reeks of alcohol.”

He has the decency to look embarrassed. “Sorry, it was kind of a rough night.” He stands up and shoves his hands in his pockets, “I guess we’re doing this then.”

He doesn’t know what compels him to say yes to her, but he suspects she tends to have that effect on people. He supposes that he’s made enough ridiculous choices in the past little while, what’s another one more?

They walk down the hill and across Downtown Montreal in silence until they get to his place. He’s thinking about what she said in reference to making choices he can live with. Are they the same choices that will make him happy?

He jumps into the shower once he gets home. He’s feeling a little tired from being out all night, but the cold water jolts him out of his torpor. This day should be interesting. It already is.

She’s looking through some of his things when he comes out to the living room, pulling a henley shirt over his head.

“Is this her?” she fingers a photo frame that’s tucked away behind several bigger photos of his Olympic wins.

“Who?”

“Your Tessa.”

“Ummm yes. I forgot I had that.”

“She’s very pretty,” she traces her finger across the little girl’s face. The young boy and girl in the photo are in a dance hold, on skates.

“She was brilliant. She still is.”

“But you don’t talk to her anymore. Why is that?”

He runs his hands through his hair. He really should get a haircut. “Because she left? And I was alone after that?”
“Why do you still have this photo then? If it makes you unhappy?”

“Because it reminds me of a happier time.”

“So you should go find it again,” she says lightly.

***

He’s never seen such a tiny person eat so much. They’re at St-Viateur, which is famed for their Montreal bagels, poached in honey-infused boiling water then baked in a wood-fire oven. He doesn’t know if Death ever eats, so he’s decided to give her a chance to explore one of city’s specialties. So far she’s already worked her way through three different types of bagel sandwiches, a white mochaccino, a chai latte, a healthy berry breakfast smoothie, a milk chocolate millefeuille cake slice, a maple syrup donut and is currently munching her weight in sugar buns.

“Yum, I’m taking these to go!” she muffles, with her mouth full.

“You should probably take it easy on those. Wouldn’t want you getting a sugar high or anything,” he snarks, impressed, and a little shocked, by the way she scarfs down the sweet stuff.

“Oh gimme a break, this is a once-in-a-century type thing,” she says while licking her fingers clean.

“Are you any good at it?” he asks suddenly, as the thought occurs to him.

“You mean eating? Or being Death?”

“The Death thing,” he leans forward to whisper conspiratorially. “You might not want to advertise that too loudly, by the way.”

She winks. “I’m excellent at it. I would even say perfect, except perfection doesn’t exist. Perfectionism is just an haute couture term for fear.”

_Huh_. He could have used that wisdom bomb a while ago.

“Do you enjoy it? What you do? What exactly do you do? Do you ever wonder if you do things simply because it’s expected of you, but then you have a feeling like there might be something else out there, but you just don’t know what it is?”

“Whoa, slow down there Sherlock. Those are a lot of deep questions. I thought you didn’t believe me.” Now it’s her turn to be sarcastic.

He feigns ignorance.

“To answer your first question, it’s who and what I am. I don’t know if I would say I enjoy it. It just is.”

He’s been lost, a ship unmoored and without a sail, since after the last Olympics. He’s never felt worthy of the fame or the achievements he has received, even as he can recognise how hard he’s worked for them. This past year has been a study in who he is without, and beyond, all of that, but he keeps coming up short.

“If there’s something I’ve learnt by watching mortals, it’s that not everyone is lucky enough to love what they do, but if they can find a way to do it well and then balance it out with something that feeds their soul, it’s still a life that’s worth living.”
“I’m not afraid to die, you know,” he says morosely. “I’m just afraid I haven’t lived enough.”

“Scott,” she takes a deep breath, like she’s about to tell him something important. “I’m not here to take you, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

The lilt of her laughter lifts the heavy atmosphere.

She continues, “Look, as long as you don’t choose, everything remains possible. But where’s the fun in that? I read something recently - yes, I do read, I’m not a savage. Do what brings you to life. Create whatever causes a revolution in your heart.”

And with that, she asks for the bill, but they find out that their tab has already been paid for by a kindly elder gentleman who had been eating breakfast quietly in the corner.

They’re out on the street when she asks what’s next on their agenda. Scott smiles and tells her it’s a secret. They jump into an Uber and when they pull up to the Ice Academy of Montreal fifteen minutes later, Death squeals in delight.

“I’ve never gone ice skating before!”

“You’re in luck then, because I know a pretty good coach,” Scott winks.

She trades her heels for skates once they’re inside and though she starts off a little shaky, after an hour Scott has already got her doing forward and backward cross rolls.

“Not bad, kiddo!” he gives her a high five. “Are you ready to try a basic lift?”

He’s good at this teaching thing. He should be doing this professionally. It’s obvious how much he loves the ice and how easily he transfers his knowledge.

“You couldn’t stop me if you tried!” She does a happy little jig on the ice, giddy with happiness, arms flailing, and almost slipping.

“Alright, alright, settle down. We’ll make an Olympic skater out of you yet!” he teases as he skates over to her and scoops her up in an easy bridal-type lift. She shrieks in joy. It’s intimate and close, and for the third time today he finds himself wondering what would have happened if his Tessa had stayed on to skate with him.

They play for another hour together in private before a group of Pee Wee Hockey skaters come on the ice for practice. They’re so excited to see one of their Canadian heroes in the flesh and start crowding around him, begging him to show off his signature spread eagle, Ina Bauer and quad jumps. Scott doesn’t have the heart to refuse and spends another hour messing about, even joining the hockey coach to help the kids out.

When he’s finally done, he lands in a contented heap where Death has been watching from the sidelines.

“Are you happy?” she asks.

“Very much so.”

“It isn’t what calls you, you know,” she grins. “It’s what you answer to.”

He has to let that sink in for a minute before he understands that she’s talking about the choices which will make him happy; the ones that will cause a revolution.
Because she had so much to eat at breakfast, Scott decides they’ll drop by Lester’s later that afternoon for take out. It’s one of the finest hot smoked meat sandwiches in town and Death agrees. The best part is that the deli owner tells them it’s on the house.

*Life can’t get much better than this,* she thinks.

They’re outdoors, soaking up the energy of the people around them and the last moments of the fall sunshine, before the city turns bitterly cold in the winter. They’re eating on a bench somewhere in the Plateau when he asks about her tattoo under her right eye.

“Oh, this old thing?” she points. “It’s a *wadjet* - the Eye of Horus. It’s a sigil of healing and resurrection.”

“But, if you’re Death, how can you represent life?”

“Good question. It’s complicated, but not. The afterlife is simply another journey,” she shrugs.

She’s about to launch into what exactly that journey entails when a poster on the street wall catches her eye. “Where did you say she dances now, Scott?”

“My Tessa, you mean? I think she’s at the National Ballet in Toronto.”

“Have you ever watched her dance?”

“Never,” he shakes his head, a little ruefully.

“That’s going to change tonight!” she crows.

He looks bewildered, but he knows better than to expect the ordinary from her by now. She points to the direction of the poster. And there it is, as plain as the writing on the wall. The National Ballet of Canada is visiting, and they’re performing for only two nights. Tonight will be their last performance in Montreal at Les Grands Ballets.

“You can’t know that she’ll be there!” he scoffs.

“Yes, I do.”

“Is this another one of your uncanny omniscient tricks?”

She rolls her eyes, “No Scott, it’s called the internet. Look it up and buy the damn tickets.”

After he’s sheepishly bought the tickets - indeed, Canada’s most eminent prima ballerina Tessa Virtue will be performing - information which makes his stomach flip flop in a curious way - they stroll down towards the river.

Death stops outside the Notre-Dame Basilica, and cocks her head, as if to say, *Let’s go inside.*

“Oh, hell no.” He still has a complicated relationship with religion. He doesn’t understand the concept of a God who can create so much beauty yet wreak so much pain.

“C’mon. You’re not going to disintegrate if you go in. We’re just going to admire the architecture.”

He goes along, but he isn’t thrilled. Death, on the other hand, marvels at the strikingly beautiful chapel in the back, the gold altar, beautiful art works, and the stained glass windows. She wishes
they could stay for the light show later that evening, but the ballet is much more of a priority. She joins him at one of the pews. “Did you know that this is where Celine Dion got married?”

“She places her hand above his. “They’re alright, Scott - your loved ones. In the end, I come for you all. Religion has nothing to do with it. Faith, on the other hand…”

He wipes a tear that gathers in the corner of his eye and nods.

“You want to get out of here? We need to get changed for the ballet!”

***

Scott marvels at the good seats he’s managed to get. He’s never been to the ballet, never had time before, except to work with several dance choreographers during his career. He’s got a large bouquet of flowers on his knee, having picked them out at the florist near his apartment earlier. He’ll get one of the ushers to deliver them to Tessa after the performance.

*Peonies are perfect,* Death told him. Dark pink. For honour, respect and love.

She had cut her thumb on a thorn when she’d enthusiastically grabbed at some roses to show Scott. She hissed at the sting at first, the pain throbbing and exquisite. Then she watched, riveted, as drops of blood rolled down her Mount of Venus.

Crimson against pale flesh.

It occurs to her that this is the essence and life force of mortals. Their bodies are a battleground between mind and heart. Their stories told through the red ink of their blood.

The florist hadn’t allowed him to pay for the flowers. She thought it was for his ‘charming companion’, as she put it.

“Do you always get things for free?” he asks, curious. “First breakfast, then lunch, now the flowers.”

“Oh, I pay. Everyone does in the end.”

The first programme the company is dancing to is Jerome Robbin’s *In the Night*, a classical ballet piece composed of three parts, set to the music of Chopin. The second is a highly celebrated contemporary group creation choreographed by Canadian Crystal Pite called *Seasons’ Canon*, using the music of Vivaldi recomposed by Max Richter.

He’s struck by the beauty and grace of the first two ballet pairs, but the moment Tessa, *his Tessa*, steps foot on stage in her scarlet-tinged costume, it’s as if the entire world falls away. She’s mesmerising in her movements, from the tips of her fingers to the point of her feet. Her dark hair is scraped back into a bun, highlighting her cheek bones and widow’s peak, her body sculpted by her métier as much as it is by her poise and finesse.

Scintillating. Cosmic. Strong.

In that vivid moment of realisation, he doesn’t question anymore her decision to leave him and ice dance behind to forge a career in ballet. She was *born* to do this. Just as sure as he was begot to take the ice.
Death turns to look at him during Tessa’s performance. There’s a hint of her androgynous sibling Desire in his eyes, but more than anything, there’s love, admiration, and hope.

She turns back to the stage to watch the performance unfold before her and she is swept away. She’s watched the best of them, known them intimately too. Nureyev, Pavlova, Fonteyn, Balanchine. Tessa has that same fire, one that’s destined for greatness. It’s the same fire that got her through the years of Compartment Syndrome anguish, two surgeries that sliced her legs open, and the desolation of learning to walk, let alone dance again. Her performance is a tour de force of classical ballet technique, powerful, passionate, and virtuous. She understands now why Scott hadn’t been able to let go.

After intermission, the second programme starts.

Inspired by nature and Vivaldi’s Four Seasons, the dancers come together as an entity to emote and express the phenomena of the physical world.

They flow, they jolt, they live, they breathe.

They hover as a swarm, roll as a wave, reach as plants that grow, fall as gently as rain, birth as a new being coming into the world, and perish as slowly as the silent decay of creation itself.

It’s hypnotic. It’s chaotic. Complex. In effect, it’s everything Life and Death are in movement.

Every hundred years, Death is given a day to fully immerse in her physical manifestation. Sometimes she chooses the downtrodden, sometimes the privileged, sometimes the content, at other times the discontent, the lonely, and the loved. In every moment, she’s always felt the thread of something greater weaving through each and every tapestry of life she’s come in contact with, and taken.

Watching this now she knows what it is. It makes her hair stand on end.

It’s connection. Pure and simple.

Scott looks over and slips his fingers through hers. And her tears begin to fall.

***

They walk all night after the show, grabbing craft beers and some poutine for a light dinner. He doesn’t think they’ve stopped talking since they met this morning, save for the enforced hush in the concert hall at Les Grand Ballets. She couldn’t have talked even if she had wanted to, so choked up with emotion as she was.

They walk by the Old Port, the river and somehow they end up at La Ronde, where the amusement park is.

“We should sneak in!” she whispers, almost drunk on exhilaration. Watching the ballet has left her raw and wide open.

“But it’s closed. We’ll get caught.”

“Oh don’t be a poltroon, live a little!” she laughs, as she kicks off her heels at last (how the hell do people walk all day in them?) and runs towards the park’s Carousel.

It’s ironic. Death, telling him to live.
He can’t help but scamper after her and join her laughter. It’s not the first time today, but it has been a very long time since he’s felt this alive. She’s twirling around, already finding her way to one of the horses and the Carousel inexplicably whirs to life, lights on and music playing. He watches her from the ground, admiring her effervescence. If Death could love life in all its strange, peripheral and wondrous ways, so too, perhaps, could he.

After a few turns, she jumps off, hunting for something with a singular focus. When he catches up to her, she’s at the base of the Ferris wheel, looking around for a way to turn the damn thing on.

The operator control station is locked, but somehow she manages to open it. There’s no key in sight, but she places her hand on one of the controls and everything lights up.

“Whoa.” He takes a step back. “How the hell did you do that?”

She raises her eyebrows as if to ask him why he still doesn’t believe who she is.

The Ferris wheel starts up slow, the hum of the machinery breaking the quietness of the night. She’s left the lights off the ride so that no one’s the wiser to them being there.

“How about the carriage awaits, Monsieur,” she makes a small bow and takes her top hat off with a flourish, as she opens the door to the gondola.

“Why, thank you Mademoiselle,” he takes her hand, leading her in first and closes the door behind them.

“This is fun,” she says. “This whole day was fun.”

She turns to him. “You know, I can’t remember when in the last millennia that I’ve had such a great time. Thank you for making it so special. You’ve been the best tour guide ever.”

“Hey,” he squeezes her hand. “You’re the one who made it momentous, Tessa. Truly.”

She smiles and they look out onto the twinkling views of the entire city, fingers entwined. There’s the Grande Roue in Old Montreal, but this little Ferris wheel feels so much more personal.

The panorama is breathtaking, in fact. They might have spent minutes watching the horizon, or it could have been hours.

It feels transcendent.

The longer they sit there the faster it feels like time is circling back to when she first met him yesterday. The light in the sky is changing and she can feel the energy around them shimmer and transfigure too.

“Scott…we’re friends, right?” For the first time since he’s met her she sounds uncertain.

It’s strange to think of Death as a friend, but it’s almost comforting. “Yes, I’d like to think so.”

“So you’ll do me a favour if I ask you?”

“Sure. Why not?” He doesn’t even hesitate. She’s already done so much for him.

She stays quiet for a while. He waits.

And then, “Will you kiss me?”
He’s a little surprised, but then not. Despite the duality of her wise naïveté and sunny stoicism, he’s sure that Death must get lonely sometimes.

He leans towards her and takes off her top hat, laying it gently on the seat beside them. He curls his fingers lightly in her dark hair, cradling her head with both of his hands.

When he kisses her it’s a gentle sweep across her lips. Delicate, dulcet, and above all, life-affirming. It’s the perfect end to her once-in-a-century mortal iteration.

“She’s a lucky lady,” she murmurs after.

“Hmmm?” he didn’t hear her.

You’ll find out soon enough, she thinks.

“Scott?”

“Yeah?” he’s leaning his forehead against hers, his eyes closed, his breathing calm. He’s never felt peace like this before. Except when he watched his Tessa dance earlier.

“You get what everyone gets. A lifetime. So live it well.”

There’s a flurried sound of feathers and in that moment, she’s gone.

He blinks a few times to make sure he isn’t seeing things. It wasn’t a dream, her top hat is resting right next to him.

He feels a profound and chasmic sense of loss, but he also feels the lightness of rebirth. He understands now that there are no guarantees in this brief life. He only gets so many years on this rock, and he’ll be damned if he doesn’t make the most of it.

He also knows he’ll see her again one day.

When the Ferris wheel stops, he gets off and retraces their steps along the river in the slow warmth of dawn and swirling mist. His mind is a jumble of thoughts, so he puts on his earphones.

Feet don’t fail me now, take me to your finish line, oh my heart it breaks every step that I take, but I’m hoping that the gates, they’ll tell me that you’re mine, walking through the city streets, is it by mistake or design? I feel so alone on a Friday night, can you make it feel like home if I tell you you’re mine?

He’s so engrossed in the melancholy of the music and replaying the last 24 hours that he almost doesn’t notice a lone figure up ahead.

She’s dressed in a tulle skirt, and wrapped up tight in a leather jacket, looking out towards the river. She has been walking all night, reading and re-reading a small golden letterpress card filled with a sloppy scrawl of words.

Brava, my beautiful T. You did it kiddo!

In her arms is a large bouquet of peonies, their ruffled petals bleeding pink like blood. Like love.

He draws a sharp breath in. His lips curl into an ebullient smile, as he throws a salute into the wind and grips the rim of the top hat with his fingers.

He takes a step closer. It’s the first step of the rest of his life.
Chapter End Notes

Additional spoilery tags: Brief mentions of cancer, hospital, brain tumour, implied attempted suicide, addiction, fatal accident but only to minor characters

Fun facts: The ballet pieces I included in the fic are real and can be viewed on YouTube. The song Scott walks to at the end is Lana Del Ray’s Born to Die. I was inspired by a film called Collateral Beauty and especially Neil Gaiman’s Death character from his Sandman graphic novel series so I cannot claim originality but if you ever get the chance to read it, check out Death: The High Cost of Living.

This is dedicated to RookandPawn for her friendship and brilliant plotting mind.

If you want to discuss life, the afterlife, debate existentialism, the meaning of death, the lack of smut in this fic, a certain someone’s body parts, or just to let me know what your favourite segments are, you know I live for comments. Yelling at me on Twitter at @lapetitemort20 is also very much encouraged.
Chapter Summary

The year is 1943 and Tessa Virtue is tired of life. Tired of war, tired of grief, and tired of endless worry. Her only escape is the local movie theatre, whose films provide her with the opportunity to forget the real world and enter ones full of fantasy and romance. But escaping goes two ways, and on Halloween the line between reality and fiction begins to blur...

Chapter Notes

Rating: G for General
Tags: 1940s, World War II AU, Romance
Word Count: 18k

Inspired by the movie The Purple Rose of Cairo. Story title from the song "I'll Be Seeing You" by Billie Holiday.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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“Are they taking care of you the way I told them to?” The butler asks the beautiful woman staring listlessly out of the window, gently placing a caring hand on her shoulder. The concern evident on his weathered face.

“Yes, thank you,” The young woman replies softly, turning away from him, “I’m sorry I’m not my old self. I haven’t been feeling well, you see.”

“I know, Miss Alice, I know. I was so hoping to see some color in your cheeks by now. I do wish you could forget what happened.”

“I will never be able to forget what happened,” Alice replies forlornly, “The wound is too fresh on my heart. Leave me, Maurice. Let me be alone.”

“Very well.” The butler leaves with another sympathetic pat on her shoulder, and Alice throws herself onto the settee in a heap, sobbing as she mourns her love – lost forevermore. The tears fall freely down her glistening cheeks and she looks towards the window with sad, grief-stricken eyes.

“I will never love again!”

The door bursts open as our hero, the young dashing Mountie, strides purposefully across the
room and sweeps Alice into his arms.

“James!” She cries, throwing her arms around him as she makes her joyful outburst. “Oh, James, I thought I’d never see you again!”

“Oh, Alice!” He holds her close, smiling when she lays her head on his shoulder, his own eyes wet with unshed tears. “I couldn’t leave you. You belong to me, and I belong to you.”

She pulls away, smiling so brightly it almost hurts, and James holds her face and gently caresses her tears away with his thumbs. “You mean that, James?”

“I do.” He smiles tenderly. “I love you.”

“I love you, too!”

The lovers, reunited at last against all the odds, share a passionate kiss as the music swells and the curtain falls and the screen fades to black.

The lights of the theatre flicker as they turn back on, casting a warm glow on the various shades of red and gold that adorn the walls, seats, and carpet, while patrons rise from their seats. All of them chatting about the movie and laughing about a few of the comedic scenes as they exit - leaving popcorn scattered in their wake to be picked up by anxiously waiting ushers before the next showing starts.

Tessa is in no hurry to leave though. She discreetly dabs the corners of her eyes with her handkerchief and picks at the kernels stuck to the bottom of the red and white striped paper popcorn bag. Dreading the moment one of the ushers reminds her that she has to leave unless she wants to pay for another showing – which she can’t possibly do, as much as she might want to. If her mother found out she spent another thirty cents seeing the same picture twice in one afternoon she’d really snap her cap. She’ll be in enough trouble as it is for getting home so late from the factory.

The problem is she just can’t seem to resist the pull of the movie theatre every weekend. With its opulent interior that harkens back to a happier time, smiling ticket sellers and ushers, delicious, warm, salty popcorn, and, most appealingly, its utter lack of anything that reminds her there’s a war going on overseas. Once the lights are dimmed and the projector turns on, casting its black and white (or, if she’s lucky, bright, vivid, new color – *The Wizard of Oz* had been a delight) film against the screen, she no longer exists as Tessa Virtue. From that moment forward she is a character in a brand new world, experiencing the kind of love and adventure that she can only dream of during her long days manufacturing airplane parts and completing nose assemblies for the new Mosquito fighter-bomber at the Sunshine Company.

(A place that most certainly does not live up to its name.)

With a deep sigh, she brushes off her plain brown wool skirt – bemoaning the frayed edges that are starting to be too noticeable to hide, even with more mending. *Use it up – wear it out – make it do!* A necessary wartime motto, but not one that makes life very fun or lends to feeling pretty very often. It’s been ages since she had a new dress. The last piece of clothing she bought was new coveralls for work after her last pair got ruined, not exactly a twenty-one year old girl’s dream purchase.

Stepping out onto London, Ontario’s busy downtown street, Tessa takes care to avoid the puddles
that still dot the sidewalk after that afternoon’s rain shower and heads in the direction of the bus stop that will take her home. Posters for war bonds coat almost every available vertical surface along the way, intermingled with reminders to ration supplies and calls to volunteer on the home front, as well as a poster or two for local Halloween dances coming up soon - the only bright spot in her grey, dreary life that matches the grey, dreary October sky.

“Extra! Extra!” A scruffy-looking paperboy on the street corner shouts, holding up the paper with the headline bolded in big black letters – standing un-phased and determined as cars speed past him, “Allies drive for Rome as Naples falls! Nazis flee northward!”

Tessa digs a nickel out of her coin purse and hands it over, practically snatching the paper out of the boy’s hands and frantically scanning the front page. Trying to absorb as much information as she can in the shortest amount of time possible – looking for specific names and titles.

There are no outright mentions of the 11th Armoured Regiment from Ontario in the article, but that doesn’t set her mind at ease. She knows enough after four years of war not to expect that no news means good news. Especially since both of her brothers wrote at the beginning of the summer that their regiment would be part of the invasion of Sicily with the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade. Both she and her parents had hardly eaten a bite for weeks until that first letter came on August twentieth letting them know that both Casey and Kevin were still alive and uninjured.

The months since then have been pure torture waiting for every letter and news update, and Tessa thanks God every night that most of the Italians have proven to be eager to surrender to the invading allies. Her prayers have been consumed by pleas for her brothers’ safety ever since they enlisted, but even more so since the start of the invasion.

Bypassing the grand steps leading up to the front of her family’s large home, Tessa makes her way around to the side of the house and enters through the kitchens instead. It’s homier in here - comforting - their cook Susan working away at whatever Mother’s ordered for dinner, and it makes her feel a little less lonely than the rest of the big house does.

With her mother busy serving as the chairwoman of the London chapter of the Red Cross Society, her father working long hours at his legal practice downtown, Kevin and Casey off in Italy, and Jordan overseas working as a Red Cross nurse, the Virtue home – once warm and inviting and full of laughter and love – now feels more like a mausoleum. And Tessa its sole caretaker.

“Good evening, Miss Tessa,” Susan pauses kneading a large ball of dough to give her a kiss on the cheek, and Tessa returns it with an affectionate smile, “You’re home late. Did Mr. McKay keep you girls working late on another shipment again? Somebody ought to tell that man that it isn’t proper to keep young ladies out past suppertime. You have a reputation to think of.”

“No, Susan,” Tessa laughs, poking her head inside the oven to get a smell of the “Canada War Cake” baking inside. It’s nothing much – an eggless, milkless, butterless, and sugar-stretching dessert invented by women desperate for something sweet to eat during rationing - but the cinnamon smells absolutely divine and Tessa loves the little raisins that help add bites of flavor to an otherwise plain cake. “I stopped at the theatre on my way home.”

“No, Susan,” Tessa laughs, poking her head inside the oven to get a smell of the “Canada War Cake” baking inside. It’s nothing much – an eggless, milkless, butterless, and sugar-stretching dessert invented by women desperate for something sweet to eat during rationing - but the cinnamon smells absolutely divine and Tessa loves the little raisins that help add bites of flavor to an otherwise plain cake. “I stopped at the theatre on my way home.”

“Again?” Susan arches an eyebrow and tugs the knot holding the scarf wrapped around her head a little tighter so that it won’t come loose during the vicious beating she’s about to inflict upon the dough. It’s obvious exactly what she thinks about Tessa’s favorite pastime, but Tessa can’t bring herself to feel guilty about it.

“I can’t help it. They’re showing a new movie right now: Summer’s Edge. It’s about a Mountie who falls in love with a singer. Starring this young, handsome newcomer named Scott Moir in his
breakout performance as a sergeant in the Northwest Mounted Police named James Clark. Isn’t that divine?” She sighs dreamily, thinking of Scott Moir’s strong jaw and dark hair and eyes that are capable of conveying so much emotion in a single scene.

Susan scoffs and tosses a handful of flour onto the counter to keep the dough from sticking. “I prefer that new Halloween one. Franken-something. A little bit of horror to get the blood flowing! There’s nothing like it.”

“Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman,” Tessa reminds her, stealing a few of the leftover cake raisins from the bowl near the sink and popping them into her mouth, “I never should have taken you to see that. It was horrible and I’m still having nightmares!”

“Those romances you like are alright, I suppose,” She concedes, tearing the dough into halves to make two loaves, one of which Tessa will probably be asked to deliver to the convalescent hospital in the morning. A prospect she doesn’t particularly look forward to. (Helping the soldiers is nice, but the sight of some of them with missing limbs or horrible scars always makes her want to cry and give them a hug – not the most appropriate behavior for a young lady). “But they’re nothing like real life.”

“Oh, and Frankenstein is?”

“No,” Susan laughs, “But at least it isn’t trying to be. There’s danger in those over-the-top romantic stories, believe me. They fill the heads of young girls with all sorts of highfalutin ideas about love and men and trick them into thinking that’s what marriage will be like instead of what it actually is.”

“And what’s that?”

“Hard work!” Susan folds the dough into the bread tins and points towards the oven, “Can you take the cake out please? It should be finished and I want to get these loaves in right away.”

Tessa retrieves the hot pads from the drawer and carefully removes the cake, setting it on the nearby rack to cool. “Is it so wrong to want to escape into a world where everything is wonderful and all of life’s problems get resolved in just a couple of hours?”

She’s not naïve, despite what some people may think, and she knows from observing her parents over the last few years just how difficult marriage can be. But that’s all the more reason to enjoy romance where she can find it. At least on film she knows she’s guaranteed a happy ending.

“No, dear,” Susan says, softening her voice from what it was before and smiling with kind understanding, “With the way the world is right now – this dreadful war that won’t seem to end, your brothers gone, hardly any young men around to befriend or flirt with – I don’t blame you for liking those movies best. Just don’t forget that they aren’t real.”

“Don’t be silly, Susan,” Tessa giggles to hide her frown, impulsively leaning up on her tiptoes and planting a peck on the top of older woman’s head, “I know they’re not real.”

They’re not real, but that doesn’t keep them from being any less important to her. All her life Tessa has been fascinated by the silver screen. She can still remember her father taking her to see The Jazz Singer when she was five years old. How the magnificent surprise of synchronized singing and talking – the first ever of its kind – had been such a marvelous wonder to her young mind, cementing her love of movies on the spot. And when Dorothy Gale stepped out into the rainbow world of Munchkinland her obsession had been renewed all over again.
Dorothy Gale never had to work in a factory that makes bombs to drop on her brothers’ enemies.

How does one compare the world of fiction to the world of reality when one is so obviously more preferable?

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“Is that a new shade of lipstick, Kathy?” Mrs. Griffith hardly glances up from her sandwich as she asks her question, her welding mask raised and propped up on her forehead so that it’s out of the way while she eats. She’s an expert welder, the best on the premises, and Tessa admires the older woman’s grit and fortitude, as well as her ability to remember small details about all of the girls who work in the same building she does.

“It is,” Kathy replies, pursing her lips to show off their vibrant red shade to all the girls seated around the large table, “I bought it brand new down at Eaton’s on Tuesday. Isn’t it scrumptious?”

“Howver did you afford it?” Sara gazes longingly at it, unconsciously grazing her own bare lips with her fingers and smearing a bit of grease on her cheek. Her lips, like most of the other girl’s, are bare and chapped, and Tessa feels a rush of solidarity with her in wishing for the ability to indulge in simple pleasures like lipstick again.

It’s not that her family can’t still afford these things. Thankfully, the Virtues are still pretty well-off thanks to her father’s profession and his poor eyesight keeping him away from the war, but her mother has taken rationing to heart and every spare penny they have either gets sent overseas to her siblings, donated to the Red Cross, or spent on behalf of some other war effort endeavor. And these aren’t things Tessa can really begrudge – they matter much more than her superficial desire for red lips or new clothes.

Kathy smirks and rubs her lips together, clearly relishing the feeling, “I’ve been saving bit by bit. Heaven knows I needed something new for the Halloween dance next week. Anything to spruce up that old blue linen dress of mine. There’s bound to be cute soldiers there and I want to stand out.”

“What I wouldn’t give for a brand new dress.” Winnie cuts up apple slices to share with all the girls, the only fruit any of them eats with any regularity now, and looks down at the crimson skin before nodding to herself. “A red one. I haven’t had something red since before the war and it’s the best color on me.”

“Nylon stockings,” Ann sighs dreamily, not needing more than the two words to make her point, and all of the girls sigh along with her. It’s tiresome having to always meticulously paint the liquid stockings on and then draw the lines on the back of your legs in lieu of the real thing. Even with the device made from a screwdriver handle and bicycle leg clip that held the eyebrow pencil straight for you, it was still difficult. Tessa had given up trying after the first year, much to her mother’s disapproval.

“These things are only temporary,” Mrs. Griffith chastises, her tone not unkind, “And we must all be willing to make sacrifices. Think of the sacrifices our boys are making right now across the Atlantic.”

That brings them all up short, and they stop complaining.

Tessa finishes chewing her apple slice and swallows politely before asking, “Have you heard from
your sons lately, Mrs. Griffith? How are they?”

“Tim and Harry are keeping the Germans busy in Italy, and Frank and Peter are still in England, but they’ve mentioned rumors about being shipped off to France someday soon.” She crosses herself and a few of the girls at the table do the same, holding onto their crosses and murmuring prayers for their own loved ones.

“You’ve managed to convince Samuel not to join them, then?”

“Thank heavens, yes. He’s only sixteen, bless him, so the army won’t take him anyway. I don’t know what I’ll do if this war drags on until he’s a legal adult. I couldn’t bear to have all my boys gone from me.”

Tessa hums in sympathy, sharing an understanding smile with her. That’s the same reason she’s still at home and not off in Europe with Jordan in the Red Cross. She and her sister had wanted to volunteer together, but her mother Kate had been adamant – she would not be parted from all four of her children unless God himself commanded it, but as it was only the Prime Minister asking and he had no children of his own, well, he could just be quiet.

"Have you heard from Casey recently?’’ Megan bumps her elbow, handing over a carrot stick fresh from her garden, her promise ring give to her by Tessa’s eldest brother still as shiny as it was the day he gave it to her – right before he volunteered. “The last letter I received was on the third.”

“Mother had one from Kevin that mentioned him on the twelfth. He said they were both still well and not to worry, although the Germans are beginning to set up a series of defensive lines across Italy that has everyone concerned and anxious – though Kevin would never admit that. He doesn’t like Mother or Father to worry.” She could tell from the way he worded his letter though, how he was really feeling. Despite the eight years between them, Tessa’s always been close with her brother Kevin, and she can read between the lines to find what he’s really trying to say.

He’s scared, and that has her scared, too.

"Casey mentioned the British troops landing at Taranto last month and at first I read it as Toronto and was so confused,” Megan laughs and Tessa joins in, grateful for any source of humor. She can easily imagine the shock that must have accompanied such a horrible misunderstanding. “The ink must have smudged because when I asked him to clarify where exactly the British were I could hear the laughter in his response.”

“Kevin did mention something else in his private letter to me, but you must swear to keep it a secret.” Tessa leans in, quirking the corner of her lip up in a smile and looking around the room as if one of her parents might suddenly appear.

“What is it?” Megan whispers back, leaning in close as well.

“He says he’s met someone in Italy. A French nurse named Nicole.”

“And it’s a secret?”

Tessa shakes her head. “Father wouldn’t approve. He’s never forgiven the French for signing the armistice in 1940.” An unfair grudge, in her opinion, given the extreme pressure the French were under, but her father only sees the world in black and white. Once his decision is made, it’s final.

“Do you think Kevin is serious about this woman?” Megan hands her another carrot stick and she gratefully accepts it, biting off half and chewing it up before continuing to speak.
"As much as Kevin can be. You know how he is – always so sarcastic."

"Yes," Megan chuckles, "I don’t think I’ve ever heard him saying anything that wasn’t at least partially in jest." She packs up her lunch pail and Tessa does the same, the two of them rising and preparing to return to work. Another four hours of grueling labor ahead of them that will undoubtedly leave them too exhausted to talk afterwards.

"The fact that he’s mentioned her at all must mean something. I suppose we’ll have to wait and see what happens."

"It’s very romantic. A soldier and a war nurse," Megan sighs, "Do you suppose Casey might –?"

"No," Tessa cuts her off, placing her hand reassuringly on Megan’s forearm and giving it a little squeeze, “Casey adores you and always has. He’d never let his head be turned by a nurse or anyone else.”

"Thank you, Tessa. I just worry, sometimes… it’s been so long since we’ve seen each other. What if he’s forgotten my face? Not that there’s much to enjoy about it anymore,” She chuckles pitifully and gestures vaguely towards her general appearance, grease-stained clothes and frizzy hair, and Tessa’s heart goes out to her friend who is really more like a sister, even if no vows have been spoken yet.

"I’ll tell you what, after our shift today why don’t we go get your picture taken and send it to him. I bet he’d love to have it.”

"In my coveralls with my hair tied up?” Megan makes a horrified, twisted expression while huffing out a laugh. “Heavens, no!”

"We’ll fix you up nice before we go,” Tessa insists, still clinging to her arm, “Come on, it will be fun!” The foreman, Mr. McKay, is eyeing both of them – scowling and looking impatiently up at the clock, and she knows she only has a minute left to convince her that this is a good idea. Which it is – they could both use an afternoon of normal, girlish activities.

"Well,” Megan hesitates, chewing the inside of her cheek as she ponders the idea, “As long as you promise to get yours taken, too.”

"Who would I send mind to?” Tessa laughs, “My brothers love me, but they hardly want to carry around a picture of their baby sister in their pocket.”

"You never know. You might meet a nice young man on leave one of these days, or at the Halloween dance next week. You’ll want to be prepared.”

Tessa almost snorts at such an absurd idea, but keeps the inelegant sound contained to the back of her throat. “I doubt it. I don’t think I’m destined for romance.”

"Oh tosh!” Megan wags her finger at her and frowns. “You’ve been cheated out of your rightful chance at youthful romance by this awful war, but it can’t last forever and as soon as it’s over you’ll have hundreds of young men lining up to court you.”

"I’d be satisfied with just one,” Tessa sighs, “If he’s the right one.”

"Well you know what they say, that Tessa Virtue – she’s got a lot of moxie.” Megan grins, taking her by the arm and leading them both back to their stations to get started on their afternoon shift. “Guys love that in a woman. You’ll find the one. But in the meantime, why don’t we go see that new picture at the theatre after we have our pictures taken? I know you love going to the movies.”
“I’ve already seen it,” Tessa apologizes, declining to mention that she’s actually seen it six times. Nobody needs to know about her shameful addiction to Summer’s Edge and her borderline indecent obsession with Scott Moir as Mountie James Clark. It wouldn’t be very becoming to admit that she’s already found love and he’s fake.

“Oh drat. The poster for that one looks so good. And I just love that actress Madison Hubbell. She’s so elegant. I wish I had beautiful blonde curls like her.”

“She is good in it,” Tessa begrudgingly admits, trying not to reveal the jealous ache in her chest that blossoms at the thought of the stunning blonde who plays Alice – the love interest and woman who gets to kiss said Scott Moir-slash-James Clark multiple times on screen.

(Some people lead truly blessed lives.)

“I guess I’ll have to go another time. Although I don’t know when. I couldn’t possibly go alone.”

“No,” Tessa quickly says, forcing herself not to get defensive over the going alone comment, spoken as if it’s something embarrassing, “No, I’d love to see it again.”

“You would?”

“Yes. It really was quite good.”

“Perhaps you’ll find even more to like upon second viewing.”

“Yes,” Tessa giggles. Or seventh. “Perhaps I will.”

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Halloween morning dawns chilly and grey. Orange, red, and yellow leaves blowing off the trees and drifting down towards the frosty lawn, hidden by an opaque layer of fog that moves over the ground with eerie intent. Outside a crow caws loudly to another one that answers in the distance, the two of them engaging in a conversation that rouses Tessa from her dreams of handsome young men and magic and fairytale worlds.

Instead of getting dressed, Tessa wraps up in her sister’s pale yellow silk robe, and then, when that’s not warm enough, a blanket on top of it, and sits in front of her bedroom window to watch the sunrise. She’ll have to be ready for church service soon, but there’s still time yet. Time enough to stare out of the window and imagine the year is nineteen thirty-nine, her brothers are visiting from the university in Toronto, Jordan is in her room fussing about some boy, and her parents are downstairs drinking coffee and not worrying about all the work that lies ahead in the new week.

Or perhaps she’s a princess locked in a tower, waiting for her prince to save her. Or a beautiful actress with a movie premiere to attend and a closet full of gorgeous dresses to choose from. Or a singer who captures the heart of a handsome Mountie.

Up in her bedroom away from the rest of the world anything is possible and with today being Halloween, Tessa feels a delicious shiver run up her spine at the thought of something fantastical happening. Something mysterious and new. Maybe today she’ll meet a ghost or a mystical witch at the carnival will read her palm and tell her about her amazing future. Or perhaps she’ll happen upon Dracula in the cemetery and he’ll whisk her away to his castle in Romania.
A sharp knock on the door followed by Susan’s voice informing her that it’s time to come down to breakfast shakes Tessa from her reverie, and she blushes at having been caught thinking such sacrilegious thoughts. Magic doesn’t exist, there is only God and the Bible and heaven and hell (her mother’s words) and the world that they can see and touch in front of them (her father’s). With a mournful little sigh she gets up and puts on her nicest church dress – ivory linen that’s held up well with overuse – and heels. Grabbing her maroon beret, navy blue wool coat, and gloves to put on later when they’re heading out the door.

“You look very lovely this morning, sweetheart.” Her father kisses her on the cheek and Tessa’s nose scrunches up the way it always does when his mustache tickles her skin.

“Thank you.”

“But a little thin,” He adds, looking at her up and down, eyes lingering at her waist where she’d had to take it in another inch, “Eat a hearty breakfast, please. I know there’s a war on, but between your mother’s excellent bookkeeping and Susan’s cooking I think we can afford to plump you up a bit.”

“It’s only from worrying about Casey and Kevin and Jordan, father,” Tessa reassures him, “Now that we know they’re safe at the moment I feel quite comfortable eating as many poached eggs as Susan can provide me with.” Her waistline tends to fluctuate with the newspaper headlines, a fact she’s grown used to, but someday she hopes her appetite won’t be so dependent on news from abroad.

Her father laughs, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose when they threaten to slip down and fall on his upper lip. “I see! Perhaps we should be raising chickens in the backyard then, if you’re planning on eating up all of London’s egg supply.”

“Don’t mention that to Mother,” Tessa teases, “If she hears you and thinks that it will help the war effort she’ll probably do it. Think of her Victory Garden.”

“Quite right,” Her father smirks, his eyes twinkling with mischief like she hasn’t seen in far too long, “Nobody can compare with your mother for economical war efforts.”

“Is that you, Tessa?” Her mother calls out as if summoned by their conversation, and Tessa quickly slips through the door into the dining room to greet her mother – looking regal as ever while drinking her morning cup of tea.

"Good morning!"

“Good morning, dear.” She gracefully butters a piece of toast, somehow managing not to get any on her thumb, unlike Tessa who always makes a mess of it. “Your father and I have some social calls to make this afternoon after church service. Will you be alright here by yourself for a few hours?”

“Mmm,” Tessa nods, biting into her own piece of toast and licking the butter off her fingers when her mother isn’t looking. It’s quite bland without jam (oh how she longs for fresh strawberries again), but she’s gotten used to it by now. “I’ll keep Susan company in the kitchen. Where are you going?”

“The Jones’s, the Andersons, the McKinnons – did you hear the news about their son Jeremy? Just dreadful.”
Tessa’s stomach churns and she sets her half-eaten toast down on the plate, “Has he been killed?”

“No,” Her mother shakes her head and Tessa lets out the breath she was holding, “Thank heavens, but he’s lost an arm, and they think he might permanently be blind. They received a telegram two days ago.”

“That’s dreadful. When will he be home?”

“Just as soon as he’s in well-enough condition to travel. He’ll come to the convalescent home first, and I hope you’ll be there to greet him with me. It will be comforting for him to see – or hear, I suppose - familiar friends.”

“Of course.” Jeremy had been two years above her in school and she didn’t know him well, but he’d always been very friendly and outgoing – and a star athlete. She can’t begin to comprehend how he must be feeling right now.

“Thank you, sweetheart.” Her mother smiles and places a gentle hand over Tessa’s, and she twists hers around so that she can hold onto it – seeking out her mother’s comfort. “You’re such a good girl, Tessa. I don’t know what your father and I would do without you. You mean the world to us, I hope you know that.”

“I do, Mother,” Tessa squeezes her fingers, wishing they had more moments like this, longing for the days when she was a child and her mother had hours of time and attention to devote to her.

"Are you quite certain you’ll be alright this afternoon? We can take you with us, if you prefer.”

Visiting their neighbors and discussing the same topic (the war, what else?) over and over all day? Honestly she would rather try to bring the wilting Victory Garden back to life than sit through that. Besides - a whole afternoon free, to spend however she wants, means that she can slip away into the city without being noticed.

She really shouldn’t, seeing as it’s the Lord’s day and any decent girl would stay home and study her scriptures or practice her needlepoint or complete any of the myriad of chores that always seem to need doing, but… being decent isn’t always fun, and she could easily get to the theatre and back before her parents return home without anyone missing her.

The opportunity is too enticing to pass up, and her decision is made.

The theatre is practically deserted when she arrives, loose papers and leaves blowing past the front entrance, the usual ruckus caused by men and women rushing to and from work completely absent, and the man behind the ticket booth - a kind gentleman and father of three named Mr. Orville - tries not to laugh when he recognizes her. Even as he shakes his head and hands over her ticket with no small amount of barely concealed amusement.

"Maybe it’ll end differently this time,” He winks and Tessa tries not to blush.

“Maybe it will.”

She orders her popcorn, ignoring the pitying look from the young boy serving it, and takes a seat right in the middle of the center row, exactly where she likes it. Taking off her coat and draping it over her lap before settling into the cushion and tossing a piece of popcorn into her mouth.
It’s almost eerie, being in the theatre all alone. What just a few days ago seemed grand and palatial now looks threadbare and faded. Every little sound echoing off the walls. A strange sort of restless energy humming in between the seats. It should be creepy, but for some reason it isn’t. She keeps expecting a few other people to show up, but isn’t sorry when they don’t. She’s never had the theatre all to herself before, and she finds that she quite likes it. Nobody coughing or talking or eating their popcorn with open mouths. Nobody around to make comments or laugh during the romantic scenes. It’s practically heaven on earth.

The lights go dark, the screen lights up, and she sits back and waits with a smile.

The NWMP inspector sits behind a large oak desk in a rather austere office, his secretary scribbling faithfully away at a desk in the corner. There’s a sharp knock on the door and the grim looking man shouts for the person to enter.

“Good day, Sergeant Clark,” The inspector nods before gesturing with his pipe for the soldier to take a seat, “Have a seat.”

“Sir,” The young man salutes dutifully before doing as he’s told, leaning forward in his chair – eager to hear what his commanding officer has to say.

“I’m sending you back up north into the woods, Clark.”

“But I just got down, Sir.”

“Yes, I’m sorry to interfere with your social activities. I’m sure the young ladies will be vastly disappointed,” He arches a stern eyebrow and Sergeant Clark attempts to look bashful, but it comes across as more of a self-satisfied smirk. “Take a look at this.”

The inspector hands him an arrest warrant, and Sergeant Clark’s whole demeanor changes.

“A young man escaped from prison just three days ago. As far as we know he has no relatives. I need you to memorize this information so that you can recite it in your sleep. I don’t want any mistakes, Sergeant, I want this man caught and caught fast. He killed one of our own in his escape.”

“When do I start, Sir?”

“At once!”

“I’ll do my best, Sir!” He stands and shakes his inspectors hand, turning to go, but then stops. His whole body going still as he stares straight forward.

It’s as if he’s looking out at the audience – and right into Tessa’s eyes.

He’s not moving, just watching her with a crease in his brow and a frown on his lips, tapping his fingers against his thighs while appearing to have some sort of internal debate. Behind him his commanding officer watches anxiously, glancing towards the doorway, then at the audience, then back at Sergeant Clark – holding his position, but looking increasingly uncomfortable as he does so.

This isn’t right. She’s seen this movie over a dozen times now and Sergeant Clark always marches straight out of the Inspector’s office with purpose before the scene cuts to him in the barracks with the other Mounties, gearing up to leave. There’s never been a break in the action before while he
appeared to think over his next move.

“Are you back here again?” Sergeant Clark asks, still staring straight at the camera, and Tessa freezes in her seat, her bag of popcorn crumpling in her tight fist.

That isn’t the dialogue. He’s supposed to be in the barracks, then it cuts to Alice journeying north through the woods, then they meet in a small, ramshackle town in remote Quebec. She knows every second of this movie like the back of her hand, every line of dialogue like it’s words she’s spoken aloud herself. Is it possible that part of the film reel had been missing and was only recently replaced by the studio – adding an extra scene? And if so, why on earth did they add it now when it seems to have been cut for a very good reason. It’s… unnerving having him stare at her – no – at the audience like he is.

“You,” He says again, pointing at the camera this time and tapping on the lens so that there can be no mistake about who he’s addressing, making the whole image shake and Tessa jump in her seat, “The pretty dark-haired woman sitting there in middle of the sixth row. This must be at least your tenth time here.”

Tessa gapes at him, her mouth falling open in stunned silence. “Are you –” She gulps, trying to remember how to properly form words as she sinks down further into her chair and pinches her arm to make sure that she hasn’t fallen asleep. This wouldn’t be the first time she dreamt about James Clark, but it would be the first where he talked to her in the dream through the movie screen. When the pinching fails to rouse her, leaving her with a sizeable bruise instead, she finally asks, “Are you talking to me?”

“Of course,” He laughs, his whole face scrunching up as he does in a way she finds kind of adorable – or would, if she weren’t currently having panic attack, “Who else? You’re all alone out there. But I’d recognize you even in a crowd of people. You’ve been here every week, sometimes more than once. My god you must really love this picture.”

This isn’t happening.

She must have fallen asleep during the movie and now her mind is playing tricks on her and the pinching trick isn’t working because… because she’s only dreaming that she’s pinching herself. That’s it! After all, movie characters don’t just start talking to their audience! It’s impossible! This has to be the result of an overworked mind and too much daydreaming, that’s all. Either that or she’s completely lost her mind and needs to be sent away to an institution – an alternative too terrible to bear.

Tessa sits up and shakes her head vigorously from side to side, slamming her eyes shut tight and counting to ten before standing up, putting on her coat, and turning to go without looking back at the screen again. “I must be more tired than I thought,” She mutters to herself, dismissing Sergeant Clark’s words as a figment of her imagination.

Susan was right. Romance movies are dangerous. It’s high time she went home.

“Don’t go!” He calls out to her, and Tessa squeaks in surprise and starts walking faster. “No, wait! Don’t go, please!”

She doesn’t know why, but something about the pleading in his voice makes her stop mid-step in the middle of the aisle and look back at him. He’s still watching her, and the second her eyes meet his a friendly smile graces his cheeks, one that, god help her, she starts to return before she realizes what she’s doing and stops herself.
Visibly relieved that she’s no longer running away, James takes his hat off and runs his fingers through his dark hair, ruining the neatly combed part and making it fluff up in every direction. “Is this really your favorite film? It must be for you to come so often.”

“I –” Is she really doing this? Is she really going to have a conversation with a movie character? She must be insane. If this isn’t a dream, then she’s officially lost her mind and begun hallucinating, because things like this don’t just happen.

“For God’s sake, James!” The Inspector in the background interrupts, grabbing the younger man gruffly by the shoulder and jerking him backwards while glaring daggers at Tessa, “What do you think you’re doing!? Stick to the script!”

“No, I want to speak to her.” James shrugs off the Inspector’s hand and walks towards the camera, and it takes every bit of Tessa’s self-control not to run in the opposite direction as he gets closer and closer and closer. Until only his face is visible.

“What are you –?”

“James, get back here!”

Suddenly the screen bends and warps, the figures and furniture distorting into oblong shapes that seem to bubble and stretch, and then his body emerges from the movie screen. Stepping out onto the stage as the picture behind him snaps back into place and bursting into color – his uniform coat bleeding red, his breeches dying jet black, his skin tanned and alive, and his eyes the warmest shade of light brown Tessa’s ever seen. Before she can react he’s hopping down off the stage and walking up the aisle right towards her smiling from ear to ear.

"James!” The Inspector shouts, waving his pipe around with one hand and banging his desk violently with the other and looking positively irate, yet still black and white and safely staying on the movie screen where he belongs. “Get back here! We have to finish the story!”

“I want a new story,” James shouts over his shoulder, his eyes never leaving Tessa.

“But… but… but… but you’re supposed to be in the movie!” She stammers, too shocked to stop him from taking her hand and kissing the back of it. “You have to catch the criminal and bring him to justice and win the heart of Alice!”

“Not anymore!” He grins gleefully, looking back down at her hand and stroking it with his thumb like it’s the most marvelous thing he’s ever seen before tugging on it until she’s following him towards the exit. “I’m free!”

“How is this possible?” Tessa lets him lead her past the concession stand, where he pauses to marvel at the popcorn for a moment – breathing in great heaping breaths of air as he smells it and tapping the glass to watch the yellow light flicker before dragging her past Mr. Orville (who looks positively flabbergasted to see her leaving the theatre accompanied by a stranger – a mirror image of what she’s sure her own face must be. It’s a relief to know that he can see him too, though) and out onto the street.

“Holy hell,” He whistles low and long at the sight before him, and Tessa’s too distracted by the look of absolute wonder on his face to reprimand him for cursing. She’s used to that kind of language at the convalescent home, but not every day in public. “I’ve never seen a world like this.”

The sun has broken out through the clouds, casting a warm glow over the buildings and sidewalks and shading everything that should be brown or grey with an yellow tint, and James whips his head
from sight to sight so fast she finds it hard to keep up. “It’s so… colorful. What do you call this?”

He sticks his arm out in front of her and Tessa drops her gaze to his crimson jacket. “Red?”

“Red,” He repeats, releasing her hand so that he can stroke the fabric back and forth, “And this?”
He touches the hat on top of her head. “This is also red?”

“Maroon. It’s in the same color family.”

“There are color families? How many colors does your world have?”

“I don’t know.” She’s never thought about it before. Never stopped to consider that any other kind
of world might exist, or what the characters on the silver screen might be seeing in their silver
stories. “I suppose there must be an infinite amount of combinations. The primary colors are
yellow, red, and blue, and using those three you can make pretty much anything you want.”

“What do you call this?” His fingers graze her cheekbone, just underneath her eyes, and she feels
her face heat up under his steady, focused gaze. “I’ve never seen eyes this color before.”

“Green,” She mumbles, wondering if she should be pushing his hand away. If letting him touch her
face on the street like this is making her a loose woman. What would her mother say? Jordan was
always so much better at this than she was. “Just plain green.”

“Gorgeous green.” He corrects her, brushing her curls behind her ear and running his fingers
through her hair. “And what about this? It’s dark, but not any shade of black or grey that I know.”

Tessa wraps her hand around a chunk of her hair, holding onto it like it’s something new now that
he’s looking at it. “It’s brown. Like yours.”

“My hair is brown?” He reaches up and runs his hand through his messy hair, ruffling it up until
it’s positively wild. “Brown.”

“Yes. And your eyes are too, only a much lighter shade. They’re quite lovely.” She hadn’t meant to
say that last part and she can feel herself going red all over at her own boldness. The audacity of
complimenting a man she’s just met! But James smiles and touches his own cheekbones like he’d
done to hers.

“Wow.”

A car whizzes past them, honking its horn loudly as it speeds through the intersection to give any
other oncoming cars plenty of warning, and James jumps in front of her, gripping both of her
shoulders and curling his body around hers for protection while staring at the vehicle like it’s a
dragon in disguise. “What on earth is that? How did it make such an awful noise?”

“That’s called an automobile.” Tessa withdraws her hands from his waist like she’s been burned
and stuffs them safely into her coat pockets where they can’t go rogue again. “It’s like a wagon,
but it runs on an engine and gasoline, and you can honk the horn to tell people or other drivers to
move out of the way.”

“An automobile,” He murmurs, absentmindedly rubbing her upper arms while trying the word out
for himself, “What date is it in your world?”

“Today is October thirty-first, nineteen forty-three.” It’s so strange to be talking to him like this,
describing colors and cars when only minutes ago he was being projected onto a screen. She pokes
the brass buttons on his jacket, tapping each one to feel their cool surface and solid weight against
her finger, asking herself again and again if this is all a dream. “About fifty years after your movie takes place, give or take. A lot has changed since then.”

Two world wars, the invention of the light bulb, automobiles, moving pictures, the phonograph, the radio, tanks, aeroplanes, bombs – practically everything is different now from how it was in his time. It must be jarring, to step out of a movie screen and into a world full of color that’s so entirely different from his own.

He smiles and takes her hand, pulling it away from his chest and kissing the back of it again – stroking it with his thumb like he did earlier before rubbing the hem of her blue coat sleeve like it’s the most fascinating color he’s ever seen. “What’s this one?”

“Dark blue.”

“And what’s your name? I should have asked you that first thing, but I was so excited to be free and I just had to see what the world was like outside of that blasted theatre. It was very rude of me not to ask, I’m sorry.”

“That’s quite alright. It’s Tessa,” She answers, still stunned by his existence and knocked off-balance by the way he’s stroking her wrist, and only remembering that propriety demands he call her by her surname after already giving him her first, “Miss Virtue, that is.”

“Tessa Virtue,” He nods as if he’s committing her name to memory, and she thinks those two simple words have never sounded better than they do in that moment, rolling off his tongue like a caress. “And just where are we, Miss Tessa Virtue?”

“We’re in London, Ontario.”

“And what does one do in London, Ontario in nineteen forty-three?”

“Ration,” She quips, the joke flying out of her mouth without permission, and to her surprise James laughs. His grip around her hand tightening as his face scrunches up with the action like it did earlier on screen, and Tessa feels her insides clench with it – butterflies bursting free inside her stomach in a flutter and making her feel like she either wants to run ten miles or vomit, she’s not sure which. She’s never spent so much time with a young man before in her life, and certainly not alone, unchaperoned. It’s got her all off-kilter.

“Ration? Are you in the army, soldier?” He does a mock salute, clicking his heels together, and Tessa flushes bright pink. A color he must like, judging by the way he strokes her cheeks again right where she knows its burning brightest.

“Pink,” She tells him, answering his unspoken question, “And no, but I do my part. My brothers are in the army. Canada’s in the middle of a war.”

”The North-West Rebellion,” He nods seriously, his mouth taking on a grim line as he loses himself in the memory that was written for him, “I saw some action in that.”

“No, no,” She laughs awkwardly, “That was sixty years ago. This is the Second World War.”

His eyebrows shoot towards his hairline. “The Second World War? Good gracious, you can’t be serious. The whole world is involved in a single war?”

“Yes, for the last four years, actually. Although the Americans only joined in forty-one after they were bombed so for some the war has been shorter. It’s been awful for everyone.”
“I am so sorry, Tessa,” He says earnestly, and she believes he really means it, “No wonder you come see my picture so often. It must be a nice escape.”

“It is.”

Nobody has ever said that to her before. It’s always been something along the lines of ‘keep pressing forward,’ ‘think about our boys abroad,’ ‘do your part.’ No one has ever simply acknowledged the pain she’s feeling. He holds his arms out for a hug and that’s definitely inappropriate, but, she rationalizes, they are on a public street where nothing too nefarious could happen. And all he wants is to offer her some comfort, so surely it couldn’t be too damaging to her reputation for her to accept.

She steps into his embrace and lets him hold her, and for the first time in four years she feels safe again. Safe and secure and protected. It’s the nicest she’s felt in a long, long time.

“What do you say we escape together?” He gives her a gentle squeeze before releasing her, ending the hug far earlier than she would have preferred (a thought that’s both mortifying and exhilarating all at once). “Leave the war behind.”

“What?” She half-laughs, half-gapes at him. Surely his magic doesn’t extend to escaping reality as well as it does to escaping moving pictures.

“You and me.” He holds his hand out and wiggles his fingers enticingly, and Tessa watches herself take it without any hesitation. “Let’s have a day of adventure. We won’t think about wars or movies or the worlds that either of us live in, we’ll just think about each other and having loads of fun.”

“I can’t do that.” Can she? No, certainly not. She mustn’t. She has obligations and duties and people expecting her and…

James pulls on her arm until he can tuck it into the crook of his own and smile down at her by his side. “Why not? Don’t you want to? Imagine what we could do, all afternoon just you and me gallivanting about town and having a grand old time. You can show me what makes London, Ontario so special.”

“London isn’t special.” It’s drab and sad and lonely, but James shakes his head and frowns – not accepting that answer. Not that she can blame him, he’s never seen it before so he can’t possibly know how dull wartime makes everything.

“You’re here, aren’t you? That already makes it special. There must be something here that brings you happiness – show it to me.”

She fixes him with a look, trying not to smile, “Are you always this impulsive?”

“Yes,” He grins, “It’s written into my character, so I have to be.”

That comment is a stark reminder about where exactly he’d just come from, and she plants her feet before he can lead her down the sidewalk. “I don’t even understand how this is happening right now. How are you here? How can I talk to you and touch you and –”

He steps in front of her and takes both of her hands, tugging until she’s laughing and following him down the sidewalk while he walks backwards, pulling her along. “You said it yourself. It’s All Hallows Eve, isn’t it? I may be from a time long before this one, but even we know that magic happens on that day.”
“But magic isn’t real.” Magic doesn’t exist, there is only God and the Bible and heaven and hell the world that they can see and touch in front of them – her parents have drilled that into her, making it hard to accept anything else.

“Says who?” James challenges, a glint in his eye that makes her think he’d be tough to go up against in a competition. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Because of magic?”

“I don’t know,” He shrugs and continues pulling her down the street, “And I don’t really care. All I care about is getting to spend time with you in this new, exciting place.”

“I suppose,” She hesitates, warring with herself over what the right decision in such extraordinary circumstances could be. Her parents won’t be home until late and Susan thinks she’s visiting Megan, so she won’t be expecting her, and she can’t deny that the prospect of getting to spend the afternoon with the man who’s been the star of all her dreams and fantasies lately is incredibly enticing. Perhaps just a few hours wouldn’t do any harm. And these are really quite extraordinary circumstances, aren’t they? “I suppose we could go to the carnival, if you’d like.”

“The carnival!” He grins, “Absolutely! Let’s go to the carnival! What is that?”

She laughs and slips her arm into the crook of his again so that she can lead him to the bus stop. “You’ve never been to a carnival?”

“I am only as the script writers made me.” He waves his arms as if to say this is it, and she takes pity on him by giving him a bright smile and taking his hand in hers.

(He seems to like the feeling and, well, it can hardly be improper in a public place.)

“Oh! We should definitely go then. Carnivals are like traveling amusement shows with games and activities and delicious food. There’s one that visits London every year at this time and it’s a lot of fun. I think you’ll love it.”

“Sounds perfect,” He grins again, and she can see herself becoming addicted to being the one who put it there, “Lead the way.”

If James thought the street outside the theatre was full of new and exciting sights and sounds, it’s nothing compared to the carnival. There are so many more colors here – bright oranges and yellows and reds and blues and greens. Lights that spin and flash. Exotic animals that roar and snarl in their cages. And children already dressed up in their costumes - witches, ghosts, mummies, and pirates - running around laughing and squealing in delight and eating gobs of carnival food that will probably make them sick later.

(He knows that one from experience.)

The sights and smells are nostalgically familiar for Tessa, reminiscent of her childhood and happy times spent with her sister and brothers running wild as they explored, but for Scott it’s all new. Funnel cakes, carousel calliope music, the Ferris wheel rising high above the striped tents. It’s a staggering assault on the senses and she wouldn’t blame him for getting overwhelmed, but he takes it all in stride. Looking at everything with a sense of childish wonder that in turn makes Tessa feel like a child again, too. The outside world and all of its worries and concerns fading away. Until
memories of the war seem colorless and muted and being with James is life in technicolor.

Being with him is like seeing the world in a whole new light, every activity – from the mundane like riding a bus (he can’t stop being fascinated by the mechanics of it) to the thrilling like seeing a real live tiger (and explaining what the color orange is and how it’s made using red and yellow) – is something to take pleasure in and enjoy.

“What are those?” He swallows the rest of his pink cotton candy, licking any remnants off his fingers, and points to a tray of caramel apples. The golden coating still looks hot and sticky from being recently dipped, and Tessa hands over a couple cents to the vendor so that he can try one.

“Caramel apples. They’re delicious, here.” She hands it over and he takes a tentative lick, his whole face lighting up as he tastes the sweet caramelized sugar. “We’re not supposed to eat the kinds of food that they need in Britain right now. It’s all being exported overseas. But we can have apples. Barrels and barrels of apples,” Tessa explains, laughing when he gets a drizzle of caramel on his chin, “‘Serve apples daily and you serve your country too,’ that’s what they tell us. What do you think?”

“You eat these every day to support the war?” He licks his lips, missing the bit that spilled, and impulsively she leans up on her tiptoes and wipes it away for him. Looking up to find him watching her with hooded eyes and a heated expression that make her blush and hum all over.

“No,” She retrieves a napkin and wipes her fingers clean, ignoring the way his gaze makes her feel all warm and fuzzy inside, “These are candied apples. A treat for special occasions.”

“It’s amazing. Here, you should try a bite.” James holds the stick out towards her and she obligingly bites off a piece of the apple, savoring the sweet taste of caramel as it coats her tongue. “Good?”

She licks her lips, noticing the way his eyes follow her tongue and stammering at the implication that he might want to kiss her (curse her inexperience!). “Yes, very good.”

He smiles, and the way the sunlight hits his eyes turns them golden like honey or the caramel they’re eating. Sweet and soft. And when he takes another bite she gets the urge to kiss the sticky sugar off his lips – an impulse that takes her by surprise and makes her blush and look for a distraction.

"We should play one of the carnival games."

"Alright,” He shrugs, quick to agree and tossing the now empty stick away in the waste bin nearby. Ever ready to move onto the next new experience. “What do you recommend?”

“Have you ever thrown a baseball?” It wasn’t in the movie of course, but she doesn’t know what the writers might have put inside his head. Perhaps he played catch with his father as a boy, long before the movie began.

“No, but I’m willing to try. How does one do it?”

She leads him over to one of the booths and hands over a nickel to the carnival worker in return for three baseballs. “You have to knock over the milk bottles. There are three stacks, each one shaped like a pyramid, and if you can knock them all onto the ground then you win a prize.”

“Seems simple enough.” James picks up one of the balls from off the counter and throws it as hard as he can, but his form is all wrong, his stance incorrect and awkward, and the ball goes flying to the side and misses all three stacks of bottles. She’s not even sure where he was aiming. “Or
maybe not.”

He tries again, and again the ball slams into the back of the shed instead. The third throw is a bit better, his arm growing more used to the weight and feel of the ball, and he manages to knock the top bottle off of one of the stacks, but it’s still far from perfect.

“I guess I won’t be winning you any prizes today.” He pulls a face, “I’m sorry.”

Growing up with her brothers, they believed in teaching her everything that they knew, and Kevin wouldn’t have been caught dead with a baby sister who didn’t know how to decently throw a baseball. She’d spent hours and hours as their pitcher while they practiced batting and now she can feel the itch in her right arm urging her to give it a go again. To see if she can still throw like she used to.

“That’s alright. Um…” Would her mother think that this was inappropriate? Is it alright for young ladies to throw baseballs? She panics for a moment, then decides that since her mother isn’t here, it doesn’t really matter. She never needs to know. “Would you mind if I gave it a try?”

“Mind?” James laughs, “Of course not. Please show me how it’s done. When you win I want that stuffed green bear. It matches your eyes.”

Trying not to blush at the casual way he so easily makes those kinds of comments, Tessa nods and gives the worker another nickel. Carefully lifting each ball to test its weight and size before preparing to throw them at the milk bottles.

She takes her aim, winds up, and **SMASH!** The first stack of bottles goes clattering onto the floor in a spectacular fashion. James raises his arms in a loud cheer and practically jumps up and down.

“That was amazing! Do it again.”

And so she does – taking out the other two stacks with ease, much to the obvious chagrin of the carnival worker who only begrudgingly hands them the green bear when asked (and is vaguely threatened by James in his Mountie outfit).

“That was fantastic, Tessa.” He grins, proudly holding the bear like it’s a gift worthy of the King, “You were fantastic. Where did you learn to throw like that?”

“My brothers were excellent teachers.” She smiles to herself, feeling her affection for her brothers surge inside her chest. Somewhere in Italy she hopes they know that she’s thinking of them. That she’s feeling closer to them today than she has in far too long. Her heart reaching out to them over the vast expanse of the ocean.

“Remind me to thank them someday.” James stuffs the bear into the belt of his jacket. Privately, Tessa thinks it looks rather ridiculous, but he wears it proudly so she doesn’t say anything. “Do women get to play sports in your time? Is baseball a profession you can go into?”

“No,” She frowns, familiar anger from her childhood emerging at the injustice of her brother being allowed to pursue such a career while she could only attend as his cheerleader, “Women aren’t allowed to play baseball professionally. Not like men.”

“Well that’s absurd. I’d expected more from a time fifty years after mine with so many marvelous advancements and inventions.”

“Me too,” She grumbles.
Sometimes, on those rare days when she allows herself to think about the war ending, she wonders what will happen to her and all of her friends and the millions of other women working in the factories and on farms – doing all the jobs that the men left behind. Will they be relegated back into the kitchens? Pushed out of industries they were only allowed to enter out of necessity?

She hopes not.

“Can we ride that?” James points towards the Ferris wheel towering in front of them, practically bouncing on the balls of his feet with barely contained energy, and Tessa shudders. She’s been afraid of that ride ever since she was a little girl and Jordan made her ride with her and it had gotten stuck while they were at the top. Jordan loved the view, while Tessa cried for their mother.

“That awful metal contraption? No thank you. Let’s ride the carousel again instead.” She tries to use her hold on his hand to lead him back towards the much safer ride. The one that stays firmly on the ground and is painted so prettily and doesn’t make her stare death in the face, but James remains firm.

“It looks like such fun! Everyone has smiles on their faces as they get off – look - and we don’t have them in my world.”

Tessa plants her feet and shakes her head, refusing to be budged even when he smiles and tries to coax a yes out of her. “No. I’m afraid of heights.”

"Please. Let’s just try it once and if you hate it we’ll get off. Please.”

It’s the please that does it. Much like when he’d first burst out of the screen and begged for her to stop running away. He has this way of saying it like she’s the only person in the world who can give him what he wants – who can make him happy. It’s a heady sort of rush that she’s unfamiliar with. A sort of power that she’s heard older girls speak of, but has no experience with herself.

“You really want to?” She asks slowly, wincing at how quickly he bobs his head up and down.

“Yes,” He answers eagerly, “We don’t have anything like that in my movie and I’d like to experience it just once.”

“Alright,” She sighs, biting the inside of her cheek so that she doesn’t smile when he does – she doesn’t want to appear to acquiesce too easily. “Fine. We can ride it. But only once.”

“Only once,” He nods, already sweeping her off her feet in the direction of the big wheel painted red and blue. Once they’re in line, their tickets handed over to the machine operator, he takes both of her hands and clasps them to his chest, brimming with confidence and anticipation. “Aren’t you even the least bit excited? Life’s too short to spend time thinking about life, Tessa. You have to just live it!”

Thinking about life is all she knows how to do, but… perhaps he has a point.

The operator opens the door on a bright daffodil-yellow cart and steps aside so that they can sit down, and she takes a deep breath and forces herself to follow James into the shaky compartment. Clamping her mouth shut to contain her scream when it starts swinging back and forth from the momentum of them taking their seats.

_Honestly, Tessa!_ She chastises herself, _we’re not even off the ground!_

The first few times around the wheel aren’t so bad. She mostly keeps her eyes closed and lets James enjoy the view – zeroing in on his laughter and happiness and keeping that at the forefront.
of her mind so that she can’t think about anything else. It’s addicting, that sound, and she could get used to hearing it more often. And if she had to sacrifice sitting through a terrifying ride to hear it, well, maybe that’s not such a high price to pay.

That is, until the wheel comes to a stop while they’re at the very top. The metal gears creaking as it goes still – their cart swinging back and forth. (An object in motion wants to stay in motion – she remembers her physics lessons. A very inconvenient truth right about now as they swing high above the ground.)

“Wow,” James whistles, “Would you look at that view. I’ve never seen anything like it. You have to see this, Tessa.” He takes her hand, but she mutely shakes her head. Slowly, so as not to upset the cart. Images of it breaking free and sending them plummeting to their deaths filling her head.

Is it even possible for James to die? Or would he merely be transported back into his film, leaving her body alone on the pavement to be returned to her parents along with the mystery of why she went to the carnival alone on a Sunday. What a dreadful prospect.

“Tess?” He asks gently. The thrill of someone outside of her family calling her by the nickname lost in the midst of her terror. “Are you alright?”

“No,” She squeaks, and when his hands find hers she clings onto them for dear life. As if somehow he can save her from the nightmare in which she currently finds herself. “Why isn’t it moving?”

“I don’t know,” He pauses for a moment, then adds, “I think they’re letting more people on and off, from what I can tell.”

“Can’t they do that faster?”

“You really hate this ride, don’t you?” She hums and he shifts towards her, freezing when that makes them rock more and Tessa cries out in fear. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize. If I’d known – I never should have made you ride this.”

“It’s alright.” Sweat trickles down her temple and her lower back. “I knew what I was getting into. It wasn’t so bad at first.”

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...

“What can I do to take your mind off it?”

"Nothing, I just –“

Warm lips press against hers, soft and gentle, and her eyes shoot open in surprise. Staring at him in shock and wonder as James leans back, a bashful smile on his face, and rubs the back of his neck. “Was that alright?”

“I…” She touches her fingers to her lips, still feeling the trace of him there – the tingle that seemed to move from that spot throughout her whole body, filling her with a warmth she’s never felt before. “I’ve never been kissed before.”

“Are you mad?” He takes her hand again and holds it in his lap, stroking his thumb back and forth across her wrist – making it hard to think. “I should have asked, but you needed a distraction and I wanted to help.”

“Did you only kiss me to be a distraction?” The thought fills her veins with ice water and she tries
to pull her hand away, but he clings to it.

“No,” He smiles again and lets out this adorable little chuckle, “I also really wanted to kiss you.”

“Oh.” She ponders that for a moment, still lighting tracing her bottom lip. Then, deciding to be bold, she says, “I’m glad you did.”

“Yeah?” His eyes are sparkling and his smile is bright enough to power all the lights in her house and Tessa grins back at him.

“Yes.”

“Do you think I might be able to do it again sometime?” His smile grows bold, his voice more confident, and she feels the irresistible urge to tease him emerging from somewhere inside her.

“Perhaps,” She cocks her head. “If we ever get off of this ride.”

“Operator!” He shouts, waving his hand as if to get the man’s attention, and Tessa bursts into giggles. “We’d like to dismount your machine, if you would be so kind!”

“Stop.” She grabs his arm and pulls it safely back inside their cart. “People are beginning to stare.”

“Let them stare.” He shrugs, waving off their little audience who probably aren’t used to seeing a Mountie shouting on a Ferris wheel. “I’m used to it.”

“You don’t care what people think of you?”

The concept is so foreign to her. Her whole life has been built around an education of propriety, decorum, ladylike behavior, and being constantly aware of your actions and how they might be perceived by other people. Friends and the general public alike. Restraint, her mother said, was the route to both social acceptance and personal happiness.

“Tessa,” James leans in with a conspiratorial whisper, “You may not know this about me, but my whole life revolves around people staring at me.”

She bursts out laughing and he looks incredibly pleased with himself. “Oh, right. I had forgotten.” Of course his perspective on having an audience would be completely different from her own.

“You can’t live your life worrying what other people will think of you,” He says sagely, daring to put his arm around her shoulders, “They’re not the ones dealing with the consequences of your actions, are they?”

“No, I suppose not.”

“Exactly. People will think what they want to think. When you’re watched as much as I am, you learn pretty quick which viewers are important, and which ones aren’t.”

“And which one am I?” It’s incredibly forward of her to ask, but she has to know.

“The most important one of all.” He smiles and tucks her hair behind her ear, his hand lingering on her cheek. “Look –” He points to the ground, suddenly much closer than it was a moment ago, “We’re almost down.”

Tessa breathes a heavy sigh of relief that makes James laugh and squeeze her hand, and when they’re finally back on hard ground again she almost kneels down to kiss it in gratitude. “Please don’t ask me to do that again. However nice your distractions may be.”
He laughs and wraps his arm around her as if to keep her safe from the nefarious carnival ride. “I won’t, I swear. You can pick what we do next. Anything you want.”

In the distance she spots a little brown ramshackle booth with a Photomaton Company logo on it and a sign advertising a strip of four photos for twenty-five cents, and she points to it with a smile. “We should have our pictures taken.”

“Pictures? As in, be in our own movie?” He pulls a face at the prospect, clearly less than thrilled with the idea, and Tessa shakes her head and points to the picture of the film strip on the advertisement.

“No, these are still pictures. We smile for the camera and it takes a snapshot of the moment and prints it out for us right here. Little keepsakes so that we can remember today. It’s an amazing invention.”

“I’ll always remember today,” He’s quick to promise, “But if that’s what you want to do then of course we shall do it. Lead the way!”

Tessa pulls aside the curtain and sits him down in the booth before taking the seat next to him. The cramped space suddenly feels much more intimate than it ever did when she was here with her siblings or girl friends, and she can feel James staring at the side of her face while she inserts the coin and presses the button for it to start.

“Ready?” She whispers, throat suddenly dry.

He reaches out to touch her cheek again, and it’s too much. He’s too close and she ducks her head to hide the shy smile that blossoms on her face. Which is, of course, when the light flashes and the first picture is taken.

“Oh!” He jumps, “What was that?”

“It’s taking our pictures. Smile at that box.” Tessa sits upright and forces herself to pay attention so that when the next flash happens she looks neat and presentable.

James shifts by her side, straightening his belt and accidentally elbowing her in the ribs – right where she’s ticklish – and Tessa bursts out laughing just as the third flash goes off.

“These pictures are going to be ridiculous,” She giggles, trying to look serious again for the last one, but it doesn’t work. She can feel James grinning at her and so she can’t help the giddy smile that she gives him in return.

“I highly doubt you could ever look ridiculous.”

He’s proven wrong when they emerge and retrieve the printed photos from the slot in the side of the compartment. In her opinion, she looks outrageous. Laughing and grinning like a fool when she’s not staring bashfully at her knees. But he seems quite pleased with them.

“You are so beautiful.” His fingers graze her cheek in one of the photos and Tessa inexplicably blushes. “Have you ever thought about performing?”

“Heavens no.”

James slips the photos into his jacket pocket and pats the spot with a smile. “I think you’d be good at it. The camera loves you.”
For some reason when he says the camera she has the distinct feeling that that’s not really what he’s talking about, but she doesn’t dare push it. It’s far, far too soon for thoughts of that nature, however much it may make her want to skip childishly down the street.

“What’s this?” He points to the poster on the side of a nearby tent, the corners of which have frayed and are flapping in the breeze. “A Halloween dance?”

Oh! In the chaos of the day she had quite forgotten that there were a few of those happening around town tonight. “Yes. They hold them every night at the dance halls around the city for the local young people and soldiers who are home on leave or who haven’t shipped overseas yet.”

“Can we go?”

“Do you know how to dance?” She teases, already leading him towards the carnival exit so that they can catch a bus to the dance hall. It’s been ages since she had the opportunity to dance, and she wants to take advantage of the chance with him – even if he ends up having two left feet and stumbling his way through.

“I know the round dances,” He replies, eagerly following her, “You know - the waltz, galop, mazurka, and polka. Those kinds of things. I have a copy of C.H. Rivers's 1885 A Full Description of Modern Dances in my locker in the Mountie barracks.”

"You do dance well with Alice in the film,” Tessa concedes, “But the style has changed somewhat since then.”

“You don’t waltz anymore?”

“Sometimes, but mostly… well… you’ll see.”

The dance hall is already bustling with activity when they arrive. The ceiling is covered in orange and black streamers, pumpkins and paper skeletons and witches decorate the walls and tables, and music is playing loudly from the corner. Girls in their finest dresses, young men – most of them in uniform – falling all over each other to try and get a moment with the girls. Dancers crowd the floor swinging about energetically to The Andrews Sisters singing Oh Johnny, Oh Johnny, Oh!

From her peripheral vision Tessa can see James’ jaw fall to the floor, and she laughs. “Not exactly what you expected, is it?”

“What is this? Is that safe?” He points to where a woman had just done a flip over the back of her partner, and Tessa smiles and nods. “This is how you people dance?” His eyes having gone as wide as saucers at the energetic display in front of him, and Tessa laughs.

“Yes. It’s called swing dancing. I’ll teach you.”

“You know how to do this?” He sounds so impressed that it makes her blush and feel a rush of confidence all at once.

“Yes. My sister and I used to take classes before the war. It’s really not as difficult as it looks, I promise. And you seem to be light on your feet, I bet you’ll be a quick learner.”

“I’m willing to try.”
“The couples doing the really impressive moves have practice a lot. We won’t try any of those tonight, but I’ll teach you the basics – come on.”

She hangs her coat up on the wall and stuffs her hat into the pocket, then grabs James’ hand and leads him out onto the busy dance floor just as Glenn Miller’s *In the Mood* starts to play. It’s one of Tessa’s favorite songs, and she can’t wait to begin moving to it. Nothing makes her feel more alive than dancing, and she’s eager to experience it with a partner that makes her feel the way James does.

“First, let’s get into starting position.” Tessa guides his right arm to her back and then places her left on his shoulder before taking his left hand in her right one. “Similar to a waltz.”

“Seems simple enough so far,” He nods, “Now what?”

“This is a basic side step.” It’s very simple and he picks it up quickly, jumping ahead in the lesson to start slowly spinning them around in a small circle. “And this is an open hold that we can use to do the side bumps.”

He picks that up quickly as well, moving from side to side and bumping her hips exactly like he’s supposed to. “This isn’t so hard! Let’s move faster.”

From there James takes the lead, looking around at the other dances for inspiration and swinging Tessa around with an ease she finds incredibly attractive – making her smile and laugh so much it’s hard to remain focused on putting her feet in the right places.

At one point he tries to get her to teach him how to do the amazing slides between the legs and flips, but she shakes her head and makes him settle for mastering the spin out instead. She trusts him, but she’s not quite ready to let him flip her over his back yet.

*Next time.*

Eventually Glenn Miller fades into something slower – a Nat King Cole song about love and sentimental reasons – and she steps in closer and rests her head on James’ shoulder, letting him hold her close as they sway gently from side to side. Like this, she can almost feel his heart beating against hers, his chest rising and falling with each breath, and Tessa lets her eyes fall closed so that she can savor the moment.

He leans in close and murmurs in her ear, “Tessa Virtue, you are divinely designed.”

She tries not to, she really does, but no amount of biting her lips or thinking solemn thoughts can prevent the round of giggles that bursts out of her. Followed by instant regret when she turns her head and sees his crestfallen expression. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to laugh. It sounds so romantic when you say it in the movie, but out here in the real world it just… doesn’t work.”

“What do men of this time say?”

“I wouldn’t know.” She shrugs and tucks her head under his chin. “I’ve never been on a date before this one.”

“Perhaps something more simple then?” He presses a soft kiss to the top of her head that makes her melt in his arms. “You are the loveliest woman I have ever met and very, very beautiful and I’m so glad I got to spend this day with you.”

“Thank you.” It’s such an inadequate thing to say to express everything she’s feeling, but it seems to be enough for him.
He prompts her to lean back enough for him to look her in the eye, and with a shy smile he asks, “May I kiss you?”

“Yes, you may.”

His lips press against hers for the second time and it’s as if everyone else in the room disappears. Until it’s just the two of them gently swaying on the dance floor as the music plays in the background. Two young, impossible lovers sharing the most romantic moment of their lives.

The kiss grows heated, his tongue grazing hers in a way that should be alarming and odd, but somehow feels good instead, and Tessa is surprised by the noise she makes in the back of her throat.

Apparently James is as well, because he pulls away in shock. “Where’s the fade out?”

“The what?” She asks, tilting her head and looking at his lips again – wondering if it would be entirely too forward of her to ask him to kiss her again. Hoping that nobody had noticed their little moment, but figuring they’d probably dismiss it as youthful exuberance. Certain liberties are allowed, she knows, when people assume your beau will be going away to war.

“The fade out,” He repeats, looking around the room, “You know, when there’s a love scene and things start getting intense – the screen fades to black. It didn’t happen just now.”

“Um, no,” She giggles, fiddling with the black collar of his jacket and indulging in her desire to wind her fingers in the hair at the base of his neck, “That doesn’t happen in the real world.”

“Really?” A wide smile stretches across his face, “The scene gets to keep going?”

“Yes,” She nods, “Would you like to try it again?”

“Yes please.”

He kisses her passionately again, spreading his hands out across her back and crushing her to his chest, until they can hear a few pointed coughs from other dancers and the music picks back up again – making continuing impossible in the chaos of more energetic dancing.

They dance for what feels like hours. Spinning around and around. Hardly stopping for such mundane needs as water or food from the buffet table. And it’s magical. The best night that Tessa’s ever had.

Eventually the dance has to come to an end, curfews must be honored, and everyone spills out onto the street to head in the direction of their respective homes. Night has fallen, the street lamps glowing in the foggy haze. Pumpkins with candles inside flickering on porch steps providing extra light for children running from door to door asking for candy.

There’s a sharp bite to the wind and in the light of the full moon the tree branches, with their few lingering leaves still clinging on, look like scary witch hands stretching out across the cloudy sky.

A perfectly chilling Halloween night that would have Tessa running straight home and hiding in her bed if it weren’t for the man by her side. She reaches for his hand, intending to ask him where they should go next, but she finds nothing.

Perhaps she missed, and she looks down at his arm to take it again and watches her hand pass right through.
“James?” She’s trying not to panic, but he’s staring at his own hands with a sort of dawning horror that makes it hard for her not to. “What’s happening?”

“The night is ending,” He answers slowly, turning towards her and trying to take her hand again. This time she feels him, solid and firm, and she clings to his fingers with every ounce of strength she has – probably crushing him, but neither of them seem to care.

“So? What does that mean?”

“The magic is ending too.” He goes quiet for a long time, then looks down the street in the direction of downtown where the theatre is. “I have to go back.”

She doesn’t understand. Magic couldn’t really be the explanation for him leaving the movie screen earlier, could it? He isn’t Cinderella. There won’t be pumpkin carriages and mouse footmen at midnight. Right?

“Back where? Why?”

“Back into the movie,” He replies, confirming her worst fears, and Tessa throws all caution and decorum to the wind and wraps her arms around him in a tight embrace.

“You can’t! You’re real now, you’re here. You can’t go back.”

“I have to, Tessa.” He shakes his head sadly, holding onto her just as tightly. “I’m imaginary, a creation thought up by writers and a director and played by an actor. I can’t exist out here for much longer. I’m already fading away.”

“But I don’t want you to go back.” Her words are muffled by his jacket, but clear enough for him to understand, and he sighs – his voice thick with unshed tears to match her own.

“I don’t either. I don’t want to leave you –“ He pauses, and when he speaks again his voice is much more animated. “You should come with me!”

“What?” She leans back to look up at him, tilting her head in confusion, but he’s rapidly becoming too excited by his suggestion to explain properly – grabbing her hand and running towards the theatre.

“Come with me into the movie,” He practically shouts, smiling giddily, “Join me on screen! Leave this world behind and come with me.”

“I couldn’t possibly –“ She protests, pointing to the right so that he continues taking them in the right direction. Not that she wants to go back to the theatre, but getting lost isn’t appealing, either.

“Yes, you could.” He comes to an abrupt stop and pulls her into his arms for another kiss. “If we go before midnight. You could step through the screen with me and enter the world of Summer’s Edge and we could be together forever. Don’t you want that?”

Exhilaration rushes through her, sending an electric shock from her head to her toes. Her world has never seemed brighter, more colorful, than it has been today with him. If she goes with him now, that could continue. She could live in technicolor forever, without the war or death or grief or sadness or worry.

“Yes. Yes, I want that.”
They make their way back to the theatre, running like two carefree children. Laughing and giggling as they sprint towards their destiny together. Splashing through puddles and piles of leaves and earning plenty of strange looks and reprimands from the nice, normal families handing out candy. Not that she cares one jot about what they think anymore.

When they arrive at the theatre the doors are closed and a sign has been posted that reads: “Due to technical errors, there will not be any showings today.”

“Oh,” Tessa gasps, throwing her hand over her chest and trying to catch her breath, “I hadn’t thought about what would happen if you disappeared. The movie must not work anymore.”

“Looks like we’ll have to break in.” James shrugs and kneels down to pick the lock, smirking when she makes a little noise of surprise. “I’m a Mountie, remember?”

Once inside, Tessa sets up the projector to play the movie. Luckily it still has the correct film reel lined up and ready to go, otherwise they’d be in dreadful trouble. But as it is the set-up is fairly simple and it doesn’t take long for the screen to flicker to life, the production studio logo lighting up in black and white and grey as the movie starts.

They walk down the aisle hand-in-hand and stand in front of the stage as the opening credits begin to roll, the overture providing the soundtrack to their anticipation. His part doesn’t come up for a few minutes, so they have time before they need to cross over.

At first Tessa can’t wait until they can go, bouncing eagerly on the balls of her feet and nervously watching the credits, but then Alice comes onto the screen for the opening scene and something about her blonde hair makes Tessa think about her mother.

Her mother. Her parents!

“Wait.” James tries to pull her up onto the stage, but she stays where she is, resisting his tug on her hand. “Wait I have to think.”

“What’s there to think about?” He smiles impatiently, practically lifting her up onto the stage so that she’s standing with him – their shadows casting black shapes onto the movie. “We’re in love. Come with me and we can be in love forever. Safe behind the screen. A movie romance, just the way you like it.”

“I know, but what about my family? My friends? My job? I’d have to leave them all behind.” Her mother’s words come back to her, making her heart heavy with guilt. I don’t know what your father and I would do without you. You mean the world to us, I hope you know that.

Her mother is the strongest person she knows, but even she couldn’t handle losing her youngest daughter with her other three children so far away. And what would the explanation be? Would Tessa cease to exist? Would she disappear forever, leaving her parents with no closure? They mystery of it would drive them to despair. They’d never stop looking for her, she knows it, and what would that do to them?

“Your world is dark and full of sadness,” James continues, “And you are so unhappy. I could make you happy. My world is simple. Every day you know exactly what you’re going to get.”

That does sound tempting. After four long years of unpredictable war, of death and destruction - simple and predictable sounds like such a relief. A reprieve from her heavy heart.

But it wouldn’t just be a reprieve. It would be forever.
Does she really want to escape her world forever?

“Come on.”

He encourages her to step towards the screen and she tentatively reaches out to touch it. The second her fingers graze the picture, instead of hitting a solid wall like she’s expecting, they move through it. The healthy pink color of her skin bleeding out and turning into light grey as her hand becomes part of the movie, and she withdraws it with a yelp.

“What’s wrong?”

“I can’t, James.” She holds her hand tightly to her chest, double-checking its color to make sure it isn’t still that unnerving lifeless, shade of grey. “I can’t go with you.”

“Why ever not? It would be so easy.”

“It’s because it would be easy that I can’t go. Don’t you see?” She takes both of his hands in hers, noticing with a heavy heart that they don’t quite feel solid anymore. “Stepping away, entering your world of make-believe, getting to be with you forever – that sounds so lovely, but it isn’t real, James. I know my world is hard and at times it feels hopeless, but it’s also alive. Full of color and moments of happiness and joy. Moments like those we experienced today. It’s scary and sad sometimes, and good things come to an end. But there are new beginnings, also. And it’s all of that, the good and the bad, that makes life worth living.” Holding his hands close to her heart, she steps closer to him and tries to keep her tears at bay as she adds, “You brought laughter back into my life today, James. You reminded me how wonderful life can be, and I love you for it, but I can’t give that up now.”

“So if I hadn’t emerged from the screen,” He smiles forlornly, caressing her cheek with the back of his hand, “I would have had a better chance of convincing you to join me behind it?” He chuckles sadly, pressing his forehead against hers and closing his eyes – inhaling deeply to breathe her in, and she does the same.

“Probably,” She admits. There’s no doubt in her mind that had he not reminded her how lovely life could be, she would have followed him into his in an instant.

“I can’t bring myself to regret it, though. Not one single second. Thank you, Tessa.”

Tears stream down her face and James catches a few of them with his thumbs, cupping her face in his hands and holding her like she’s infinitely precious.

“Will you remember me?” She asks thickly, trying not to choke on her emotions, “There, on the other side?”

“Of course I will.” His answer is immediate, but he doesn’t seem sure. “Will you remember me?”

“Of course.” She nods as vigorously as she can with him still holding her head. “I could never, ever forget you.”

“Here –“ He steps back and pulls the little green bear out of his belt and hands it to her. “You keep this. Put it somewhere you can see it, won’t you? Somewhere you can hold it and think of me, from time to time.”

“I will. And you keep these.” She pats the spot on his chest where the pictures are still securely placed in his pocket. “Maybe when nobody’s watching you can look at them and think of me.”
“I’ll miss you, Tessa Virtue.”

“I’ll miss you, too, James Clark.”

He wraps his arms around her for another passionate kiss, pouring his whole heart and soul into it, and she does the same. Hoping to convey all of her love and gratitude into this one simple act so that he can carry it with him back into the movie. Trying to memorize the way his mouth feels moving against hers, his solid body, his smell – everything.

The NWMP inspector sits behind a large oak desk in a rather austere office, his secretary scribbling faithfully away at a desk in the corner. Waiting for a knock on the door.

With one last longing look, James steps through the screen – the picture bending and warping to accommodate him. His color fading back to black and white. And the Inspector greets him as if nothing is amiss.

“Good day, Sergeant Clark,” The inspector nods before gesturing with his pipe for the soldier to take a seat, “Have a seat.”

“Sir,” The young man salutes dutifully before doing as he’s told, leaning forward in his chair – eager to hear what his commanding officer has to say.

“I’m sending you back up north into the woods, Clark.”

“But I just got down, Sir.”

She waits for a minute, watching for any sign that he can still see her, still talk to her, but none comes. The scene ends where it’s supposed to, fades to black, and picks back up with him in the barracks talking to his friends and packing up to leave.

Pain lances through her heart and tears stream uncontrollably down her face as Tessa flees the theatre. She can’t bear to watch him fall in love with Alice now, but she also can’t bear to turn the projector off. It would feel like killing him. So she runs instead – runs and runs all the way home. Until she’s breathless and exhausted and there are no more tears left to cry.

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Halloween in 1945 is unusually warm. Sunshine seems to coat every surface with a golden drizzle. The trees have been changing their color late this year, so the roads are still lined with boughs of vivid crimson and orange and yellow. And beautiful maple leaves float gently to the ground to create heaping piles for children to play in.

There’s a sense of hopefulness that’s been missing in the world for far too long. With more soldiers coming home every day, stepping off the train at the station amid cheers and clapping and crowds of people high on the thrill and overwhelming relief of the war ending and the allies winning against the Germans.

Every once in a while Tessa glimpses the resplendent sights of autumn outside through the department store windows as she works, making her smile and think fondly of Halloweens past. This time of year is bittersweet for her, but she’s trying to live by James’ words that he spoke that day: *Life's too short to spend time thinking about life, Tessa. You have to just live it!*
It’s a motto she’s since taken to heart.

She’d left her job at the factory once the men started returning home and were available to do the work, replacing it with a job at Eaton’s department store. It’s much more suited to her interests, and she likes getting to meet new people every day.

Her brothers and Jordan are home again, not unscathed, but healing, and her parents are healing, too. All of them adjusting to being together again, to not having to live in a perpetual state of worry anymore, to the simple pleasure that comes from being home.

Casey and Megan are engaged, and Kevin brought his French nurse home with him as his wife – much to the horror of their father. Although he quickly came around when he saw how sweet and kind Nicole was.

Life goes on, even after heartbreak, and although it still hurts sometimes, Tessa knows she made the right decision to continue living it.

“Tessa,” Her boss whispers urgently in her ear, snapping her out of her thoughts and forcing her to turn away from the lovely great tree that’s visible through their biggest window – the one whose leaves are the same shade of orange as a tiger’s fur, “Stop daydreaming and go help that young man over there.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” She straightens her skirt and makes sure her sweater is buttoned properly before picking up her notepad and pen and spinning around to help this new customer.

His back is to her, but she can tell immediately that he’s a soldier. Very recently returned home, too, given that he’s still in uniform. The brownish-green fabric frayed, but still neat and well-fitted, although perhaps a little looser than it should be. A not-uncommon phenomenon in men just returned from the front.

“How can I help you, sir?”

He turns around and her notepad and pen go clattering to the floor. “James!”

He picks up her dropped items, setting them on the counter when she seems incapable of accepting them - her hands no longer working properly, then takes his hat off and runs his hand through his unkempt hair, chuckling awkwardly and blushing under her intense stare. “I guess you saw my picture, eh?”

“What?” She’s horribly confused. He looks exactly like James, but there’s something… different. He’s a little older, maybe, and there are bags under his eyes and a shadow of facial hair on his chin. He looks worn out. His light brown eyes tired and heavy with the weight of all he’s seen. A soldier’s eyes.

Not James.

“My picture,” He explains kindly, “Summer’s Edge. I made it just before I enlisted. Kind of a silly film, but I heard it was popular here. I’m Scott Moir.” He holds out his hand and Tessa takes it in stunned silence, a shock going through her arm at how familiar it feels.

“Oh, right.” She kind of laughs and tries to take her hand back, hoping disappointment isn’t written as plainly across her face as she fears it might be, but he keeps ahold of it – stroking her wrist with his thumb in a way that’s achingly familiar, although she’s not sure he’s aware he’s doing it.

“I’m sorry, I just – you seem so familiar.” Scott reaches into the inside pocket of his jacket and
pulls out a dirty and torn strip of pictures.

“Impossible,” Tessa whispers breathlessly, covering her mouth with her free hand when he holds it out to show her.

It’s her, there’s no mistaking it, but she’s alone. James isn’t anywhere to be seen in any of the pictures, even though she’s laughing and blushing and grinning like someone should be there with her eliciting those reactions.

“But… how?” She looks up to find Scott watching her closely, his face soft and tender in a way that’s both thrilling and unnerving all at once. Like they know each other, when in reality they just met.

“I found this strip of pictures in my coat jacket two years ago. I don’t know how it got there, it was as if they just appeared one night when I,” He pauses to let out an embarrassed chuckle, rubbing the back of his neck, “When I needed them the most. They, it’s hard to explain, but they really helped me get through some tough situations. They reminded me that life was worth living even with everything seemed hopeless. I hope you don’t find that too forward of me.”

“Not…” She struggles to regain her composure, feeling close to fainting. “Not at all…”

“I’m sorry if it was meant for someone else. A husband, maybe. I swear I did ask around my regiment to see if they belonged to someone else and ended up in my jacket by mistake.” He speaks so earnestly that she can’t help but let her heart reach out to him a little.

“No,” Tessa laughs in spite of herself, “No husband.”

“A fiancé then? No?” He smiles when she shakes her head, and it’s beautiful. “A beau?”

Tessa bites her cheek to stop from giggling, overwhelmed by the rush and confusion of him being here, so like James, yet also not. “No, none of the above. I don’t know how you found it. I suppose one of my brothers must have lost it somewhere.” The lie comes easily, even though she knows full-well that it’s impossible. There’s just no explanation for how pictures that went through a movie screen ended up in the pocket of an actor thousands of miles away, but they did.

Magic, indeed.

“Brother?” He smiles hopefully and her heart skips a beat, “Well, then, he won’t mind if I keep them?”

“I suppose not.”

“Excellent.” He grins and she finds herself inexplicably smiling back at him. "Can I get your name, or should I just keep calling you ‘my ray of sunshine’ like I’ve been doing?"

“You didn’t really,” She blushes, horribly embarrassed and flattered at the same time, “Did you?”

“Only in private.” He winks. "I didn’t have a name to work with, although I did sometimes entertain myself by trying to guess what it might be.”

She can’t help but be curious, and so she leans in closer - mimicking his body language with her own. “And what were your guesses?”

“Elizabeth?”
“No,” She scrunches up her face and shakes her head, and he laughs. It shouldn't surprise her that he sounds and looks exactly like James, but it does, catching her off-guard and sending a pang of longing through her heart.

“Lauren?”

“Wrong again.”


She shakes her head, laughing along with him now. “None of those, either.”

“No, something prettier,” He taps his chin, “Something soft and sweet. With a few S’s, I think. Am I getting close?”

Shocked at his assessment, she merely nods and quietly tells him, “It’s Tessa.”

“Tessa,” He tries it out, nodding to himself, speaking with a caress in his voice, just like James had, “Yes, that’s perfect. Thank you, Tessa, for getting me through the war.”

“I didn’t do anything,” She awkwardly waves him off, but he shakes his head and captures her hand again - squeezing it with a gentle earnestness that steals her breath out of her lungs.

“You did far more than you know.”

“Are you giving this young man the assistance he requires, Miss Virtue?” Her boss interrupts, and Tessa quickly puts a respectable amount of distance between them. Trying to remember the etiquette lessons that had been drilled into her head when she was hired.

*No loose behavior with young men!* - That had been rule number one. She'd laughed at the time, but now...

“She most certainly is,” Scott grins, sharing a conspiratorial wink with her, “I just returned home and was hoping to pick up a present for my mother.”

“That's nice.” Her boss nods firmly. "Don’t dawdle, Tessa.”

They both wait for her to walk away, watching her back disappear around the corner, before Tessa asks, “Do your parents live near here?” All these years, she's never stopped to wonder where Scott Moir was from or where in the world he might be. An oversight that seems ridiculous now.

He hums and starts idly looking over the jewelry on display. “I grew up in Ilderton, a little town just north of here. You probably haven't heard of it.”

“I had no idea,” She whispers, mostly to herself. All this time he'd been from a town only twenty minutes away and she'd never known. It almost seems like... *fate.*

“Well, how would you?” He laughs, “We only just met, right?”

"Right." She nods slowly, shaking her head to clear it. "Right, of course."

“Tessa,” He takes her hand again, and she doesn't know why she keeps letting him take such liberties - only that it feels right when he touches her. "I know it’s awfully presumptuous of me, and I wouldn’t normally be so forward with someone I just met, but I feel... drawn to you, somehow, and I was wondering if you would let me take you out to dinner tonight.”
She hesitates for a moment, thinking of James and wondering what he would want. If he would approve or be sad. If it's wrong to accept a date with the actor who played him. But then she remembers the warmth in his eyes and the way he leapt at every new experience - how he wasn't afraid to live for the moment. And she looks at Scott, his bashful smile, the hope in his eyes.

"Please," His request is soft, gentle, and that makes her decision for her.

"Yes, I would like that."

Chapter End Notes

I got a little caught-up in the 1940s of it all. I don't know how to write anything short anymore.
in the devil's garden

Chapter by Miss_Six

Chapter Summary

Tess becomes obsessed with a house.

Chapter Notes

Rated PG for the scares
Tags: Brief mention of injury/blood, minor character death, general creepiness abounds
Word Count: 6.5k

Apologies for the wait, dear readers! This is definitely different than the stories before mine, and all I can tell you is that you're gonna want to read it with the lights on. Many thanks to purplehazegirl and awakeanddreaming for the read throughs and beta-ing, and of course the guild for always being my cheerleaders. Now onto the horror, shall we?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“No peeking!”

“I’m not!” Scott protests from the passenger seat of Tessa’s car, hands firmly over his eyes the way she had instructed him to do once she had turned the car into a sleepy looking residential area. He feels the car pull to a stop. “Can I open them now?”

“No yet.” He hears Tessa get out of the car, and she opens his door and guides him out, pulling him to stand next to her. “Okay, you can open them.”

When Scott removes his hands from his eyes, he finds himself standing in front of a monster of a house. Not that it was a large building—it couldn’t be more than 2-3 bedrooms—but it looms over them, 2 stories of the most foreboding Victorian architecture he’s ever seen. The fluted concrete columns that flank the front door are crumbling, and Scott can see several spots of peeling paint. There are a few shingles missing from the roof, which has an honest to god turret hanging off a back corner like an afterthought. Vines wrap around the railings and columns as though it’s being pulled into the ground by nature herself.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Tessa says, and Scott bursts out laughing.

He stops when he sees a look of hurt flash across her eyes. “Wait, Tess, you’re serious? You want to buy this house?”

“Look, I know it needs some work,” she says, “but I just...I know how it sounds, but I just feel like I need to buy this house. Like it’s supposed to be mine.”
“Have you even had it inspected? A place like this could have serious structural damage, T.” Scott doesn’t like the way the front porch seems to sag, and is that turret leaning?

“Of course I did. The inspector said there’s a few things that need to be brought up to code, but the foundation looks good and the structure is sound.” Grabbing his hand, she leads him up to the front door and starts fiddling with the small lockbox hanging from the knob. “Come on, I want to show you the inside.”

The interior of the house seems somewhat better maintained that the outside, although the decor is straight out of the seventies, and a thick layer of dust covers every surface. There’s even furniture inside, or drop cloths covering what appears to be furniture. Scott sees nothing that would excite a potential homebuyer, at least not one that swore off fixer-uppers after all the work she’d done on her current house.

Which reminds him…”Tess, are you gonna sell your other place?” he asks, looking over the faded brown-and-green striped wallpaper and brown shag carpet in the living room. “You love that house.”

“I’m not going to sell it, I’ll rent it out,” she reassures him. “I can’t really explain it, Scott. I was on a run and it was like a voice told me to cut through this neighborhood, and there she was.”

Something about how Tessa referred to the house as “she” makes the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. “T, you know it’s just a house, right?”

Tessa’s expression changes to one of disapproval and the atmosphere shifts suddenly, and a wave of unease washes over him. “Be respectful, Scott,” she says, and he has to swallow hard to fight the nausea that bubbles up.

“Sorry,” he says, and the nausea doesn’t completely vanish but it subsides a little. “I only meant that this place is going to be a lot of work to renovate.”

“Not renovate,” Tessa says calmly, and the hairs on his neck stand up again at the blank wonder in her eyes. “Restore.”

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**Moir, Scott. Phone interview with [redacted], 2022 June 14.**

**Interviewer:** So tell me more about the house.

**Scott:** I don’t know what else there is to tell, I already gave the insurance guy all the details.

**I:** Not about the restoration. How did the house make you feel?

**S:** I don’t know. Uncomfortable. Like you were always being watched.

**I:** Watched how?

**S:** Like there was always someone else there, looking over your shoulder, even when you were alone. I hated it.
I: Were you the only person who felt this way in the house?

S: I mean, I know her mother would only go in there if Tessa was with her. And her sister wouldn’t go in the house at all, after the first time she visited...but I can’t say if they felt the same way. We never talked about it.

I: But Tessa never felt uncomfortable?

S: No, if anything she was happier when she was home. Started making more and more excuses not to leave.

I: And did anything ever happen to you while you were inside the house?

S: [long pause] I don’t want to talk about that. Who did you say you were?

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“Jordan!” Tessa calls out happily. Her sister stands in the front doorway, looking a bit bewildered at the flurry of activity happening. “Come in, the contractors are just taking measurements.”

Scott looks up from the chairs he’s moving to the middle of the room. “Hey, Jordan.”

“Hi,” Jordan says, still looking uncertain. “Are you sure this is a good time? I can come back later.”

“No, no, it’s fine! I’ll show you around,” Tessa chirps. “You’ve got to see the master bath, it has a clawfoot tub!”

Despite Scott’s general discomfort with Tessa’s current life choices, he has to smile at how excited she is over the project. *Maybe this is just what she needs right now*, he thinks to himself. *Something new to throw herself into.*

He moves to the dining room and starts stacking chairs on the huge wooden table, careful not to scratch the tabletop, which has an intricate inlay pattern. He’s in the process of dragging the large china hutch into the kitchen when he hears one of the contractors call out. “Dave? I have a problem.”

Wandering back into the living room, Scott sees two of the workers standing in the northwest corner of the room. “Did you measure it again?” one of them, presumably Dave, asks.

“I measured it five times, and I got a different number every time,” the other one says. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“How much is it off by?” Dave asks.

“Minus or plus anywhere from an eighth of an inch to two inches,” the contractor replies. “And it’s not like it’s just coming up short, I measured it at two inches more than what the inside dimensions should be.”

Tessa and Jordan reappear in the living room. “Is there a problem?”
Dave waves his hand as though trying to shoo the question away. “I think Steve just forgot how to use a tape measure,” he says. “Look, I pulled up a corner of the carpet and there’s some nice hardwood flooring under there. Would you rather restore that, or put in more carpet?”

“Oh, I’ll go with the hardwood floors, definitely,” Tessa replies immediately.

Steve shrugs, looking over from the corner he’d been staring at intently. “I won’t worry about the measurements in here, then,” he says.

“Problem solved!” Dave announces. “We’ll be upstairs in the master suite.” The contractors walk out of the room and the three that remain look at each other, slightly puzzled.

“What was that about?” Tessa asks, and Scott shakes his head.

“I have no idea,” he says.

“Uh, I think I’m gonna go,” Jordan says, looking decidedly unsettled. “I’ve got some stuff I have to do.”

“Already?” Tessa asks, dismayed. “You just got here!”

“I know, I’m sorry, I just...oh,” Jordan breathes, bending over a little. “I’m feeling a little lightheaded, I just need some air.” Standing upright again, she practically bolts out the door.

As Scott watches Tessa follow her sister out the door to say goodbye, the feeling of unease in his stomach solidifies into dread.

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Missing Persons Poster for April Jones

Name: April Eleanor Jones

Missing Since: 10/31/1980

Missing From: London, Ontario

DOB: 10/03/1963

Age: 17

Race: White

Hair Color: Brown

Eye Color: Brown

Height: 5’4”

Weight: 60kg
April was last seen by friends while exploring a vacant house in London, Ontario. She was reported missing by her parents when she had not returned by the next morning. Police think she may have been abducted by a transient living in the house, as signs of a struggle were found in the basement and her friends reported hearing “strange noises” before realizing she was no longer with the group. April was last seen wearing blue jeans and a yellow sweater with pink butterflies. If you see her, please contact [redacted].

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“Wait, what?” Tessa says over the phone. “What do you mean, terminate the contract? I don’t understand.”

Scott listens to her finish the phone conversation as he eats his sandwich in the dining room. They had waited two hours for the contractors to show up before Tessa finally received a phone call that, from the sounds of it, means they won’t be coming at all.

“Well, of course you’re going to give me back my deposit! Yes. Yes. Thank you.” Tessa ends the call and stares at her phone with a deep frown.

“What happened?” Scott asks.

“The contracting company is turning down the job,” she says glumly. “The foreman wouldn’t tell me why. Just said his guys weren’t comfortable with it.”

I’m not comfortable here either, Scott thinks but doesn’t say out loud. “Maybe they didn’t think they’d be able to restore what’s already here.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Tessa says, distracted. “Hey, when you’re done with your sandwich, can you help me in the basement?”

“The basement” is little more than a glorified crawl space, with visible insulation and a low ceiling that Scott almost bumps his head on when he reaches the bottom of the stairs. It’s full of junk left behind by former tenants, with a small door to an actual crawl space under the stairs. Purely out of curiosity, Scott tugs on the knob but it doesn’t give. Must be jammed.

Tessa brings a camping lantern down with them. “The light doesn’t work down here, I changed the bulb but the socket must be bad,” she says, setting the lantern down on a small side table that’s missing the drawer pull. “I just want to get some of this stuff out of here.”

They begin pulling items away from the pile, and the findings get more bizarre the deeper they go. “Hey, Virtch,” Scott says, “take a look at this.” He’s found a tricycle that looks like it’s from the early 1900s, covered in rust and dirt. “This might be worth something if you clean it up.”

“Are you okay?” Tessa asks, and then her eyes go to his hand. “Oh no, I’ll go grab you a towel!” Quickly she runs up the stairs.
Scott holds his hand in front of him, palm up, trying not to drip blood but a few drops spill over. As they hit the concrete floor with a wet *plop*, the light overhead snaps on.

“Here, wrap this around your hand,” Tessa says, returning with a dish towel. “Do you think you’ll need stitches?”

“No, I don’t think it’s that deep. Must’ve caught it on an edge,” Scott says, still staring at the light above them as he presses the towel to his wound. “Look, your light came on.”

“Oh!” Tessa exclaims. “Well, good, that’s one less thing to worry about. Are you okay? Have you had a tetanus shot?”

“I’m good,” Scott says. “I’m pretty sure I got a booster a while back.”

The bleeding has abated, so he bends down to clean up the blood spots, but they’ve vanished.

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**Virtue, Tessa. In-person interview with [redacted], 2022 June 27**

**Interviewer:** What was it that made you decide to buy the house?

**Tessa:** It’s hard to explain. Have you ever been out shopping, and you see something you just know will look great on you? Like you can see yourself wearing it?

**I:** Sure.

**T:** It was like that, but a thousand times stronger. I could see myself living in that house.

**I:** Were you told anything about the house? The history?

**T:** Not the realtor. They only told me it had been empty for years.

**I:** Did anyone else tell you anything?

**T:** Not really, no. Not directly.

**I:** What about indirectly?

**T:** I mean...the neighbors were weird. None of them would step foot on the property. I didn’t find out about the disappearances until later.

**I:** But you stayed in the house after you found out?

**T:** *pause* Yes. I told you, it’s hard to explain. Can we take a break?

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“Oof!” Scott collapses onto the sofa with a grunt, and he can smell the dust in the air from the ancient couch cushions. “God, Tess, I’m fucking beat.”

“Me too.” She sits down next to him, being a little more delicate than he had. “Thank you for helping me get those boxes over.”

“Yeah, of course.” He did find it slightly suspicious that everyone else seemed to have an awfully convenient excuse as to why they couldn’t help out today, but at least it was just boxes today. “I can’t believe you want to start staying here already, I thought you’d want to wait until the place was in better shape.”

Tessa looks at him sharply. “I keep telling you, there’s **nothing wrong** with the house.”

“That’s not what I meant! It’s just an older house, and they can be drafty and…” he trails off under her gaze. “Okay. I admit it, this place gives me the creeps.”

Her expression shifts to exasperation. “Well, I like it here. It feels like home already.”

“Even without all your stuff in it? Hey, when did you want to start bringing your furniture over?” he asks.

“Oh! Um,” she stutters, “I think...I might actually leave my furniture at the house. You know, rent it out fully furnished.”

Scott blinks at her, surprised. “All of it? Even the bed?”

“Well, maybe I’ll bring my mattress, but...yeah. I mean,” she continues, “My furniture is all so modern looking, I just don’t think it’s going to fit with the vision I have in mind.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Scott says slowly. He couldn’t really imagine all of Tessa’s stark white-and-grey palettes against the richness of the paint swatches she’d been showing him.

“Yeah, I might just see about getting some of these pieces restored,” she tells him, gesturing at the living room around them. “They’re not bad, maybe with some love and new upholstery they can look good as new.”

He shakes his head. “I still think you’ve lost it,” he says. “But if it makes you happy, then go for it. Less for me to move,” he adds, stretching his legs out. “I am gonna hurt so much tomorrow.”

“Do you want to take a hot bath?” Tessa asks, and he looks up in surprise. “The plumber said the pipes are fine, and I know I’ve got some epsom salts in one of these boxes.”

Scott’s uneasiness about the house seems silly given he’d been walking in and out of it with no weirdness all day, and a hot bath does sound like exactly what his sore muscles need... “You know what, sure.”

About half an hour later, Scott is reclining in the clawfoot tub that Tessa had gushed to her sister about the week prior. Which reminds him– “Hey, T?” he calls out to where she’s unpacking boxes on the other side of the door. “Is Jordan okay? She seemed like she might be sick or something when she came over the other day.”

“Oh, she’s fine,” Tessa says, voice muffled but audible through the door. “I don’t know what that was about.”

The tub really is massive – Scott’s not a tall man by any means, but he can’t remember the last time
he was in a tub he could really stretch out in. He sighs as the heat seeps into his muscles. “Your hot water bill is going to be massive,” he calls out, but there’s no response. She must have gone downstairs, he thinks to himself as he reaches out of the tub for the bag of epsom salts.

It happens so quickly he doesn’t have time to react – one second he’s sitting up, the next he’s flat on his back in the tub, his face and nose below the water line as he thrashes to get traction against something, anything. His wet hands slip uselessly off of the porcelain walls of the tub as he scrabbles for a handhold, and his chest is burning and I can’t die in a bathtub is the only thought in his mind–

– and then he’s on the bathroom floor, with Tessa half on top of him, and he’s coughing and sputtering.

“Scott?” Tessa’s voice is panicked and shrill. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“I think your tub tried to drown me,” he says, realizing he’s naked, and snatching the towel from the rack next to them to cover himself. “Good thing you came back upstairs.”

“What do you mean? I was up here the whole time.”

“But I was talking to you–you didn’t answer,” he says by way of explanation, sitting up, and she shakes her head.

“I didn’t hear it,” she says. “I was talking to you and when you stopped answering, I got worried. You didn’t hear me pounding on the door?”

“I must’ve been underwater at that point,” he says flatly, and her cheeks flush. Tessa stands up abruptly. “I’m going to get changed,” she says, and finally he realizes she’s soaking wet.

“T, did you really pull me out of that tub all by yourself?” he asks her, and she flushes an even deeper shade of red.

“Well, I wasn’t going to let you drown,” she says. “You were just...so still, under the water. I thought you fell asleep.”

Scott is dumbstruck. “What are you talking about? I was thrashing around like crazy trying to get back up!”

“No, Scott,” she says, and he can tell she’s as confused as he is. “I swear, you weren’t moving and I panicked.”

He sighs. “Maybe you’re right, maybe I did just fall asleep and dreamed it.” Carefully keeping the towel over everything important, he stands up. “Thank you for not letting me die in a bathtub.”

“You’re welcome,” she says quietly, and he hugs her, wet clothes and all.

She leaves him to get dressed, and as Scott gathers his things he can’t help but notice that the brass fixtures all seem to gleam a bit brighter than he remembers.
“I don’t know, Danny, it’s like she’s been brainwashed,” Scott says to his brother. “The house this, the house that. I don’t get it, she wasn’t like this with her last place.”

“Well, have you tried – I dunno – talking to her about it?” Danny asks. “Maybe asked her what’s missing in her life that she’s trying to fulfil?”

Scott senses what his brother is hinting at, and he doesn’t like it one bit. “I’ve asked her, she just gives me these vague woo-woo answers about feeling like the house is ‘meant’ for her. I’ll be honest with you, it’s kinda weird.”

He can feel his brother’s sigh deep in his bones. “Have you tried talking to her about the other thing?”

“What other thing?” Silence. Danny isn’t going to let him off easy. Well, two can play at that game. “Oh, you mean the thing where we were a thing until we decided not to be a thing? That thing?”

“Oh, decided not to be a thing? Is that how you’re spinning it?”

“Plus you know who’s over there? Her father,” Scott continues talking as though his brother hadn’t replied. “You know, the one that up until last Tuesday she hadn’t spoken to in years.”
“Okay, that is a little weird,” Danny admits. “What did she have to say about it?”

“That her father wanted to come help out with the new house, and she thought it might be good for them to reconcile,” Scott says.

“That… actually seems perfectly reasonable.”

Scott runs his hand through his hair in frustration. “It might be if it was any other time, but now? When she’s bought a house that’s the diametric opposite of everything she’s ever gravitated toward?”

“Look, I have to go,” his brother says, “but I still think maybe she’s just having a rough time right now, and you two should make up already. That’s my brotherly two cents.”

“Thanks a lot, man,” Scott says sarcastically. “Really great insight there.”

They hang up and before he can talk himself out of it, Scott grabs his keys and heads over to the house.

Turning onto Tessa’s block, he’s almost blinded with lights flashing red and blue and white atop emergency vehicles, and before he sees what house they’re in front of, he knows it must be hers. His split second of curiosity turns to sheer terror. Oh god, Tessa!

Scott barely remembers to cut the engine, he’s in such a hurry to get to her, and he sprints into the house at top speed, stopping short when he sees the somber scene in the living room–one that includes a very much conscious, breathing Tessa, much to his relief.

His relief flips back to worry when he sees Tessa’s been crying, her face blotchy and her eyes red rimmed. “Tessa? What’s wrong?”

He hears someone clear their throat, and for the first time notices the uniformed officers standing in front of her. “And who are you?” one of them – a man, with the name THOMPSON on his uniform – asks him.

Scott’s hackles are up instantly “I’m her–” he glances back at Tessa– “I’m a friend of Tessa’s. What’s going on here?” he asks, sitting down on the sofa next to her. She doesn’t speak, just sags into him, and he puts a protective arm around her.

“Miss Virtue discovered her father’s body earlier this evening, and we just had a few questions for her,” Thompson says.

“What, like you think she did something?” Scott asks incredulously. “She could never.”

He feels their eyes meet more than he sees it, as focused as he is on Tessa. “No, nothing like that,” the other one assures him. His uniform says PHILLIPS. “It’s just a formality when something like this happens, just gotta dot the Is and cross the Ts, you know how it is.”

“No, I don’t,” Scott says bluntly. “Something like what?”

He’s expecting to hear that her father had some kind of accident. He’s not expecting what comes out of Officer Thompson’s mouth.

“Heart attack, from the looks of it. Seems he laid down for a nap and just didn’t get back up again.”
She spends three days at his place after that. Scott almost starts to believe that her father’s death has broken the spell the house seemed to have her under, but on the fourth day she packs up her things and tells him goodbye with a hug and a kiss on the cheek as though they hadn’t just spent three nights in the same bed.

“Thank you, Scott,” she says, and walks out the door without so much as a glance backwards.

Virtue, Tessa. *In-person interview with [redacted], 2022 July 05*

Interviewer: What did you see when you got back to the house?

Tessa: *pause* I don’t think–I mean, it isn’t going to make any sense. I can’t explain it.

I: Don’t worry about making sense, just describe what you saw.

T: Well, the living room… it was opulent.

I: Opulent?

T: Everything was like new. The carpet was gone and the hardwood floors were shining, the furniture was restored, the dust was cleaned off of everything – it was like stepping out of a time machine, I just knew this was how it was meant to look.

I: And did you ever come up with an explanation for it?

T: Look, I know how it sounds, but the house did that all by itself. It fed on death. It used me.

I: What do you mean, “used you”?

T: Every trap needs bait.

It’s 2am and Scott is still wide awake, so he’s mindlessly flipping channels while waiting out his insomnia. He lands on a nature documentary, and figures that should be boring enough to lull him to sleep.

“These stands of a single species of tree are called *devil’s gardens* by the locals,” the narrator says, and it cuts to a closeup of bustling ants. “It was thought that an evil forest spirit inhabited these
spaces, but in fact they are the work of *Myrmelachista schumanni*, an ant that defends the trees by killing insects that would feed on them and other plants that attempt to grow within their territory. In return, the ants nest in the hollow stems of the leaves. Under the protection of these ants, the trees flourish."

Instead of feeling soothed, Scott is even more unnerved. *Is that what’s happening?* he thinks. *Is Tessa becoming just an ant in a devil’s garden?*

The thought disturbs him so much that the sun comes up before he can manage to fall into a restless sleep.

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Scott’s 2am revelation sticks with him in the days to follow, but it’s not until the following Monday that he thinks to try to back up his wild theory with some research.

He starts by looking up property records. Nothing seems too out of the ordinary there, the house seems bought and sold about as often as Scott would expect from any house. But then he begins searching on the names listed on the deeds and that’s when the bottom falls out.

He finds obituaries for family members, all of which seem to hint at the deaths happening at home. There’s also a slew of missing persons reports. All the news articles mention the missing person as being last seen in the vicinity of the house.

Scott’s blood is running cold, but he needs confirmation that he’s not crazy, so he looks up the names on the most recent deed. He gets a hit on the woman’s name, and an address. Armed with this information, he gets in his car.

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The house he pulls up to is a very normal, cookie-cutter house in a pleasant neighborhood, and fortunately it does not give Scott the creeps. Before he can lose his nerve he walks up to the door and rings the bell.

A woman about his age answers the door, looking confused and a little alarmed. “Hello, can I help you?”

“I’m looking for Debra Wright, are you her?” he asks, and the woman shakes her head.

“I’m her niece,” the woman says. “My name is Caroline. Why do you need to see my aunt?”

“My friend bought her house, and I just had some questions about it,” he says, and Caroline visibly flinches.

“That’s not a good idea,” she says bluntly. “Look, my aunt has been through a lot, and we really just think it’s best if she forgets about that place."

“What do you mean, she’s been through a lot?” Scott asks, but Caroline remains silent. “I know
it’s strange of me to just show up like this, but I think my friend is experiencing what your aunt did, and I just want to help her.”

Caroline studies him for a long moment, then opens the door wider. “Fine. You can ask her a few questions. But if she gets upset, you have to leave.”

Scott nods and follows her inside, then up the stairs to a bedroom. He takes note of the stair lift installed. “She has a hard time getting up and down, but she wanted to be as far away from the basement as possible,” Caroline explains. “She won’t go near it.”

They enter the bedroom where a woman who looks to be about seventy is in bed watching television. “Aunt Deb, there’s someone here to see you,” Caroline says, and the woman in bed looks at him with curiosity.

“What can I do for you, young man?” she says, and Scott sits in the chair next to the bed.

“My friend Tessa bought your house,” he says, and like her niece had, the woman blanches.

“Is that so?” Debra asks, her voice shaking. “Does she – is she living there?”

“Yes,” Scott tells her, and her eyes go wide.

“You need to get your friend out of that house,” Debra tells him, in a voice barely louder than a whisper. “It’ll take everyone from her, and then it will take her, too.”

“What do you mean?” Scott asks. “How will it take her?”

“Tell me,” the woman says as though she hadn’t heard him, “Have you been in the basement?”

“Yes,” he answers hesitantly, “Once.”

“Was the door closed?” Debra asks him.

Out of the corner of his eye he can see Caroline start to wring her hands nervously. “What door? The basement door?”

“No,” Debra says, “The door under the stairs.”

“Oh, the crawl space? It’s jammed shut, I couldn’t get it open,” he tells her, and her shoulders drop as she sighs in relief.

“Good,” the older woman says. “That’s where it happens.”

“You should go,” Caroline tells him. “Aunt Deb doesn’t like to talk about this.”

“I’m fine, Caro,” Debra says insistently. “He should know.”

“Know what?” Scott says, no longer caring if he agitates the women with his questions. “What happened to you in that house?”

Debra sits up a little straighter and smooths the covers in front of her with her hands. “I lived in that house for only eight months, twenty years ago,” she says. “My family hated it but I loved it. It was as though—”

“As though it was meant for you?” Scott finishes her sentence, and she nods.
“They tried to tell me but I didn’t listen. I didn’t even listen after my eldest son vanished while he was house sitting for us. It wasn’t until it took my husband that I realized what was happening.”

“What was happening?”

“The house feeds on people,” Debra says matter-of-factly. “It feeds on their fear, on their emotions. And when it can, it takes them. That door in the basement is a door to hell.”

“I don’t understand,” Scott says, frustrated. “How do you know this?”

“Because it opened for me once, and I stared pure evil in the face and then walked straight out the door and never went back,” Debra tells him.

“But why would the house spare you like that?” he presses.

Her answer makes his blood run cold. “It was a threat. It needs a caretaker to bring it what it needs,” she says. “And what better lure than a woman who wants her loved ones close by?”

“So when Tessa runs out of people to bring to the house…” he trails off.

Debra nods. “Then it will take her, too.”

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Scott breaks all the speed limits and a few traffic laws in his haste to get to Tessa, Debra’s voice still ringing in his head. It will take her, too.

Storm clouds are gathering as he pulls up to the house, and he thinks he can hear a rumble of thunder in the distance. He rings the doorbell three times and pounds on the door before she finally opens it.

“What the hell, Scott? What’s going on?” Tessa asks, a hand wrapped defensively around the door.

“You have to leave, right now,” Scott says, but she shakes her head.

“I don’t have to go anywhere,” she says in a flat tone. “I don’t understand why you’re so upset.”

“Tessa, this house is doing things to you,” he says, pleading. “It needs you to help it feed, and the people you love will keep dying here.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she insists. “It’s just a house, Scott.”

“It’s not just a house!” he explodes, loud enough that she flinches at his words. “I went and talked to the woman you bought it from, she told me everything. She told me that when the house is done with you, it’ll eat you, too!”

She shrinks away from him. “It wouldn’t hurt me,” she insists. “I belong here.”

“Stop saying that!” he yells, and she shrinks away from him even more, so he lowers his voice. “Please, kiddo. Please just come with me.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t leave,” she says, so quietly he can barely make out her words above
the rising wind. “I can’t. It won’t let me.”

Fat raindrops are beginning to fall from the sky as they face off and before he can react, she turns and bolts into the house.

He runs in after her, and catching up to her should be a simple matter but he swears the floor is sticking to his shoes, slowing him down in his pursuit. “Tessa!”

She runs upstairs and he manages to make it up just in time to see her throw open the door to the attic stairs. Scott slows down, realizing there’s no way she could get back past him without running right by him. “Tessa?”

The feeling of dread in the pit of his stomach gets stronger with every step he takes up the steps to the attic, not knowing what he’s going to find. It surges when he sees that the door leading to the roof is open, and he tastes bile in the back of his throat.

She’s standing on the narrow walkway between the attic and the door to the turret, gazing over the side at the ground two stories below. “Don’t come any closer!” she shouts over the howling wind, dark hair whipping around her face and her eyes wide and frightened. “You can’t make me leave. I belong here.”


“I’ll jump,” she says, and Scott realizes the house is in control. Tears spill from her eyes, mixing with the rain on her face. “I swear, I’ll jump and then I can be here forever. You’ll see.”

Scott takes one step out the door, then another. She watches him warily, but doesn’t move. “Tessa, I don’t want you to be with this house forever,” he says, hoping she can hear him over the wind. A strong gust of wind sweeps past him and he almost loses his footing.

Below them a low rumble begins to hum through the house, and Scott knows it’s not thunder. He looks down and to his horror, new shingles are beginning to push through on the roof, displacing the old shingles as a new tooth forces out the old. They tumble to the ground, where he can see old siding blowing away.

She’s only a step or two away from him, still watching his every move, muscles tensed. “Tessa, I’m sorry.”

Her expression goes from scared to bewildered. “What? Sorry about what?”

“I wasn’t being honest when we called it off,” he says. “I didn’t tell you how I really felt.”

“That doesn’t matter anymore,” she says. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because I’m in love with you, Tess,” he says, and she blinks at him. “I’m in love with you and if you throw yourself off this roof, I won’t be able to live with myself.”

He feels it then, something breaks inside her and she looks at him as though she’s seeing him for the first time. “I’m in love with you too,” she tells him, and her face crumples. “But I can’t leave. It won’t let me leave.”

“Come here, just – just take a step, and grab my hand,” Scott says, reaching for her. “I won’t let you fall.”

After a harrowing moment, Tessa takes a step back from the edge of the walkway and grabs his
hand. “Take me away from here, please,” she begs.

They’re carefully making their way back to the attic when all the hairs on Scott’s arms begin to stand up, and he realizes it’s not the house but the air around them. “Tessa, get down!”

He half pulls, half shoves her into the attic, throwing both of them to the floor as a bolt of lightning strikes the turret behind them. They gape through the door at the fire that begins to consume the roof of the turret.

*Take that, you son of a bitch,* he thinks, and he swears he can hear the house screaming in pain. It sounds like the screech of nails on chalkboard, of ancient stones being ground together.

Standing up, he pulls Tessa to her feet and both of them run down the attic steps, down the flight of stairs to the first story, and again the floor seems to warp and stick to their feet. As they pass the door to the basement he can feel her try to pull away, but Scott sweeps her up and throws her over his shoulder to run out the front door.

Reaching the front lawn, Scott bends down to set Tessa on her feet and then collapses. Despite the rain, the fire is considerably larger and has almost engulfed the entire roof.

Tessa sits down next to him in the wet grass. “Shouldn’t we do something? Call the fire department?”

He chuckles, reaching up to rub Tessa’s back. “We will. Eventually.”

“I’m going to have to replace so much,” she laments, and he pats her back.

“Maybe,” he says, “but you can’t be replaced.”

Tessa lies down in the grass with him, wraps her arms around him and kisses him. They watch the house burn folded in each others’ arms.

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*Missing Persons Poster for Richard MacDonald*

**Name:** Richard Thomas MacDonald

**Missing Since:** 02/14/2017

**Missing From:** Goderich, Ontario

**DOB:** 05/08/1997

**Age:** 20

**Race:** White

**Hair Color:** Blond

**Eye Color:** Blue
Height: 5’11”

Weight: 77kg

Richard was last seen by neighbors leaving his home to house sit for a friend. He was reported missing by his girlfriend when he failed to show up for a date they had planned the following day. Richard’s car was found with the engine still running in front of the house he was asked to check on, but no eyewitnesses have come forward to report if he made it there without consequence. He was last seen wearing blue jeans and a dark gray or dark blue shirt, a black parka and a Toronto Blue Jays cap. If you see anyone matching this description please contact [redacted]

Chapter End Notes

This story is sort of a mashup of/tribute to House of Leaves, Dionaea House and an old movie called Burnt Offerings. Apparently I have a thing for evil houses. I hope you enjoyed!
on hallowed ground

Chapter by runny33, virtueoso

Chapter Summary

For three-hundred and twenty-four days of the year, Hogwarts' top floor corridor lies empty and abandoned, resigned to sink into obscurity and whispered legend. Then, on day three-hundred and twenty-five, something strange happens.

Chapter Notes

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Beta: the incomparable Marie, thank you so much!

For our AU, we got to return to a world still so very near and dear to our hearts - do you believe in magic? One day, we'll finish the pages sitting in our google doc. But until then, please enjoy these Halloween excerpts of magic!vm.

After four years at Hogwarts, Scott is certain: if ever confined to a Hogwarts portrait, he would be a regal knight hanging outside the Transfiguration classroom, able to hold court with all the students striding by.

Not one of the long-haired, severe looking men in the gloomy portraits lining the Entrance Hall, the ones that never get to say anything beyond reprimanding first-years for letting their robes drag on the polished floor; or the silent, murky shadows that lurk along the hallway to the Slytherin Common Room, the gleaming yellow eyes hidden behind flat brushstrokes of oil paint like the promise of a fire dancing past thick, soupy mist--the ones that make his skin crawl. And definitely not one of the poor souls confined to the top floor: the echoing, empty corridors where nobody ever ventures. Up on the top floor, the vast majority of the portraits are covered in thick black cloth. The brocade is heavy, like a shroud across a coffin, yet no dust ever settles. Torches burn ever-bright in the sconces by each archway, the flames constant and steady yet never quite banishing the shadows that seem to creep uncommonly far across the flagstones. The shadows of the hallway along the top floor are not for lingering in; even the greenest of students knows that.

For three-hundred and twenty-four days of the year, the corridor lies empty and abandoned, resigned to sink into obscurity and whispered legend. Then, on day three-hundred and twenty-five, something strange happens.

The shadows still creep across the floor, grasping at the flickers of light which dare to brave the darkness, and silence lies thick across the shrouds of cloth and the empty hallways, swimming in the pale moonlight through the arched windows at the very end of the hallway. But if you know where to look, on a nondescript section of mahogany-panelled wall between two equally nondescript covered portraits, something new appears: a small, perfectly circular hole, half-hidden
by a lip of wood running alongside. Get closer, and you might notice something stranger still
behind the hole.

An eye. Unblinking and lidless. No colour to the iris, smoky grey and slightly translucent, misted
at the pupil. Easy enough to look straight through, until you notice it following you with every
step.

Students who approach the hallway on day three-hundred and twenty-five are the reason it lies
abandoned for the remaining three-hundred and twenty-four—unless, that is, you come with an
invitation. And Scott Moir, star of the Gryffindor Quidditch team and friend to the unlikeliest of
Hogwarts denizens, has come with not only that. He’s come with a plus one.

They’re dressed rather distinctly. “Evening wear,” the invite had specified, though only one of
them had figured out that the curled, swooping cursive of the lettering, and the crimson wax seal
dated to 1483, probably spoke of a host with different ideas of formal wear than what most of the
young students at Hogwarts kept in their wardrobes.

Scott wears his faded jeans and the only shirt remaining in his trunk without permanent grass stains
from rolling around on the Quidditch pitch, the kind of stains that stick no matter how many times
he tries to charm them out. By his side, Tessa is dressed like a young Marie Antoinette. He can’t
even hazard a guess at where she found her dress. The fabric is too glossy and rich to have come
from a costume shop, not the scratchy sort of satin that only accompanies discount Bride of
Dracula or Sexy Veela get-ups, and the bodice fits too well to her shape, obviously tailor-made.
But she blends in perfectly amongst the crowds of students on the staircases as she and Scott make
their way up to the top floor. Costumes and dress robes alike are fair game on Halloween night;
Scott’s lackluster attire is not.

Drawing closer to the peephole in the wall, the two of them stop in front of it. The eye blinks at
them slowly, looking first one of them, then the other, up and down. Its milky iris rolls in the
socket as it sizes them up, before spinning backwards entirely to show nothing but a blank white
eye, pale venulations spidering across the surface.

Tessa and Scott look at each other, as for a minute or two, there’s nothing but silence, lapsing and
uneven in the lingering stillness of the hall. Then, with a quiet ‘click,’ and a creaking of wood, the
entire wall panel swings open before them, peephole and all. A wave of heat rolls out from the
opening, the rush of air carrying the faint, sour smell of rot, and Scott’s nose wrinkles up.

“Don’t be rude,” Tessa reminds him, without even looking. “We’re guests.”

“Yeah, but did they have to choose a room with no windows? On the top floor, T? Would it kill
them to be able to see outside?”

“And now you’re being insensitive.”

Grumbling to himself, Scott slips his arm through the arm that Tessa holds out to him as they
maneuver inside the passageway. There isn’t far to go; once inside, the panel swings closed again,
trapping them in the humid fog of overly-rich, almost fetid air. The sounds of celebration drift
through from along the narrow passageway: glasses clinking and voices raised in laughter, the
gentle swell of polite conversation.

“We’re late,” Tessa hisses, her fingers digging in at his elbow. They’re slightly damp with sweat,
and Scott realises that she’s nervous: what for, he has no idea. There’s hardly precedence for two
mortals attending a five hundred and eleventh Deathday Celebration. Nobody will mind if they
miss the speeches.
Still, he gives her a reassuring pat of the hand, and doesn’t tell her that her grip is so tight they might have to amputate his arm if she keeps this up for the whole dinner.

There must have been a magical charm silencing the noise from inside the passageway, because as they move closer to the room where the party must be in full swing, the noise becomes so loud that it’s almost unbearable. Laughter becomes raucous and shrieking, great peals of it that bounce off the close-panelled walls, seeming to come from all directions, and the gentle clinking of glasses isn’t so gentle any more. In fact, if Scott listens closely, the sound has a metallic ring to it: jangling, like metal chains clanking together. The scrape of something being dragged across uneven floorboards, something large and heavy. Or is that the rasp of a knife across a sharpening stone? It reminds him of the discordant sound when a skate is sharpened incorrectly—a sound that cuts through the air, quivering and still, just as easily as it frays his nerves.

In the airless corridor, all the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

The two of them have drawn to a standstill; when he looks at Tessa, she’s staring back at him, her eyes wide and pale. He can barely see her face, he realises: a strange darkness cloaking the corridor, turning the dim light to gloom so that all he can make out are the whites of her eyes, and the flash of her teeth when she opens her mouth and says, hesitantly: “Scott…?”

“I know,” he says, past the fluttering of his pulse in his throat, his palms growing clammy and cold. “It’s fine, it’s probably just some shit they pull all the time to frighten off anyone who’s not supposed to be here. Here, hold on…”

Fumbling in his back pocket, he pulls out his wand and mutters a quick “Lumos.” The tip dutifully lights up, casting a small, yellowing halo of light around them, and he sees Tessa visibly relax.

“Better?” he says, and she nods.

Her fingers press in tighter at his arm. “Okay,” she says. “Let’s hurry up before we miss the entire party.”

It’s long, this corridor. Longer than it looked from outside. Longer than would make physical sense to have hidden behind a wall on the top floor of the castle; but then, maybe it’s one of those corridors that run the whole length of the castle, the ones that go on for miles and miles. Scott’s heard rumours of students who disappeared into dusty, cobwebbed old corridors and never came back out again—“shortcuts” that nobody with half a brain ever thinks about taking. The castle’s staircases change in the blink of an eye; what about the corridors? Hidden entrances that swing open once and never open again? When Scott tips his head back behind him, the entrance they came through is lost in gloom.

He can’t help but wonder if there was something important left out of their invite. Top floor, it had said. The corridor by the east staircase, thirteenth wall panel along. Seven-thirty sharp for Sir Nicholas’s five-hundred and fiftieth Deathday Celebration. No RSVP needed. Nothing about creepy hallways that go on forever, or weird clanking noises and demonic laughter. Scott has the invite still, crumpled and crushed in the bottom pocket of his jeans, just in case anyone asked questions about why two mortals were turning up.

The corridor continues onwards. It’s impossibly straight: they’re not curving, not descending, just walking straight forwards. It makes no sense. There’s no castle left for them to be walking in; the passageway where they entered was on the outer edge of the wall, windows at either end looking out across the castle grounds. This corridor is impossible.

Suddenly, there’s a tug on his arm and he realises that Tessa has stopped. The look on her face
when he glances across turns his blood to ice. Her gaze is wide and frozen in fear, fixed on something ahead of them in the corridor.

He doesn’t want to look. But he does anyway, because Tessa has seen it and he refuses to make her go through anything alone.

At first, it’s difficult to make out anything in the hazy darkness. He thought it was a good idea to use Lumos, give them a bit of breathing room. But as he squints into the blackness of the corridor ahead, he’s realising that it completely blinds them to whatever is happening outside of their conspicuous little bubble of light. His eyes strain in the darkness, trying desperately to make out whatever it is that has Tessa so scared.

And then, for a second, he sees it.

A shape.

Something large, almost tall enough to block the entire corridor. The edges of it are grey and formless, melting into the surrounding darkness like it belongs to the dark panelled walls and the creaking mahogany floorboards. It’s wearing a cloak of some kind, a hood draped forwards where a head should be, obscuring the face, and Scott finds suddenly that he really doesn’t want to know what is underneath that cloak. He absolutely does not.

But before he can think anything else, the shape has vanished.

“Maybe, um… Tess, maybe we should go back,” Scott whispers, his voice cracking.

Tessa’s fingernails are dug so hard into his arm that he knows there’ll be tiny crescent-shaped bruises there tomorrow morning. “We can’t,” she protests, turning her head back and forth along the corridor to check what’s around them. “Nick invited you, he’d be so disappointed if you didn’t show up. Are you sure we’ve got the right corridor?”

“You’re telling me there’s another secret passageway hidden behind the thirteenth wall panel along from the east stairwell?”

“I don’t know! It can’t hurt to check!”

“Right, I’ll just go and ask the disembodied eye on the front door, shall I?”

A loud BANG makes them both jump, followed by a slow, rhythmic creaking noise: footsteps from further down along the corridor, steadily heading in their direction. Scott feels Tessa’s hand leave his arm, moving instead to clutch his hand. Her fingers are cool and clammy with sweat, but he grips them tightly, locking the two of them together.

“Maybe we should head back,” she whispers, her eyes fixed on the corridor. From the vast darkness, the creaking footsteps slowly make their way towards the two of them. A breath of wind stirs the air, but the breeze isn’t fresh; it’s putrid and stale, as if somewhere along the corridor, a door that has remained closed for a very long time has suddenly opened.

“No rush,” he says, attempting a smile, but it falls flat as Tessa digs her bottom teeth into her lip. “Definitely not permanently damaging my sense of smell here.”

They turn and head back along the corridor as quickly as they can manage in the cramped space of the passage. Scott’s heart pounds in his chest, the sounds of footsteps still echoing along the hall behind them, and he finds that he doesn’t want to turn around again, doesn’t want to come face to face with the source of that noise, the hooded figure and the sound of scraping metal.
It’s a faster journey back, not long until the closed door of the entrance comes into view out of the darkness, Scott’s raised wand still casting a faint sphere of light for them, and he feels his heart skip a beat. It’ll be a shame to miss the party; they’ll have to apologise to Nick tomorrow, but at least they’ll be out in the open hallway. Free of the crowded confines of the passageway, the two straight walls like bars of a cage, and out where there’s torchlight and open air and people.

“Here we go,” he says, with an uneven smile at Tessa. Raising his hand up to the closed door, he gives it a push. It doesn’t budge. Tessa’s breathing is loud—quick, panicked inhales of breath, and still, the steady, groaning creak of the footsteps behind them.

“We just have to push harder,” Tessa says, with conviction. “It’s an old door. They probably get stuck all the time.”

“Right,” Scott nods. “Yeah, of course, you’re right. Here, help me push—”

Stowing his wand away in his front pocket (the light dimming slightly, crushed against his shirt), he raises both hands to push. Tessa does the same, shouldering up alongside him and placing both palms on the door.

“Okay, on three,” he says. The footsteps get closer with every passing second; he can see Tessa dart a nervous glance back behind them, her eyes wide. “As hard as you can, Tess, ready? One, two, three!”

The two of them push with all their might; Scott strains so hard that he can feel the blood rushing in his ears, his pulse pounding like hammer and tongs. The wood is warm to the touch, and he can practically hear the buzz of the castle on the other side, the hubbub of friendly chatter, the Halloween Feast in full swing in the Great Hall. But they push to no avail: the panel doesn’t move an inch, doesn’t even creak like it might give way if they put enough effort into it.

The peephole in the centre of the panel is empty, and it’s impossible to make out the raised edges where the panel might swing open again. There’s no door any more: just a solid, seamless wall.

“We’re trapped,” Tessa says, her voice pitching higher, and Scott feels the panic rise in his own chest too. There’s no use banging on the wall, hoping that somebody hears them: there’s a reason that students stay away from the corridor on the top floor.

“Hold on, hold on, there must be something we can do,” he says, scrambling for his wand. What spells have they been taught to knock through a solid wall? Alohomora, yes, but there has to be a lock and a key for that.

“You can’t just blast a hole in the wall, Scott!” Tessa hisses. “They’re hundreds of years old, do you know how much it would take to replace them? We’d be in detention for the rest of our lives!”

“Well, have you got any bright ideas?! I’m trying to make sure we live long enough to even see another detention!”

“Look,” she says, turning to face him; in the dim light cast by his wand, he can see her face is pale as porcelain. “There’s obviously somebody down the end of the corridor. We heard them when we came in. We go and find them, they’ll know how we can get out of here.”

“And the… thing?”

The footsteps, still echoing down the hallway, closer and closer.

He sees Tessa swallow, her hand trembling where it grips her wand tightly. “Whatever it is, it can’t
hurt us. The castle has enchantments against that. It couldn’t even be here if it was malicious, it’s not allowed.”

Like the Dementors weren’t supposed to be able to get onto the castle grounds all those years ago, Scott wants to say? But she’s being pragmatic, and seeing her lack of fear makes him a little less afraid, so he nods.

“Alright then. We go back up the corridor. We find someone who can help. We get out, and then we go to the Feast with everyone else and never accept invitations from ghosts ever again.”

Tessa nods her head, the wisps of hair she curled for the party bobbing around her ears. “Deal.”

They both turn to look back up the corridor, into the fog of darkness. The footsteps have stopped, but in their absence there’s a disquieting stillness. Everything on edge, a silence that stretches and wraps itself around every wall and floorboard, thick as mud, grasping from the darkness to fold around them too.

Scott gulps. They have to go. They can’t stay here, trapped in a dead-end corridor until whatever it is finds them, even if Tessa is so adamant that it can’t actually do anything to them. Holding his wand back out in front of him, he takes a steadying breath. The light is comforting: a warm, solid little glow, for all its uselessness in ways that matter.

But as he stares into the darkness, there’s a sudden glimmer. A thin sliver of light winking from the farthest end of the corridor, something that looks almost like—moonlight? A window? A way out.

“Shit, Tess, there —” he cries, lurching forwards with sudden speed, grabbing her wrist to pull her along with him.

She makes a noise of protest, scrambling to keep pace, but it’s difficult with the skirts of dress slowing her down, taking up space so there’s no room for them to run side by side, and he finds her wrist slipping through his fingers. His eyes are fixed on the light ahead of them, bobbing in his vision as he runs: breakneck speed now, Tessa’s shoes slapping on the floorboards behind him, the sound of her harsh breathing in his ear, her skirts rustling.

Faster and faster they go, until his lungs are burning with the effort and the light still seems no closer than before, a mirage in a desert. Faster and faster, his eyes blurring and unfocused, the breath stripped raw from his lungs, calves screaming.

Suddenly, the light from his wand winks out, like a candle snuffed between a thumb and forefinger. And behind him—far behind him, much too far behind him, Tessa screams.

It’s a sound he’s never heard before, and never wants to hear ever again.

He spins on his heel, staring wildly into the darkness, unable to see anything. She’s not here: she must have fallen behind, and he hadn’t even realised, shit, if she’s hurt—

“Tess?!?” he yells, the sound bouncing off the walls of the passageway. “Tessa?!”

Silence. Only the sound of his own voice reflected back at him.

Without a second thought, he takes off down the hallway, towards where Tessa’s scream came from. His burning lungs don’t matter anymore; or the fact that the *Lumos* spell won’t take again, his fumbling attempts at casting shedding no light on the situation. He runs, blind in the dark,
calling her name all the while and terrified of what he might hear in response.

He yells her name until he’s hoarse and sore-throated, until he’s sure he must have run the entire length of the corridor three times over, and still, still nothing—how can there be nothing?

How is he ever supposed to explain this to her family? To her parents, her brothers? To Jordan, he thinks with panic, who he’ll have to face every day in the Great Hall? How is he supposed to keep going knowing she’s been lost, all because he decided he needed a plus one to this party and dragged her along, convinced her to give up the warm, safe Halloween feast to accompany him? He hurtles along the hallway, still calling out intermittently for Tessa. His heart clenches around the fear, and the blind hope that if he just keeps going, if he just keeps searching, he’ll find her. He’d know if she really were gone, right? He just has to keep going.

Suddenly, there’s a hand around his arm, tugging him to the wall, through the wall like it’s mist, and he topples into a small, warmly lit room, and into a small, blessedly familiar figure who promptly screams. Scott screams. The ghost standing opposite them screams. And Nearly Headless Nick, who watches them all with a weary look on his face, shakes his head slowly.

Once Scott and Tessa have recovered sufficiently that they’ve stopped clinging to one another like frightened kittens, they’re provided with an explanation and a profuse apology from Sir Nick and the Bloody Baron both. A little initiation ritual, the Baron explains, for the lone human Gryffindor who was to be in attendance—knowing nothing of the Slytherin girl who would be following along with him. Some harmless fun for a ghost who sees out the majority of his days alone in the Astronomy Tower, absolutely un sanctioned by Nick himself, who assures the two of them that he had no idea any of this would be taking place. And if he had, he says, shooting daggers at the Baron, who gives a nonchalant shrug, he would certainly have rescinded the Baron’s invitation. The Bloody Baron rolls his eyes. But later, he pulls Tessa aside, his harsh, cracked voice earnest as he whispers that she’s his favourite third year, that he’s sorry. Tessa assaudes his concerns politely, if a little stiffly.

No apology helps get the sound of Tessa’s scream out of Scott’s head. After a quick half hour, the two of them take their leave of the Deathday Celebration and finally join their friends downstairs in the Great Hall looking notably pale.

Safe to say, their invite the following year comes with a few additional clauses attached: an entire handwritten note, in fact, attached to the main parchment scroll with a neat crimson ribbon.

Dearest Tessa and Scott, the note reads. I would be honoured if you would attend the five-hundred and twelfth celebration of my passage into this unearthly realm. Please do be assured that the Baron will NOT be in attendance this year. Following a period of lengthy discourse with the affected party, I have taken the executive decision to revoke the Baron’s invitation. Our doorman, Klaus, is fully advised of the situation, and the appropriate Repelling charms have been established around the perimeter to ensure that the Baron is kept well away from the corridor on the night of the party. If this can be any reassurance, my dear friends, that your evening this year will be one of certain delight and pleasant company, I would be most humbly grateful to entertain you.

Tessa is initially aghast at the thought of the Baron being excluded from the entire celebration, but she comes around when she finds out that the Baron actually prefers the solace of the Astronomy Tower to being stuck in a room celebrating Sir Nick’s Deathday (the first time, he says, it was a novelty. The five-hundredth time, the table conversation began to run a little dry.) And although she and Scott approach the evening with considerable trepidation (and five separate escape plans if they get stuck in the corridor again, none of which involve letting go of the other’s hand), their
preparation turns out to be have been needless.

Sir Nick greets them at the entrance, guiding them through to the drawing room at the end of the passageway, where he introduces them to the assorted party of ghosts and ghouls before outlining the schedule for the evening.

“This year,” he drawls, “we’re implementing a new change. Namely, in deference to our corporal pals, we’ve decided that we will be partaking in some of the wonderful Halloween traditions that the world of the living has to offer nowadays.”

Scott nudges Tessa. After making it through the passageway and settling in at their assigned places at the dining table, his nerves quickly gave way to excitement. Tessa seems content to wait and see what this new development holds, but that’s alright. He can be thrilled enough for the both of them.

“We will be engaging in a night of Halloween terror!” Nick announces.

The small, spindly-limbed ghost sitting next to them leans across to whisper: “It’s mostly an excuse for Nick to pull his head off his shoulders and terrify some first-years… and for us to show you all the castle’s best secrets.”

Tessa’s eyes light up at the mention of the castle’s secrets, and Scott’s not surprised. Ever since their escapade last year, she’s been working on a list of all the secret passageways she can find; a foot and a half of parchment later, and she still tells Scott she feels like she’s only just scratched the surface of the secrets Hogwarts has to offer.

“AH EM.” Nick clears his throat, scowling. “Ulterior motives or no, the goal is to strike fear into the hearts of as many unsuspecting students as possible. Ordinarily I would caution against such behaviour, kindly and helpful citizens of this life as we must strive to be, but it is Halloween, after all. Now, Scott, Tessa, you are free to accompany whoever you like. Being denizens of the mortal realm yourselves, I’m sure you’ll understand that we cannot allow you to wander around these halls terrifying your fellow students willy-nilly—why, Professor McGonagall would have my head on a platter at the very thought! However, Lucille here has kindly offered to take you on for the evening, if you would like to help with her dare.”

Nick gestures to a brightly-pale ghost sat across from them; round-cheeked and smiling, with a shock of loose-curled hair fanning out around her face, Lucille gives them a wave. Scott can’t help but glance down to the sabre hilt protruding from her chest, the blade stabbed clean through her leather vest and poking out the other side. It seems like a painful way to go. Very cool, but painful.

“Thank you,” Tessa says, digging her elbow into Scott’s ribs, and Scott remembers that it’s probably not polite to stare at somebody’s death wound. “That would be lovely.”

He tries not to stare the whole evening, as Lucille leads them on a merry dance around the castle, terrifying the inopportune students who happen across her path. It’s a morbid, curious fascination, because Lucille doesn’t play up her wound like Nick and his nearly-severed head, or the Baron and his chains. She carries the sword stuck straight through her like it’s not even there—and Scott supposes that, after a time, she probably forgets it herself. It’s simply a part of her body, as natural as a hand or a limb. He wonders who stuck it there. Whether they cared about the fate they were resigning Lucille to, forever stuck between one life and the next. Ghosts only remain behind where their connection to a place or a person in the corporeal realm is so strong that it overcomes death, and he doubts that Lucille gave up an afterlife of bliss all for the love of the Owly.

The sword, too, makes her incredibly effective at their task. Scott and Tessa enjoy themselves,
lurking in the shadows as Lucille tries to tally up the most wins.

It’s Tessa who first has the idea of how to actively help. They’re huddled behind a statue, out of sight of the fourth year students just ahead. Lucille’s grin is broad; it’s rare to find an opportunity to scare upper level students and she’s determined to make the most of it. As they wait for them to get closer, Tessa gasps and reaches for Scott’s hand, gripping it tightly. Her other hand wraps around her wand, but she says not a word. Silently, Scott feels the familiar pull, the way Tessa’s magic wraps around his and he feeds it to her.

Lucille, for her part, seems content to wait and see how this plays out.

The air in the hallway changes; it’s charged, prickling the senses. Even the walls seem to bend inwards, waiting—

And then all the lights plunge out.

Lucille grins, recognizing her cue. As she floats down the hallway, Tessa quietly whispers, “Parva ignis”, and tiny flames with no source burst up around her, flickering, casting shadows everywhere. The sword sticking out from Lucille’s chest seems impossibly large, the hilt glowing in the firelight.

Discordant notes fill the hallway. Lucille sneaks a glance backwards, a grin on her face, and Scott gives her a quick thumbs up, before she faces forward. She leans in closely, inches from the fourth years’ faces. “Pray tell, children, why do you roam my halls on this night of all nights?”

Tessa’s hand twitches in his, and Scott chances a look at her. A small grin on her face and the silent movement of her lips foreshadows the latest arrival—from the very end of the hallway, a ghostly replica of the sword in Lucille’s chest flies impossibly quick towards the group.

They scream and scatter, running away from the apparition at full speed.

Once they disappear around the corner, Tessa’s hand slides out of his, and the magic dissipates. They stare at each other for a long moment, before doubling over in laughter.

“Did you see their—their faces?!” Scott chokes out between hiccuping laughter.

Tessa grins. “Lucille, I hope you didn’t mind the sword.”

The ghost floats above them, cackling to herself. “Mind? It was bloody brilliant! No wonder all the professors talk about you two and your magic. How the hell did you do that?”

“Magic,” Tessa winks.

With a shake of her head, Lucille descends. “Well, magic or not, you’ve been holding out on me. Come on, with that we’ve got many more students to terrorize.”

They stay with Lucille late into the night, losing time as they find new opportunities to help with her task. Their count reaches somewhere in the triple digits by the time they’re done: curfew long since passed, the halls empty of all but a few professors and prefects on their usual nightly patrols.

Lucille floats ahead of them, checking around corners, while Tessa and Scott cling to the shadows. After a productive evening of terror, Lucille has promised to take them to her favorite part of the castle, unknown to all other students, up on the very topmost battlements; she knows the secret staircase that will lead them up undiscovered.
It’s slow going through the halls, though, with two students in tow desperate not to be spotted. Scott thinks it would be faster if they just sprinted for the staircase, screw the patrols, but Tessa punches him in the shoulder for suggesting it. She’s already in enough trouble with her House for skipping the Feast, let alone losing them points if they’re caught wandering around the halls after hours. So they proceed at a crawl. Scott wonders if it’ll be worth it. He hopes it is; Tessa deserves it.

Finally, Lucille stops at a wide stone pillar marking the corner of the castle. It looks identical to all the other stone pillars on every other floor, flagstones clean and bright, the stone worn smooth with age, but Lucille gestures to a small stone about a third of the way up.

“There,” she says, her translucent hand passing clean through the pillar. “Push it in and go up. Be sure to watch your step. It’s a long way down, and I’d rather not see you on the less corporeal side of things at Nick’s next Deathday! Thanks for all your help earlier.”

Lucille gives them a wink, remembering the terrified looks on the fourth years’ faces, and floats off down the corridor. Scott watches her until she disappears out of sight through the floor, then turns to Tessa.

“Right then,” he grins. “Back to spooky secret corridors again.”

“Spooky secret staircases,” Tessa corrects, as she pushes in the stone Lucille indicated and slips inside the narrow opening that presents itself. “We can deal with those.”

Scott follows her inside, and the stone seals behind them once more; Tessa mutters a quick Lumos charm to light their way. “You’ve got a lot of faith in us,” he says.

It’s a little cramped; there’s barely room for he and Tessa to stand face to face, even with the rather less voluminous period-appropriate dress shirt and pants she’s opted for this time around. (Practicality, she’d told him, had won out over style. Sixteen-layer petticoats were all well and good for ballroom dancing—not so much for running for her life along narrow corridors. Just in case.)

“Mm,” she considers, tilting her head to the side. “I have faith in me, mostly. I don’t trust you not to leave me in the lurch again like you did last time. Big, brave Gryffindor,” she teases.

“Honest to Merlin, I thought you were behind me the whole time, Tess. I never would have…”

“I know,” she says, gently. Her hand wraps around his, twining their fingers together between them. “It’s okay. Now come on, I want to see the sun rise across the unlucky idiots who have to be out for Quidditch practice the morning after Halloween.”

It’s Ravenclaw, Scott knows: they chose the day specifically because no other team would ever badger them to swap that particular practice rota. And so he explains to Tessa as they begin their climb.

The walls of the staircase are dark but well-maintained, despite the heavy silence of time that seems to fill the space. The stairs themselves curve upwards and upwards; even craning his neck, Scott can’t get a sense of how high they go. Time slips away as they ascend. It could be seconds, or minutes, or days even; the repetition of the stairs makes it drone on. Finally, blissfully—Scott’s pretty sure he was close to going insane if he had to climb another riser—Tessa stops, hand pressed against a trapdoor above her. Between the two of them, they manage to heave it open; the heavy wooden door clatters against the stonework with a loud bang, and they both look down for a second, nervous that the sound might have travelled.
“I think we’re far enough away,” Scott whispers, running a comforting hand across Tessa’s back, the same soothing motion he does just before they take the ice. The warmth of her skin bleeds through her shirt, makes his palm tingle where he touches her.

Maybe it distracts Tessa too, because it takes her a few seconds to respond. “Right,” she says, with a rushed exhale of breath. “Yeah, I hope so. I think you’ll have to come and hide out in my common room if Gryffindor loses any more points on your behalf.”

“That’s okay,” Scott says. “Slytherin loves me.”

“Only because you’re so good at self-sabotage,” Tessa teases, as she makes her way up out of the trapdoor. “We don’t even need to try to win the House Cup anymore. You do all the hard work for us.”

“Ah, but which of us has won more Quidditch matches?”

But she’s not listening anymore, and as Scott climbs up through the trap door and out into the chill night air, he realises why.

The night sky above Hogwarts is like nothing he’s ever seen before. It’s vast, an endless expanse of darkness spilling across the sky like ink on a canvas. However far he looks, there doesn’t seem to be an end. Back in Canada, there was always the haze of city lights on the horizon, dirty smears of yellow and beige and brown. Here, there’s nothing but the pitch darkness of the night, pure and clear, and the stars shimmering in great handfuls around them. His eyes follow one cluster, then the next: so big and bright that they seem almost close enough to touch, like they’re moving in waves around him and Tessa, dancing, beckoning.

Then his gaze falls upon Tessa, standing in the middle of the tower, head tipped all the way back, and he forgets what he’s supposed to be looking at. The smile on her face is stunning—literally, he feels like his heart might stop if he doesn’t tear his eyes away from her. Her smile is unabashed, on the verge of laughter. Her eyes shine with delight, lips parted in wonderment.

He means to look away and take in the stars again, but all he can do is keep looking at her. Staring at Tessa staring at the sky, he thinks that maybe it wasn’t her love for a person that kept Lucille tethered to this world. Or, maybe it was, but maybe it was more than that. Maybe it was love for a person in a place; one singular, clarified moment that stayed with her for the rest of her life.

Nothing, he thinks, could be as beautiful as this.

“It’s wonderful,” Tessa breathes. Her words are barely audible, like she’s afraid to disturb the magic of the moment, her eyes still fixed on the sky above them. Scott realises he’s not sure the last time he saw her smile so widely, and he makes a mental note to get Lucille something—anything—to thank her for sharing this space with them.

He drags his gaze away from Tessa for long enough to note the trunk pushed to the corner of the battlements, right where Lucille had said it would be. Inside, he finds two thick, fluffy comforters and a single overstuffed pillow. He holds them up for Tessa’s inspection. “Thoughts?”

“Old fashioned,” she grins, raising her eyebrows. “I like it.”

“Well, you know. If sharing body heat was good enough for the cavemen…”

“What, you mean the cavemen who all died in horrible, frostbite-y ways until the invention of fire? Those cavemen?”
“Guess they should’ve had Scott Moir, personal space heater and hand-warmer extraordinaire,” he says, puffing out his chest, before she levels him with a look and they both collapse into laughter.

“Alright, space heater,” Tessa grins, when they’ve both sufficiently recovered power of speech. “I’ll make sure we don’t freeze, and you can go on thinking that it’s all you.”

She mutters a warming charm while Scott spreads the first blanket across the stone, and they curl up together under the second blanket. Scott’s head rests on the pillow; true to form, Tessa chooses to use his chest as her pillow instead. He worries at first that she’ll be cold, even tucked under a magically-heated blanket, with his body wrapped as politely as he can manage around hers, his hand settled at the curve of her waist, holding her close.

But she doesn’t shiver. Her breath comes easily, her chest rising and falling evenly against his, and it’s simple for them both to turn their attention back to the stars. Scott absentmindedly carding his fingers through Tessa’s hair. They lie there in silence for a long time; Scott’s pretty sure Tessa falls asleep on more than one occasion, actually, her breath turning to soft whistles, and as hard as he tries to stay awake, his eyes keep sliding closed too.

He doesn’t know what time it is when a small voice asks, “Scott?”

His grip tightens at her waist, a reflexive movement: feeling the warmth of her body against his palm.

“Hmm?” he mumbles, eyes still closed.

“Promise you won’t come here with anyone but me?”

The answer comes without hesitation. “Course, T.”

She curls closer to his body before she speaks again, her voice heavy with sleep. “Good. It’ll be our spot.”

Ours and Lucille’s, he thinks, vaguely, but he doesn’t say it out loud. He gets the importance of it being theirs—just theirs, something nobody else is allowed to share. Everyone everywhere gets pieces of them: on the ice, they belong to the crowd and to Canada; at home, to their families; here at Hogwarts, to their houses. But here, in this one, small spot, they can belong only to themselves and to each other.

“Okay,” he says with a yawn, pressing his face to her hair, the side of her neck, warm and drowsy, seeking the simple comfort of her. “Our spot.”

Scott wakes up the next morning with a crick in his neck that takes a trip to Madam Pomfrey to cure him of, and a backache like he’s aged sixty years in a single night. Practice is hell. But he would—and does—do it a hundred times again for the simplicity of that moment: just he and Tessa, curled up around one another, and the vast impossibility of the universe sleeping overhead.

She’s late.

Tessa’s never late, Scott thinks, as he scuffs up his new white sneakers against the stone floor of the hallway. But here they are, forty minutes past the hour. And Tessa’s late. Even after she’d assured him that absolutely nothing would change this year, that it’d be a Death Day celebration just like the last one, and he felt bad about being skeptical.

Perhaps he was right.
Because even as he hears footfalls from the stairs, harried whispers and quick footfalls, and he sees Tessa, resplendent in her period costume (a dress this year, no longer worried about escape routes: royal purple satin and a silky skirt shot through with tiny embroidered gold stars, a night sky deep enough to fall into)—he sees the other person who will be joining their merry company for the night.

_Jason._

Jason, who seems to have bent to Tessa’s will but only just, donning a modern-looking set of dress robes. Jason, who has been on the scene for all of three months and still manages to finesse an invite to the Death Day celebration as Tessa’s plus one. Jason, who seems absolutely oblivious to the fact that Scott hates his guts. Well, either oblivious or wilfully ignorant, which is worse than oblivious. At least if Jason’s oblivious, Tessa can’t give him shit about being unkind to her boyfriend.

“Evening,” Scott mumbles, as the two of them draw close. He doesn’t miss the pink flush raised on Tessa’s cheeks, or the lipgloss smudged just above the bow of her lips.

“Hi,” Tessa says. Her voice is all funny, too high-pitched; her posture looks strange too, like she’s out of sorts with herself, unsure how to arrange her limbs into the semblance of a human being. “Sorry we’re late, we were—”

“It’s fine,” Scott cuts her off with a wave of his hand. “I wasn’t waiting long.” His gaze slides reluctantly across to Jason, who stands with his hands slipped into his pockets, Tessa’s clutch dangling from his wrist. “Hey, Jason.”

Jason dips his head. “Hey dude.”

That’s as much polite conversation as he’s ever gotten out of Jason: a man of few words. The first time Tessa introduced the two of them, they spoke for approximately thirty seconds about the new Nimbus model, after which Jason confessed that he wasn’t much of a Quidditch fan, and Scott had nothing more to say to him.

The three of them proceed up to the thirteenth wall panel, where the familiar disembodied eye (whom Scott has since learned is named Klaus) looks them over before swinging open the door. A parade of ghosts streams out from the opening, ready with the usual greetings and well-wishes like a host of great-aunts flocking around their favourite children. But as soon as they clock who Tessa has arrived with, they fall silent.

It’s an eerie sight, a hundred ghosts just staring at you.

“Oh!” Nearly Headless Nick bustles up to the threesome. “Well, hello, Scott and Tessa! Do you know, I’m always tickled pink when you turn up at the door; I keep expecting this to be the year you’d rather go to the Feast.”

Tessa beams at Nick, her hand on Jason’s arm. “Of course not, Nick! We wouldn’t dream of missing your Deathday. Allow me to introduce Jason; he’s a fifth year Slytherin like me.”

Actually, Scott thinks, fifth year and Slytherin is where the similarities between Tessa and her boyfriend end. Jason’s not charming like Tessa is; he doesn’t have her ease with people (and ghosts), or know how to wrap someone around his finger with nothing but a smile. When Lucille, whom Scott has become increasingly fond of over the past year, spending more and more time up on the roof with only the curly-haired ghost for company, settles herself down next to Jason and asks him how his OWLs studies are going, he pales to the tips of his fingers and stammers a one-
word response, his eyes fixed on the sword impaled through Lucille’s chest.

In the interim between dinner and the now-traditional Halloween scares, Jason leans towards Tessa and whispers, “So how can Nick be nearly headless, anyway? Don’t you either have a head or not?”

Tessa hushes him, but Scott knows it’s already too late. If he could hear Jason, awkwardly squashed as he is between Tessa and a gaunt-faced, slender ghost in a smart doublet, there’ll be no doubt of the ghosts hearing it. Sure enough, the cry goes up: “Hey, Nick! The newbie wants to know how you’re nearly headless.”

Nick’s face is thunderous as he approaches. If it was possible for the ghost to purple, he certainly would—a vein throbs dangerously large in Nick’s forehead. Scott has to hold back his smile as Jason takes a step backwards, but is stopped by the stone wall behind him. Even Tessa can do nothing but shake her head; Scott knows she recognises there’s no stopping Nick once he gets going. Every first year Gryffindor has been subjected to this show—it’s a minor miracle that Jason hadn’t heard yet.

“You ask how I’m nearly headless?” Nick roars, his voice booming in the confines of the modestly-sized room. “Eh, boy? Nearly headless, with that sneer on your face. How can anyone be nearly headless? Well, let me tell you. It involves your executioner being too lazy to sharpen his damn axe. So you lie there on the chopping block, and you hear the axe coming, not once, not twice. He swings, and he swings, and he swings, but never does he manage to remove your head. It’s a strange feeling, you might say: to feel the blade thudding through your neck over and over, never granting you that final mercy. Makes a man think. Makes him scared enough to fear what comes next. And when you fear it enough, well—” Nick’s hand goes to his scalp, gripping his hair tightly and pulling his head away from his neck. “You’re old Nearly Headless Nick.”

Scott splutters a laugh as he watches Jason’s face turn a nauseated green shade. He remembers his first time seeing Nick’s stump: the bones still sticking up from the spinal cord, the dangling, hacked tatters of flesh. It’s horrifying, certainly, when you’re eleven. At nearly sixteen, he’d hoped Jason would’ve had more of a stomach.

Tessa fixes Nick with a glare. “Yes, yes, Nick, alright. Thank you for that,” she says, stroking a hand across Jason’s back. When she dips her head to talk with Jason in a low voice, something in Scott’s stomach flares, ugly and sharp.

Maybe he wasn’t unaffected by Nick’s display after all. That’s certainly it. No other alternative to consider.

Nick gives Tessa a placating smile, flopping his head back upright on his shoulders. “Just trying to initiate the boy, that’s all.”

Jason and Tessa eventually have to leave the room to get Jason some fresh air, at which point the ghosts hound Scott for information about Tessa’s new beau. Like a gracious friend, he tells them nothing. Except what Jason’s least favourite food is, the one scary movie he and Tessa watched that made him cry like a baby, and the fact that he hates Quidditch—which has absolutely nothing to do with any devious plots, it’s just reassuring to hear the hiss of disapproval whenever Scott brings it up.

If, perhaps, later that night he sees Lucille pull a scare directly from the movie, and direct it towards Jason rather than any unsuspecting student, that’s certainly not his fault. Nor is it his fault when, for three nights in a row, Jason’s dinner plate is loaded high with baked beans and pork, his face scowling in disgust.
Each time, Scott claps him on the shoulder, an easy smile fixed on his face. “Hey man, welcome to the club.” And each time, leaving the dining hall, he spots Lucille, high up in the rafters, grinning down at him.

Lucille, he thinks, is good people.

It’s almost disappointing when, despite the considerable amount of effort invested into Jason’s “initiation”, he doesn’t last longer than a few weeks after the Deathday Celebration. Tessa doesn’t seem too cut up about it, mutters something about how he was “high-maintenance” when Scott prods her for details. So any lingering guilt he holds, he thinks, is very much unwarranted.

All things considered, Scott is glad to have a return to normalcy for their Deathday Celebration the following year. The invitation is very clear, Nick’s tone pleading: “For the safety and sanity of all, please refrain from bringing any guests.”

So this year, it will be just them, as it should be. For starters, it’s their final Celebration together; being Scott’s seventh year, he’ll graduate come summer, leaving Tessa to attend her seventh-year Celebration alone. And the simple fact of the matter is that he enjoys their Deathday Celebrations. They’ve always been something simple and private, something of their own. Not like the Halloween Feast or the Yule Ball, vast events with hundreds of students he doesn’t recognise, watched over by wary-eyed professors and waiting staff. The Deathday Celebration might technically be for Nick’s benefit, but it’s become a tradition Scott looks forward to as much as his own birthday. The ghosts are like old family, and amongst old family, he and Tessa don’t have to be anything other than what they are.

So if he puts a little more effort in for this year’s Deathday Celebration, and actually turns up in a period-appropriate outfit, sue him. It took three separate trips to Hogsmeade to find something that didn’t make him want to shrivel up and die at the mere thought of putting it on, eventually settling on a navy blue doublet with moonlight-silver embroidery at the chest and cuffs, and a smart pair of grey silk breeches. He still feels like a prat walking the halls up to the top floor on his own, fiddling self-consciously with the velvet buttons on his doublet. The tailor had assured him that a doublet was supposed to fit rather more snugly than Scott was used to—and yes, it was supposed to pad out his shoulders and flare neatly over his hips. Scott’s not sure whether it was supposed to make him feel like he can barely breathe. At this rate he’ll burst before dinner has even been served.

He hopes Tessa appreciates his sacrifice. Although she’ll claim otherwise if he ever told her, he’s only dressing up in such a ridiculous manner for her. She’s the one with an unwavering commitment to hopelessly impractical Deathday fashion, the one who always looks slightly disappointed when he turns up in his usual jeans and shirt and takes her arm.

There’s a not-so-small part of his brain that’s slowly coming to realise he’ll do anything if it’s for Tessa Virtue’s benefit—that he has been doing anything for the past nine years of his life, only it took him this long to realise it.

He slows his pace as he approaches the corner of the usual hallway. He’s not really sure why; he only knows that Tessa will be there already, arriving five minutes early to wait for him just like she always does, and once the ghosts see the two of them together outside the door, it’ll be straight into the party. He doesn’t want tonight to end—so it follows that it should never begin. He wants to stay like this, always, in the perfect minute before he graduates and Tessa is left behind, and the world changes for them once more.

But he figures that Tessa would probably be rightly pissed off if he never showed up for their last
Deathday together, so he rounds the corner eventually.

“Hey-yo,” he says, waving his hand as nonchalantly as he can manage. The doublet restricts movement to a certain angle above his shoulder, but he makes do.

Tessa’s eyes widen as she looks him up and down. “Scott!” she gasps, her mouth forming a little ‘o’ in shock. He would be offended, really, if it didn’t mirror the look she gets each time he first models a new skating costume for her.

Her hands smooth down her skirt, and he suddenly recognizes the colour: navy, too, in a dark velvet. The bodice is embroidered with sparkling silver thread, the pattern evoking skate marks on clean ice, the familiar disorganized harmony. He thinks if he stood here long enough he could find a rocker in it all, but he blinks, realizing he’s been staring.

“Wow, Tess,” he breathes out. “You’ve outdone yourself.”

Tessa’s cheeks flush, and her smile turns shy. “And you too! You finally dressed up!”

“Ah, you know how it is. Fourth time’s the charm.” He extends his arm, and she takes it. “Don’t you dare tell anyone I ever wore this,” he adds, leaning close to whisper into her ear. “This joins the ranks of Prince Charming for Ilderton Fair as things-we-do-not-talk-about-at-Hogwarts, got it?”

She snickers as they walk towards the entrance. “Ah, Scott Moir. If you think I’m not going to find a way to take a photograph of you tonight, and then plaster it all over Gryffindor’s common room, you are sorely mistaken.”

He grumbles half-heartedly at her, but he knew what he was letting himself in for with his outfit for the night. Both of them quieten when they draw close to the entrance, waiting for the door to swing open as per usual, but there’s no movement. No eye appears at the peephole, no ghosts pouring out to greet them. There appears to be no one around.

Briefly, their traumatic experience on their very first Deathday pops into Scott’s head, but he pushes the thought away. Back then, both he and Tessa had qualms about destroying school property with an Exploding Charm. As a seventh year due to graduate in less than eight months, Scott has no such worries any more.

Besides, he thinks, they hardly need to reach for each other’s magic now. After seven years of honing and refining, neither they or their teachers are any better able to explain their strange ability (an innate form of wordless spellcasting was the most recent suggestion), but they’re certainly able to wield it. It takes no thought for Scott to push their combined energy out, probing at the wall. The entranceway is still mist, swirling where their magic has disturbed it, and he tilts his head in question to Tessa.

She shrugs, and they both step through.

At the end of the passage, the room is still, devoid of the usual clamour of voices and stench of rotten food. Instead of a crowd of ghosts, there is but one table: a table laden heavy with food and drink, piled high.

And, for once, it’s food Scott’s happy to eat: turkey with lush stuffing, mashed potatoes and gravy on the side; brussel sprouts, soaked in butter and sprinkled with cheese; a curry chicken in an inviting tomato broth; apple pie, the spices floating through the air.

Tessa eyes the table too, her favorites present as well: roasted chicken and potatoes with smashed garlic cloves; fresh linguine with basil pesto sauce atop; and donuts, dozens of them, in every
flavour imaginable.

“Think it’s safe?” Tessa says, even as she reaches for a plate, piling it high with generous servings.

Scott grabs a spoonful of stuffing, bypassing the plate altogether, and moans when the food hits his mouth. The flavours burst across his tongue. “If it’s not, this is exactly how I want to go.”

A forkful of pasta later, she nods. “Yep, yep, I concur. Olympics who? Just me and this food.”

A hushed silence falls over them, interrupted only by the scrape of their utensils or a request to pass an item. The silence is only broken when Tessa, halfway through a bite, drops her fork on her plate. Staring at it, she mutters to herself, “Marina’s gonna kill me.”

Scott scowls before reaching across to grab her hand. “Hey, screw that.” When Tessa tries to look away, he tightens his grip until her eyes meet his. “Seriously, T. You’re perfect just the way you are.”

She lifts her head, a small smile on her face. “It’s on you if you can’t lift me anymore.”

He flexes. “With these guns? I can always lift you!” Tessa laughs at his preening, as he kisses each bicep in turn, before clapping his hands together once. The wine beckons to him from the end of the table. “Okay,” he says, grabbing the bottle and quickly uncorking it, pouring a generous helping into each of their goblets. “Drink up! It’s school sanctioned.” At the questioning upward raise of her eyebrow, he laughs. “Seriously! The ghosts left it for us. They live at school. Ergo, school sanctioned.”

She rolls her eyes theatrically, but still reaches for the goblet and clinks it against his. Swirling the glass once before lifting it to her nose, she takes a sip. And then another, and another.

The evening passes in laughter and food and wine, just the two of them. It’s one of Scott’s favorite ways to spend a night, Tessa’s laughter surrounding him like an embrace, comforting and safe. He’s not sure how he’ll exist without it for a year, but each time the thought of graduation rises to the front of his mind, he chases it away with a large gulp of wine.

Somewhere into their second bottle of vintage House Salazar cabernet, Scott decides it’d be a good idea to undo the top button of his doublet. It’s not his fault the room is so stiflingly hot. Give him the choice and he’d chop a few windows into the nice mahogany walls. For a moment, he contemplates whether their combined magic would be enough to both fortify the foundations and carve into stone. He discards the idea, finally, if only because he’s not sure he could cut straight lines. But if they have to be there (which they do, it would be rude to leave without at least waiting a few hours for their errant ghost companions to show up), he has to make himself comfortable.

So a second button follows a first, and then a third, and by the time they’ve polished off their bottle, Scott’s doublet is falling down his arms. The rather faded old dress shirt beneath is doing its best to stay closed, the shirt strings drawn loosely together and tied off, but it’s a dicey affair.

“You look like a debauched seventeenth century squire,” Tessa tells him, rolling the ends of her syllables in that way she does when she’s definitely had too much to drink. “Like you’ve just been rolling with a maidservant in the hayloft.”

“So do you,” he says.

Her eyes go wide with amusement, her eyebrows raising. “What, rolling with a maidservant?”
“Mm,” he nods, raising his wine glass in some sort of agreement before pausing. “Wait, no. The other way around. The opposite one. Y’know, Tess. You get it.”

She does get it, but she’ll be difficult. Because she’s always difficult. She likes to make his life difficult, he thinks, would be much too bored without it. So would he.

“I mean, a roll with a maidservant is up my alley. Or a squire. Or both.”

“Both?!” he squeaks.

She laughs. “You’re drunk,” she says, tipping her head towards him. “Is what you are. Drunk.”

“Alright. So are you.”

“Am not. I can handle my wine.”

Scott grins, leaning forwards to place his forearms on the table. It’s a long, empty table with a great deal of empty seats, so it figures that he and Tessa should be squashed up almost arm to arm at the very end of it. She’s a little fuzzy now, her outline slightly blurred around the edges, but he can definitely focus enough to tell that her cheeks are burnished pink and her hair, so neatly curled and pinned before, tumbles over her shoulders with reckless abandon.

“Is that what you call this general state of affairs?” he says, gesturing lazily in her direction. “‘Handling it’?”

She leans in closer, so much so that the tip of her nose almost brushes his. “Yes. Precisely.”

When she speaks, he can feel her breath blow across his mouth. It’s a funny sensation. It feels like it shouldn’t be particularly pleasant, but everything’s always pleasant when it’s Tessa. She cheats the rules.

“I’m glad we match, y’know,” he mumbles. “I wanted to match. I picked it for the stars. The ones Lucille showed us.”

Her expression softens, and she brings a hand up to pat Scott’s cheek, strokes her thumb gently across the underside of his jaw.

“So did I,” she nods.

Scott blinks, slightly taken aback by the turn of events. “You did? But I—we haven’t been there in years. I thought—”

Actually, it turns out that Scott hadn’t thought much of anything at all—or at least, he certainly doesn’t once Tessa leans in and presses her lips to his. His quiet noise of surprise melts into a sigh, his hand tangling into her hair, the other at her waist: the gentle curve of the bodice unfamiliar under his fingertips, the embroidered silver patterns that swoop and dive around her torso.

They’ve done this before, the whole kissing thing. Never really figured it out beyond “you’re drunk and I’m drunk and it seems like a good idea right now”, but they take the opportunities they’re presented with.

Tessa’s tongue is in his mouth now, and his shirt is definitely more on the floor than on him, and the thought occurs to him that they’re perhaps moving a little faster than usual. Especially when she slides herself into his lap, her dark velvet skirts rustling over his breeches, and settles fully across his thighs, and he has to clench his teeth and hiss her name in warning. They’ve done plenty
of things before but they’ve never done this; and as much as his wine-addled head (and other parts of him) warm pleasantly at the thought of continuing, he suspects that the consequences of such an evening would cause more of a mess than they really know how to deal with.

“Hey,” he mutters, pressing his forehead against hers. “Hey, T, stop for a second.” She presses against him, hands flat on his chest. He feels like he can’t catch his breath, like they’ve just finished a run through, and it’s been only minutes of this.

“What is it?” she whispers, the breath from her speech tickling his skin.

“I just…” his voice trails off as he traces the patterns on her dress. “I can’t believe this is our last one.”

She sits back on her heels then, hand tracing his jaw. “Are you scared to leave?”

He shakes his head, staring her in the eyes. “No. It’s not the change, it’s—it’s only a year, and I’ll be here all the time to train with you. But…” His voice trails off.

Her eyes light up with recognition. “But you won’t be here, just in Hogsmeade.”

They sit in the silence of that, for a moment. He wonders if she’s thinking the same thing he is: no more nights sneaking away together, no more Library study dates devolving into desperate attempts to make the other laugh and get kicked out. No more first skate on the newly frozen Great Lake.

“It’s our last Deathday, Tess.”

“Yeah,” she whispers, placing a soft kiss on his lips. “It is.”

He breathes deeply, hands shaking against the soft fabric of her dress.

She holds his face in her hands. “So all I’m saying is, it’s just tonight. It’s just a Deathday, okay?”


This time, it doesn’t move faster. The rhythm is sweet, their hands less searching, more comforting. Their synergy on the ice translates here: a gentle push and pull, wordless communication.

Music, as though from a piano, floats around them, ebbing and flowing with the pace of their lips. Scott smiles, recognizing the music from their last free dance. “This is what you came up with, Tess?”

Against his lips, she smiles, and the music changes, shifting into another piece. It’s four bars later when Scott recognizes the music: the Pride and Prejudice composition Tessa tries to push every season.

He pulls back and splutters. Tessa bends in half, laughter shaking her body hard enough that she can barely wheeze out a breathy “Serves you right!”

“You fight dirty, Virtch,” he grins, half-amused and half-outraged at how low she would stoop to push her Pride and Prejudice agenda. With the easy access of her still sat in his lap, it’s all too simple to tickle her at her weak points—she gasps and twists away from him, leaping up to the table.

There’s a dangerous glint in her eye as she surveys him from her vantage point. “Dirty, huh?” Too
late he realises her plan, and the mashed potatoes flung from the spoon in Tessa’s hands hit him square in the middle of his chest.

Only thoughts of revenge fill his mind as he grabs the gravy boat and turns it upside down above Tessa’s head.

The thick brown liquid cascades down her head in rivulets. For a split second, Scott thinks maybe he misread the situation, but then a grin spreads across Tessa’s face. “Oh, it’s on.”

She pulls out her wand from beneath her skirts and flicks it at the table. The turkey and chicken rise up, waddling towards Scott, who backs up as he reaches for his own wand. With a flick, he sends the cutlery to him, creating a wall around the turkey and chicken, halting their advance.

Reaching out for Tessa’s magic, he pulls it closer in preparation for his next move. “Hey!” she calls out, “No stealing!” He feels her magic thin, sliding out of his grasp.

“Can you blame a guy for trying?”

While Tessa’s been distracted, though, he’s set up his trap. “What’s that over there?” Tessa whirls around, and the apple pie smashes into her face.

Scott howls with laughter. “I can’t believe you fell for that!”

Throwing aside her wand, Tessa grabs the container of whipped cream. With a fistful, she stalks up to him, smearing it across his face.

He lets her, before slowing licking his lips. “Mmm, thank you! I was getting hungry.”

Her lips twitch before she schools her expression, falling into faux seriousness. She extends her whipped cream covered hand. “Truce?”

“Truce.”

As they shake hands, he feels the cascade of the cleaning spell tickling down his skin and outwards, cleaning the room. He raises an eyebrow at Tessa. “The house elves don’t deserve to have to clean up after us,” she answers.

“Always thinking of others.”

Her arms wrap around him, and he holds her close, their eyes falling closed. It’s easy to slip into their usual rhythm like this: his nose in her hair, her chest rising and falling against his, their breathing slowing into synchronicity. They’ll still have this, even when he’s graduated and staying in Hogsmeade for training, and she’s at the castle. They’ll always have this.

“Thank you,” he sighs, squeezing his arms tight around her.

Against his chest, she mumbles, “Welcome.”

Duly preoccupied, they don’t notice the ghostly face peering in through the floorboards on the opposite side of the room, or the way the eyes widen in delight at what it catches a glimpse of. But pulling back from the cracks, Nick looks at Lucille with delight.

“They’re doing it! They’re doing the hug. Oh, and they’re communicating too, this is all so wonderful.”

Lucille grins. “So, worth having to relocate your party to the Lake this year for the five-hundred
and fourteenth? It seems like they appreciated the wine you left, that’s for sure.”

“I would say so,” Nick says, with a wistful little smile. “I would say it was worth it all. The perfect Deathday.”

And up through the floorboards above them, Scott can’t help but agree.
Tessa had almost been ready to pack up her cards and close out her table early. When she sees him walk in she changes her mind - not because he came right over to her table, or anything else as obvious as that. Just that there was something about him that made her want to wait. She makes eye contact with him and nods in greeting and he does the same, and then continues his path farther into the bookstore. She notices Kaitlyn noticing him, too, and the two women share a glance. Tessa winks at her, a silent attempt at letting her know she’ll stay at her table a little longer, just in case. Kaitlyn nods back, seeming to understand.

A few minutes later a young woman approaches, who Tessa recognizes as Marjorie, one of their regular customers. Tessa smiles and gestures for her to sit down, and sure enough the girl asks for a reading. Tessa does her usual spread for her, inviting her to think about what’s really pressing in her life at the moment. Unsurprising to Tessa, the cards reveal a contented life overall, with possible threads to tease out in areas of love and career.

One of the last cards she turns over is the Two of Cups, showing an idyllic scene between two partners holding hands. Tessa looks at her. “Is there someone new in your life?” she asks. “Someone...you might have feelings for?”

The young woman blushes. “Not someone new, but...there is someone, yes,” Marjorie admits. “I’ve known him for a long while, but lately there’s been something different between us, at least I think there is,” she says. “I just can’t tell if he feels the same way or not.”
“Well, we still have one more card left, maybe that one will tell us the answer,” Tessa says. She gestures for Marjorie to turn it over herself, and after a brief pause, she does so, revealing the Knight of Cups.

The girl smiles, looking back at Tessa. “It’s a Knight. That...I think that must be a good sign, yes?”

“It’s definitely not a bad sign,” Tessa says, laughing a little. “The Knight of Cups represents a true admirer, caring and thoughtful.”

“That’s him,” Marjorie says, her expression softening. “He’s always so thoughtful, and he looks out for me, and I don’t know what I would do without him,” she explains. After a moment she scans over all of the cards that are now face up on the table and then looks at Tessa again. “What should I do next?”

Tessa smiles back at her. “Only you can know that,” she tells her, a tried-and-true response. “But I can say that there’s nothing in here that warns against starting a new relationship. There are, however, a lot of encouraging signs,” she concludes.

A few minutes later Marjorie leaves again, encouraged by the reading. Tessa waves goodbye and then gathers up all the cards, re-shuffling them satisfyingly. Then she sits back and takes a sip of her tea that’s gone mostly cold by now. A moment passes as she contemplates the scene just outside the shop window - now that it’s October, the weather has started to turn and the leaves along with it. She likes the new bright oranges and reds in the trees that line the streets, and the way everyone has started bundling up in their sweaters and cozy jackets. It makes her think of home, and the warm welcome awaiting her there. But before she can glance at her watch to check the time she sees she’s not alone.

“Hi,” says the gentleman, having approached her table. He’s holding a paper bag with a few books in it - one of them peeks out over the edge of the bag and she recognizes it as the first in a children’s book series she often recommends to customers. She lets herself admire his taste.

“Hello,” Tessa greets him back. “Would you like to join me?” She gestures to the now empty chair at the table.

“Are you giving readings?”

Tessa nods. “Yes, every Thursday. It’s free of charge if you’ve bought two books or more, so...” she points briefly at his bag, and then again invites him to sit. “If you’re interested, please. I’d be happy to.” The shop is quiet now, just a few customers browsing around and one couple reading with coffees at a table in the opposite corner. It’s as close to a private reading opportunity as she usually gets.

She can tell he’s curious, if a little hesitant. It’s a familiar reaction. But the man also steps closer. He rests one hand on the back of the empty chair and still clutches the books in the other. Just then Tessa feels warm, suddenly encouraged by his curiosity. She can sense that he’s someone with a lot of questions in his mind - and some hopes, too. It feels right that she lingered a little longer this evening at her table, if she gets to read the cards for him now.

“Okay,” he nods too, curious. He sets his bag down on the table and folds his coat over the back of the chair, and finally sits down. “How does it work? I’ve never had anyone read tarot cards for me before.”

Tessa picks up the deck and fans it out between them, with the cards face up so he can see them. “The cards are sort of like a regular deck of cards - there are four suits, each with their own court
cards. These show us different aspects of our lives - happy events, partnerships, decisions, our family, our work,” she explains, pointing to a few cards one at a time as she does so. “And then there are the Major Arcana, these are the cards that come to mind for a lot of people when it comes to tarot.” She pulls out a few of the more recognizable ones - the Magician, the Fool, and the Wheel of Fortune. Her hand lingers a little on the Hermit. “These cards almost supercede the others, because they represent the bigger things, the foundational people and emotions and journeys we go on. But all of the cards have their own meanings. In the reading you draw a few and lay them out in a sequence, and together it all tells a story,” she says. “A story about what’s happening in your life.”

“Will the cards tell me my future?” he asks, half-smiling as though trying to joke a little. But she can tell he’s genuinely wondering about the answer.

Tessa smiles back. It’s another familiar question, and in her experience is usually a sign that the person asking it is worrying about something in particular. “The cards give us an invitation to reflect on our lives. They offer a response to the questions we have right now. But what happens next is always up to us to decide,” she says gently. It’s not a direct answer to what he asked, but it’s the most accurate one she can give.

He nods again, seemingly satisfied enough to proceed. “Okay. Yes, I’d like to try it. Try...a reading, however it goes.”

“Alright,” she answers. She slides her cup over to one side and sits up a little straighter, pulling her chair close to the table once again. Next she gathers the cards and shuffles them thoroughly. Satisfied, she places the deck on the table between them and gestures towards him. “Please, cut them.”

He smiles, and rubs his hands together for enthusiastic effect, which makes her smile, too. And then does as she asks, cutting the cards once and then re-stacking him. She nods and then places the deck closer to him before fanning them out, face down, in a curved line across the width of the table. She gestures again to the array of cards. “I’d like you to pick nine cards in total. The first three will represent your past, the next three will tell us about your present. And the final three will tell us about what could happen in your future.”

“Should I turn them all over, too?” he asks, his hand hovering closer to the cards.

“Not yet,” she tells him, and shows him where to place the cards as he draws them.

He takes in a breath and then chooses the cards one at a time, and as he does so she helps him arrange them in a kind of grid. She leaves the rest of the cards where they are, for now. She asks him if he has a particular question in mind, and he shakes his head. But his brow furrows a little, making her wonder if there is something that he’s wondering about but just doesn’t want to share it out loud.

“Alright,” she smiles again. “Let’s begin. These first three cards will draw attention to events in your past. I’ll invite you to turn them over one at a time, and we’ll see what they tell us.”

With a nervous smile, he does as she asks, and turns over the first three cards one at a time. As he does so Tessa examines each of them, letting some thoughts form in her mind. She offers him another gentle smile as she prepares her first comments.

“You’ve lost someone important,” she starts, radiating compassion as she says it. She’s never had a reading where the Five of Cups has not meant the loss of a loved one, and from the way this man is reacting now she guesses that streak isn’t about to come to an end. But it’s the first card he drew,
and she doesn’t want to ignore it. In her experience the difficult cards are usually best faced head-
on.

He simply nods, his eyes closing tightly for a moment. “More than one someone,” he tells her. Hearing him say that out loud makes her heart sink.

“I’m so sorry,” Tessa says gently. Her hand rests on the table between them, a few inches from his. “There’s nothing easy about that.”

“No, there isn’t,” he answers, a kind of certainty in his voice. She simply lets him sit with that thought, waiting to see if he wants to add anything. “It was a few years ago,” he says after another moment. “And it’s taken me some time to come to terms with it, and I’m in a good place now. But losing them definitely changed my life,” he finishes, and Tessa nods, sensing that’s as much as he wants to say about it for now.

She looks at the other cards that he’s turned over, noticing the Knight of Wands is reversed instead of upright. “When court cards appear they usually draw our attention to specific people,” she explains. “This Knight is someone usually very passionate, and energetic, always ready for new adventures or challenges.” As she speaks she notices his expression shifting a little, as though in surprise and recognition. She’d wondered if the card represents him, and now she thinks she was right. Not to mention it’s the first court card to appear so far in the reading. “But this card is reversed,” she continues. “Which means something has happened to diminish these energies. This person has experienced a significant change, or disruption, perhaps even doubts whether they are on the right path.

“That...that’s an interesting way of putting it,” he responds. “The last few years have been...eventful, to say the least.”

“It sounds like this one is about you, then,” Tessa says, and sees him nod. “That would make sense that it’s reversed, what with the loss and change you’ve experienced.”

He seems to agree with that. “Yeah. But the way you described it at first, that’s...” he chuckles a little. “A lot of people in my family would say that’s me to a ‘T,’” he says. She’s glad something in the reading has brought his smile back.

“So then, this third one is the Six of Swords,” she explains, pointing to the third card. “It represents a journey, possibly one towards healing. A time of steering through turbulent waters towards somewhere calmer.”

“Yes,” he says, his voice a little rough now. He swallows. “I’d say that’s accurate, too.”

“These cards draw attention to past events that still hold some significant influence over what’s happening in your life right now. So let’s turn over the next three cards and see what they have to tell us about your present.” She gestures for him to turn over the middle three cards on the table.

He does so, one at a time just like before. Tessa looks them over and sees more of a picture forming in her mind. She smiles at him again as she begins again. “I can tell that the changes you’ve experienced have had an affect on your relationships,” she says, gesturing to a reversed Two of Cups. “Or perhaps romantic attachment has simply not become your first priority at the moment,” she offers, and see his shoulders drop a little bit as though in recognition. “That would make sense, given the challenges you’ve come through already.”

He nods in affirmation, a half-smile on his face that seems a little regretful. Tessa glances back at the remaining two cards. “This middle card shows the Hierophant,” she explains. “For many
people this card can feel intimidating - it’s a figure who represents institutions and authority. But just as likely it can indicate the desire to seek counsel - either from a trusted advisor or mentor, or from someone in the legal profession.”

The man’s eyes close briefly, and his expression shifts into an almost wry smile. It seems she’s hit something right. “You’re not wrong about that. My guess is an adoption arrangement would qualify there?”

She lifts her eyebrows a little. It’s the first time he’s offered a direct answer to any of her statements, giving her more of a glimpse into his world. Now she wonders even more about the first few cards, and what his relationship is with the adoption. She wonders if it was the result of a separation, or...or the loss. “It certainly would make sense for this card,” she answers gently. Her hand rests on the table between them again, closer to his. She could reach out and take his hand so easily if she wanted too, but she doesn’t dare cross that line in the middle of a reading with someone new. “And it’s my guess that this is the event that’s overshadowed everything else in your life right now.” It’s the only Major Arcana card to appear so far, and clearly indicative of the most significant thing happening in his life.

“You’re not wrong about that, either,” he says, exhaling as he does so.

“But sometimes legal arrangements can bring clarity and help one more forward, even though they can be stressful. And from what I can see here, it hasn’t diminished who you are as a person,” Tessa offers, and then pauses for a split second. She realizes now she’s on the verge of reading him instead of reading the cards, and that’s something she tries not to do if she can help it. “See? The Six of Pentacles,” she indicates, showing a card with a figure handing out coins. “This tells me you’re a generous man, ready to give of yourself and support those around you.” She sees a hint of a smile return to his expression and his cheeks redden just a little. It makes her wonder if he’s someone who doesn’t seek out compliments very often - and it also tells her she’s reading things right. In any case, her description of that card seems to have put him at ease, and she’s grateful for that.

“So, I guess I should look at what’s going to happen next?” he asks, with the same half-nervous expression as before. She’s not sure if he’s eager to finish the reading or mostly keen to move past the uncomfortable cards, but either way she’s fine to proceed.

“What could happen next,” she emphasizes. But for some reason she doesn’t think these last three cards are going to do anything further to disorient him. As she watches him reach towards the cards she feels only affection for him, and a hope that these last few will offer him some comfort and reassurance. She closes her eyes briefly, as if willing that to be true.

Tessa then watches as the man turns over a reversed Three of Swords, and then the Page of Wands, and finally the Ten of Cups. She nods, smiling warmly at him once again. He looks at the cards for a long moment, absorbing them and looking like he’s thinking about them. She considers his expression. “What do you see?”

He reaches for the Ten of Cups, sliding the card a little closer to himself. “It looks happy,” he says simply. “Like a happy family, at home.” He’s smiling more easily.

She nods. “They are. That’s exactly what this shows,” she affirms. “This is one of the happiest cards in the deck. And it’s the kind of happiness that doesn't just happen overnight, either. So I’d say the cards are showing you something that’s not just possible but has already begun. And not just for your family but for you personally, or one loved one in particular,” she adds, pointing to the upright Page of Wands. “You’ve got new adventures ahead, new pursuits...even new love, if that’s what you want.”
The man looks at her again, a mix of surprise and hope on his face. “I guess I had hoped that would be true, I just...I suppose I haven’t let myself want those things for myself. Not for a long time, anyway.”

“That’s a hard thing to walk around with, too,” Tessa answers gently. “Holding back from living the life you want.”

“Yes,” he nods, releasing a breath. “It is. But necessary too, sometimes.”

The way he says it makes her heart reach for him again. Like he’s someone who’s worked for a long time to make sure other people in his life have been supported and loved, and like someone who very much deserves those things for himself, too. And the reason she can recognize those things in him is because she knows they’ve been a part of her life, too, probably for too long a time. “Yes, that too,” she agrees with him, her voice soft. “I can understand that.”

He lifts his hand towards the final card, touching his fingers to the reversed Three of Hearts. “This one doesn’t seem so happy, though,” he observes, his fingers running over the image of a pierced heart, shadowed by rain and storm clouds. And he’s not entirely wrong about that observation, either. It’s an intimidating card to read, especially when upright. But here it’s reversed, and Tessa makes a guess at why.

“There are some heartbreaks that never truly leave us,” she offers. “We still feel them, even when time has helped us heal from them. The same is true for you, and what you’ve experienced in the course of events that have led you to where you are now.” She reaches over and touches the card too, her fingers brushing briefly against his. “It doesn’t mean you don’t still feel that loss, just that it doesn’t need to hold you back.”

“I like that,” he answers. “That makes a lot of sense. It’s something other people have told me before, too, but...” his voice trails off a little as he thinks. “I like the way you put it.”

“I’m glad. And I think there’s a lot here to be hopeful about,” she says. “Is there anything else you want to ask about?” Sometimes her clients ask more questions about a card in particular, or want to draw another card or two to follow up. But he shakes his head.

“No, that’s fine,” he says. “This has been more than enough, thank you.” He sits up a little straighter, pulling his hands away. It’s a signal that the reading is coming to an end for him.

“You’re very welcome. And please, come back any time, Mr...”

He looks suddenly mortified. “Oh, I’m Scott. I’m sorry I didn’t properly introduce myself before, I see now I should have. Scott Moir,” he adds, holding out his hand towards her.

She takes his hand and shakes it. It’s the first time she’s actually had proper physical contact with him, and she finds it steadying. His handshake is reassuring and confident, not rushed or crushing the way some clients often are. Her smile is broad as she returns the gesture.

“I’m Tessa. Tessa Virtue. It’s very nice to meet you, Scott.”

“Are you here every week?” he asks, encouraged. She feels briefly excited at the idea that she’ll see him again - she finds herself keen to spend more time with him and get to know him better.

“I’m here every day,” Tessa answers. “Well, almost every day - we’re closed on Mondays and Tuesdays. I’m the proprietor here, this is my shop. If I’m not here then Kaitlyn will be,” she says, nodding over to the front counter.
Scott nods back. “Then, I’ll be happy to come in again. You have a lovely store,” he tells her, looking around. He stands to put on his coat and picks up the bag with his purchases. “And you keep a good selection here. These will be going home to a very happy little lady, I can promise you.”

Tessa smile becomes a grin now. “I’m so glad. Please tell her she’s welcome to come and look in with you, I’d love to show her some more of our kids’ section. And hear about what she likes.”

Scott’s expression mirrors hers now. “Count on it. Thank you, again, Tessa,” he says.

She shakes his hand again and waves as he walks out. As she watches him leave she just stands for a moment, as though not sure what to do next. She wishes she had a way to contact him, or that she’d told him more about their store hours or the fact that she’ll be at the fall fair in the town square this weekend. She’s looking forward to so many things, all of a sudden.

Tessa blinks and lets out a breath and then gathers up the cards, feeling a little hopeful herself.

An hour later Tessa finishes closing up the store, bids Kaitlyn goodnight, and walks home. It’s dusk now, and as she heads through the neighbourhood on her way home she sees a few of the remaining shop-keepers turning off their lights and drawing their blinds. As she walks she replays the day in her mind, remembering a few things she’ll need to take care of tomorrow. And she finds her mind drifting back to the reading with Scott. She knows she’s a good reader - hell, there’s more than one rumour that’s followed her around all her life that would attest to that - but it’s still not every day that she has a tarot reading go so accurately. And for someone new to the cards, at that.

It had even felt easy, when she thinks about it. Not just the reading itself but talking with him, sitting with him. It had felt like it wasn’t their first time meeting each other, like she could speak honestly with him without worry.

Tessa’s still thinking about him when she gets home, almost as though the walk and time alone with her thoughts have only served to amplify her curiosity about him. It’s almost startling to walk through her front door and back into her normal life, as though it can’t have been just this morning that she was last here. But as soon as she hangs her coat in the hallway and walks through the long corridor lined with books, she can hear the familiar sounds of activity.

“Hey, anybody miss me?” she says when she reaches the kitchen, dropping her purse and tote bag on a waiting chair. The two figures in the dining room just beyond turn their heads in one motion, as though Tessa’s interrupted some serious conversation.

“Mom, you’re back!” The boy immediately runs over to her. He hugs her around her waist and she reciprocates, clasping her arms around his shoulders.

“I missed you all day. It’s been so long since I saw you this morning,” she tells him eagerly.

“But it was only just this morning!” Leo says, like the day has gone by in a flash, and for him it likely has. He looks over at her things, and then back up at her, knowing that she often returns from her late evenings with something special. “Did you bring me anything?”

Tessa laughs a little, and runs her hand over his head and shoulders. “There might be a new book in there just right for very smart and adventurous seven-year-olds,” she tells him, and his face lights up. He goes right to her tote bag now that he has permission, and rifles through until he finds the
book she means. It’s the newest one in a series he’s been enjoying, about a brother and sister who learn to fight monsters together.

“Yeah!” he exclaims, grasping the book. “Thanks, Mom!” he says, and then runs off with his treat. Tessa can see him making a beeline for the couch in the living room that’s just off the dining room, and by the time she turns back to Jordan he probably has the book open already.

She just shakes her head, glad that he’s happy. She turns to her sister then and Jordan gives her a quick hug. "Thanks for getting him from school," she tells her. “And handling dinner. Although from the looks of it, it seems more like breakfast?” She glances around the kitchen and sees what looks like the remnants of pancakes. With whipped cream on top. And bacon on the side.

“You know it. Dinner of champions for normal people, breakfast of champions for those of us about to go on night shift,” Jordan answers. She’s a nurse at the hospital in town, and as much as she begrudges her weeks when she works nights, Tessa also knows she finds the work just as meaningful.

“I do know,” Tessa confirms. Her sister will be headed for her regular nursing shift in another hour. “It’s okay, you know how much Leo loves Thursdays with you. His mom never lets him have pancakes and whipped cream for dinner,” she adds, lifting one eyebrow.

“That’s why it’s so much fun being the fun aunt.” Jordan winks at her. She reaches for a potholder and then pulls out a tray from the warm oven, where several pancakes and slices of crispy bacon are waiting, ready. “Ta da!” she says with a flourish, and then makes quick work of putting together a plate.

“Thanks, Jo,” Tessa says, coming to sit at the kitchen island with her sister. She takes a bite and it’s wonderful - perhaps a little over-done around the edges but still good.

“You’re welcome. You look like you need food.”

“Mmm,” she says in confirmation, and then reaches for the bowl of blueberries waiting on the counter. She adds some of the fruit and then tops it off with a dollop of whipped cream. *Why not*, she thinks to herself. “It was a long day. Not a bad day, really, just long,” she says, exhaling. Just like that, her thoughts drift back to Scott, wondering when she’ll see him again. She hopes he’s having a good evening too, with his family, just like she is right now.

Just then Tessa feels a nudge at her lower leg and sees Minnie the cat winding her way around Tessa’s chair. “Nice to see you too, Minerva,” she says gently. She reaches down and scratches the cat’s ears, offering some affectionate words as she pets her.

“You want to tell me about it?” Jordan asks. She settles in a chair opposite Tessa, a mug of coffee in her hands.

So Tessa does. As she eats she relates the events of her day - the new inventory that came in, and working out a new schedule with Kaitlyn, and checking in with Eric who’s the new manager of her store’s suburban location. By the time she gets to telling her about her tarot reading back at the shop downtown her plate is almost empty and she’s just clutching a mug and leaning against the counter like her sister. She tells her about how she’d almost been ready to leave but then Scott had come in and she’d waited around, and then been very glad she did.

When she describes the reading with Scott she doesn’t go into complete detail - it’s one of her personal rules about reading the cards - but she does say a little about how nice it was to read for him, and how their conversation had wrapped up. She’s describing the book series he’d bought for
his daughter as she finishes her very last bite of pancakes, and then when she looks up she sees Jordan looking back at her with such a curious expression on her face.

“What is it?” Tessa asks, swallowing licking her lips. She looks down to check she hasn’t spilled something on herself.

“This guy you read for...It sounds like he made quite an impression on you,” she says knowingly.

Tessa blushes, pushing her plate aside complete. “Jordan, be serious. I just met the guy, we talked for maybe half an hour.”

Her sister shakes her head. “Then that was some half hour,” she insists.

Tessa swallows again, unable to come up with a response. The truth is she’s not wrong. And she thinks maybe part of why she couldn’t stop thinking about him on her way home is because she can’t decide whether to be excited or terrified about it - or both.

“Let me see your deck.” Jordan isn’t asking so much as demanding, though she’s doing it as affectionately as she can manage.

“Jo…” Tessa answers, caution in her tone.

“Come on, give it,” Jordan insists.

Tessa fishes through her handbag for the velvet pouch, then holds it with both hands briefly. “Just remember it was only one reading. It was probably less than half an hour, even.”

Her sister curls her hand and opens it again a couple of times in quick succession, silently demanding the deck. Tessa hands it to her and Jordan pulls out the cards. She shuffles them exactly three times, cuts the deck once, then moves to pull the top card. Before she does, she pauses and looks back at Tessa.

“Describe the way it felt when you were with him,” Jordan asks. Her voice carries none of the confrontation of a moment ago, replaced now with probing curiosity and deep, deep empathy.

Tessa takes in a breath and lets it out again, closing her eyes for a moment. “It felt...it almost felt like I knew him already. It felt like it was important that I read the cards for him,” she says, her voice faltering a little as part of her tries to figure out why she’d felt that way. “It felt like when I was talking to him in that time...I was exactly where I was supposed to be,” she shrugs. She opens her eyes and sees her sister looking at her so intently, but also with something like understanding.

Wordlessly, Jordan nods. Then without any additional flourish pulls the top card off the deck, and places it on the table in front of Tessa.

The Lovers stares back at her.

Tessa’s mouth opens in a silent gasp. “That...that doesn’t necessarily mean...” she starts, her words faltering. She swallows, thinking. “That doesn’t mean we’re supposed to fall in love, it could mean something else - a decision, a choice. Maybe my reading is helping him make a decision about something important,” she says, exhaling a breath.

Jordan lifts one eyebrow. “Maybe,” she allows. She slides the deck towards Tessa, inviting her to continue. “Are you sure about that?”

Tessa lets out another sigh, not sure what her answer is. But she reaches for the deck and rests her
hand on it, then nods, sitting up straight. She cuts the deck and re-stacks it, then fans out all of the cards in front of her. She pulls a card and places it face up next to The Lovers.

“Ace of Cups,” Jordan reads, her voice more gentle than smug. There’s a soft smile on her face when she looks at Tessa. “Seems pretty clear to me.”

Tessa swallows, her eyes shutting against sudden tears. She feels the cat jump softly onto her lap, then, as though offering reassurance. She doesn’t know why she’s feeling like this all of a sudden, just that she can’t stop it. The cards are right, she knows they are.

“But I hardly know anything about him, not really,” she says, blinking. “A couple of hours ago I didn’t even know him.”

“What are you feeling right now?” Her sister asks.

She lets out a breath. “Nervousness,” she admits. “And excitement, I guess,” she offers with a scant smile. “I liked talking to him, it felt so easy. And I know I want to see him again.”

“Well that sounds like a good start,” Jordan offers. “What else?”

“You know what else,” Tessa counters. “It’s been years since Simon. Since anyone,” she adds with a knot in her throat. She’s been separated from her ex-husband since before Leo was born, and anyone else she’d tried a relationship with hadn’t lasted very long. There had been no one she’d come close to considering a long future with, not by a long shot.

And while she hasn’t exactly regretted being on her own with Leo, she’s had more than her fair share of moments of second-guessing herself - unsure if she genuinely hasn’t found the right person, or if she’s just been too guarded to even consider anyone seriously. Either way, she’s had several years of near solitude as a result. And she’s come to accept that as her reality, now. It’s better, in a lot of ways. But in other ways...

She closes her eyes again, feeling Jordan’s hand stroking along her arm and shoulder. And then Minnie’s soft head nudging at her chin and chest. Amidst all of her vulnerabilities she’s still surrounded by so much comfort.

"We're Virtue women. Knowledge is our gift," Jordan says, almost ruefully. It's a familiar refrain.

Tessa breathes out a half-laugh. “Well I wish our gift would be a little more specific about what I’m supposed to do next,” she says, wiping under her eyes. She strokes one hand along Minnie’s back, feeling her gentle, insistent purring.

Jordan purses her lips as though thinking about it, and then reaches for the cards again. She lets her hand over them before choosing one and turning it over.

The Chariot stares back at them, and Tessa just laughs again.

“There’s your answer,” Jordan says, laughing too. “Full speed ahead.”

“Then I guess I’d better get behind the wheel again.”

“You can do it, Tess, I promise. Just...when you see him again don’t let the moment pass you by. Go for it and see what happens, okay?”

“Alright. I will,” she insists, as much for her own benefit as her sister’s.
And after all, the cards are never wrong.

As it turns out, she only needs to wait until Saturday until she sees him again. Tessa’s running a booth at the fall fair out in the town square, with rotating assistance from Kaitlyn and then Eric. They’ve brought a few popular Halloween favourites and have set up a bookmark-decorating station for the kids. Tessa has brought a few decks of cards with her and holds a separate table off to one side just for readings - all fees going towards the local animal shelter to support their fall adoption drive. (The animal shelter have also set up a booth with a grooming station and a pet-hugging area for kids. Leo has already visited twice with Jordan and begged for both a dog and a second cat, but so far Tessa has stayed strong).

She’d even let Jordan convince her to lean in to the witchy Halloween vibes, and has put on one of her longer black dresses with a matching, gauzy sort-of-jacket over top. For good measure she’d thrown on a silver necklace with the pendant that looks like a spider - a birthday gift from her mother a few years ago. (“Who cares if anybody thinks we’re real witches, T, it’s the one time of year it’s okay,” she’d reasoned with her. “Besides, you look gorgeous in it.”) And it does look good on her, and it’s the fall fair, and Halloween is less than a week away, so why not.

It’s been a busy day, so much so that by the middle of the afternoon Tessa’s glad when their bookmark-decorating station starts to decline in favour of the face-painting station that the beauty salon sets up just after lunchtime. Tessa breathes a brief sigh of relief as she sits down, observing Eric leaning back in his chair as well, sipping a coffee in momentary solitude.

A few minutes later she sees Scott winding his way through the crowds, accompanied by a young girl. She’s holding his hand in one of hers, and a very large caramel-covered apple in the other. Tessa lights up immediately, just before Scott sees her, too. She waves to him and stands as they make their way over.

“Hi!” she says brightly, looking from him to his daughter. The girl presses herself close against Scott’s leg, but smiles back, sweetly and shyly. She’s got pink cheeks and golden blond hair, and Tessa puts her at about five years old - maybe six.

“You can say hi, Cee,” Scott says encouragingly, patting her shoulder. “Tessa’s one of my new friends, remember I told you about the cool bookstore?” He takes the candied apple from her hand since it seems like she’s finished with it for now. Tessa reaches for an empty paper cup from their hot cider station and hands it to Scott, who takes it gratefully and rests the apple in it.

“Are you the bookstore lady?” the girl asks, quickly looking from Scott to Tessa.

“That’s me!” Tessa says. “I’m Tessa, it’s nice to meet you,” she adds, crouching a little lower and holding out her hand.

“I’m Celia,” the girl answers, still a little shy. But she waves her hand at Tessa and Tessa waves back easily, wiggling her fingers.

“I’ve heard you like books,” Tessa offers, and Celia nods, smiling and fidgeting with her hands. “Would you like to have some warm cider with me? We have books here you can look at, too, or you can decorate a bookmark over there with my friend Eric, if you want.” She looks over and sees Eric returning a very charming smile and a wave in their direction. There’s a little boy and his mum over there now, drawing with the crayons.
“Ooh, cider sounds really great, huh, Cee?” Scott asks her. “Or maybe some colouring?”

“Cider, please,” she says, quietly eager, and Scott laughs a little.

“Two ciders then, please, just like the lady ordered,” he confirms. They come to sit down with her at Tessa’s table as she fills up cups for all three of them, Celia between the two adults. “Are you reading cards today too?” Scott asks as they sit with their cider. He’s looking over at Tessa’s decks sitting to one side.

“Oh yes, I always do readings at the fair. But just now I think we’ve got some competition from the face-painting and the pumpkin carving,” she says, looking around at the activity elsewhere.

“Are these fancy cards?” Celia asks. She reaches for one of the decks with her little fingers, and Tessa smiles, guessing that her shy exterior is hiding a curious and imaginative mind. It makes her feel some affinity for her, and also makes her think she and Leo would probably get along quite well.

“Sort of,” Tessa says. She reaches for one deck in particular, the one she holds aside in case there are younger visitors who want to explore the cards. This set is beautifully drawn and brightly coloured, and one that Tessa has already taken the liberty of removing any of the more worrisome cards. “These cards all tell different stories,” she explains. “About what’s very special in your life right now.” She pulls the deck out of its bag and fans the cards out, face up, so Celia can see all of them.

Sure enough the girl puts her hand out and runs her fingers over them, like she’s just feeling the texture of all the card edges laid out together. But then she reaches for one and Tessa smiles when she pulls out the Sun.

“Oh, that’s one of my very favourite cards,” Tessa says.

“What story does this one mean?” Celia asks, her face lighting up in curiosity.

Tessa leans in, her elbow on the table and her chin in her hand. She spares a glance and a wink at Scott, trying to let him know there’s nothing to worry about with this card - or this whole exercise, for that matter. Truth be told it’s mostly the grown-ups who get curious about her cards. Celia’s the first child to ask her about them in a while.

“Well, what does it make you think about when you look at it?”

Celia holds the card close to her with both hands and looks at it like she’s really thinking about it. “It looks like...a happy sun that’s making everyone have a warm sunny day,” she decides, pleased with her answer.

Tessa laughs gently, and Scott does too. “That’s a pretty good description, actually,” Tessa says. She has an impulse to put her arm around the girl but holds back, letting her decide how she wants to engage. Instead Tessa just leans a little closer, and points to a few parts of the picture on the card. “This card could be a story about a very, very sunny day, the best sunniest day of the whole year. Or it could be about a happy time, when you feel really sunny on the inside, because of everything else that’s happening.”

Celia looks up at Tessa brightly, recognition in her eyes. Then she looks back over at Scott. “Like today!”

“Is it?” Scott answers. “Today’s been a really fun, sunny day, hasn’t it,” he says, patting one hand on her shoulder. Celia puts out her hands on top of his knee and steps closer to him again. Then she
just nods, a few times in quick succession. Scott glances back at Tessa, a warm expression on his face. “This morning we got to hang out with Grandma and have special Saturday breakfast,” he explains for Tessa’s benefit, as though narrating on Celia’s behalf. “And then we went to the skating arena and we tried out our new skates for the very first time.”

“Ooh, I love ice skating,” Tessa says, just as warmly. “I sometimes take my son Leo to the skating rink but we haven’t been yet this year. He wants to try hockey, I think.”

“Well then we have something to look forward to, don’t we, Cee?” Scott says, running one hand through Celia’s hair to brush it out of her eyes. “Maybe Tessa and Leo can come too some time.”

Celia smiles that same shy pink-cheeked smile again. “My daddy runs the whole skating rink,” she says proudly, and Scott sputters out a half-laugh.

“Well, not quite the whole rink,” he says, hugging her a little. “But I am managing the training programs there now, and I guess I do have a set of keys to the place,” he allows, measured pride in his voice as he glances back at Tessa.

“Oh, well then we’ll have to come skate there again soon, that seals the deal,” Tessa says. She doesn’t mind admitting she is completely charmed by him. And even though it was Celia who pulled out the Sun card a minute ago, she’s feeling some of that same sunny feeling herself now, too. She catches herself just looking back at Scott for a moment, as their eyes meet and neither of them breaks the gaze right away. He looks relaxed, much lighter than when she saw him a couple of evenings ago - the time with his daughter and the day off seem to suit him very well.

It’s Celia who interrupts them first. “Are you a real witch?” she asks, looking at Tessa with interest as though adding up the cards, and Tessa’s black gown, and the conversation.

“Oh my, what a question.” Tessa just reacts at first. It’s not like she’s never heard that question before, but it’s admittedly been quite a while, and she’s a bit caught off guard.

“Celia,” Scott interrupts, surprised. “I’m not sure that’s a nice question to ask.” He’s looking from her and Tessa like he needs to apologize, horrified that they might have spoiled something for her.

“It’s alright,” she says, putting out her hand gently. She looks at Celia, who’s blushing a little, feeling the admonishment in Scott’s voice but also still genuinely intrigued to hear Tessa’s answer. Her green eyes are wide with curiosity under her messy blonde hair. And that’s when Tessa realizes the girl isn’t at all afraid of the answer. The Chariot card appears back in her mind all of a sudden.

Tessa’s mouth quirks a little as she decides her response. “Well,” she starts, just like when they’d looked at the cards together a moment ago. “What would a real witch be like, do you think?”

Celia blinks, her head tilting and her mouth twisting a little like Tessa’s. “In stories witches always wear black,” she starts, like she’s really thinking about it. “And they have black cats, and live in big houses in the woods with lots of books, and they make potions and spells,” she finishes decisively.

Tessa smiles, half-laughing as she exhales. “Well, I am wearing black, you’re right,” she says, looking down at her dress. “And I do have a lot of books, and a black cat at home. I don’t quite live in the woods, although there are a lot of trees around my house,” she thinks out loud. “But I don’t make potions or spells,” she says finally, shaking her head as she leans in again towards Celia.
“Then you can be a different kind of witch!” Celia answers, like it’s the obvious thing. “The kind that tells the future, instead of doing potions,” she says. Her small hands rest on the table again, touching the bright cards.

Scott laughs a little too, his hand rubbing across his daughter’s shoulders. “I guess that sounds pretty good too,” he says, sounding both delighted and relieved.

“I agree,” Tessa agrees. On instinct she reaches for another card, only half looking at what it is. When she places it next to the Sun she sees it’s the Nine of Cups. “And I can see your future is that you are going to have a very happy day today,” she tells her. “Do you think that’s going to come true?”

“I think so,” Celia giggles, a small, buoyant sound that permeates the whole space around them. Tessa breathes out a laugh again, entirely delighted.

There’s more excited chatter behind them, then, the sounds of more visitors gathering at the bookmark station.

Celia, seemingly satisfied with Tessa’s answer to her question, turns and asks Scott if she can go do some colouring at the other table.

“Of course, honey,” he answers, clearing his throat a little. “You can go over and I’ll be there in just a minute, okay?”

Tessa nods in agreement, and then looks over to see Eric’s overheard them. He offers a wave again, and after a pause Celia decides that sounds okay, and scampers over to one of the empty chairs at the colouring table with an excited smile on her face. When Tessa turns back to Scott she can’t help but noticed the relaxed, proud expression on his.

“She’s wonderful, Scott,” she tells him gently.

“Yeah, you can say that again,” he answers, mirroring her tone.

“It does sound like you guys are having a great day together,” she offers. She lets her hand rest on the card Celia drew, admiring the image.

“It’s been a full day, that’s for sure,” he agrees. “I think we’re probably about an hour away from heading home for a nap, but yeah, it’s been pretty great.” He pauses, looking like he’s thinking. “I think this is one of the first weekends since we moved here that she’s really felt settled in, like she knows how everything goes and it’s a normal routine,” he tells her, glancing over at Celia again and then back to Tessa. “Saturday mornings we visit Grandma, and in the afternoon we go to the arena and then the park. But today we came here instead of the park and she’s just been soaking it all in and talking to new people, coming out of her shell a little more. It’s…” he sighs a little. “It’s been really great to see.”

“I can see that,” Tessa says. She wants to say something else, about how she can tell how much curiosity Celia has, and how smart and creative she seems, even just from the few minutes she’s spent with her so far. And how she and Scott clearly love each other so much. But she’s not sure how far to go just yet, and even though she already feels such affinity for this man she can’t guarantee he feels the same way about her.

More than that, Tessa can see more of him, now. She can tell that her cards were so right about his qualities - she can feel the generosity and care in his voice. Tessa can feel the bright energy and enthusiasm he must have for the world around him, something that she wonders if he’s had to
temper a little as a single parent to such a thoughtful, inquisitive child. It makes her want to know him more, to spend as much time with him as she can. And it makes her hope he knows all of these good things about himself.

Scott sits up a little straighter, then, clearing his throat. “Thank you, for the conversation the other evening,” he tells her directly. “For the...the reading, with the cards. And for listening. I hadn’t planned on doing that, I really did just go to look for some books, but then I saw you there at that table and it seemed so…” he shrugs a little, swallowing. “It helped, seeing all those cards on the table and talking things out like that. It felt reassuring.”

Tessa can’t help but smile again, broadly like it’s a reflex she can’t stop. “I’m so glad, really I am. It was my pleasure. It sounds like you’ve had a lot happening in your life the last few years.”

“Yeah, you could say that, too. But a lot of it has been good. The best, even,” he says, glancing briefly over at Celia. “Your cards helped remind of that,” he tells Tessa.

“Oh, I’m glad,” she repeats, reaching her hand a little closer to him. “That’s the best possible result I could ask for.”

He’s looking at her with that same soft expression from before. When he lets his hand rest on top of hers, ever so briefly, she feels a rush of warmth run through her.

“Would you like to come to the shop now?” Tessa says suddenly, so many thoughts in her mind just then. Scott blinks a little, like she’s interrupted some train of thought. “Only, it’s just that I promised you I could show your daughter the children’s books we have. But it doesn’t have to be today, I didn’t mean to interrupt your plans,” she explains quickly.

“No, that--I mean, yes, we’d love to,” Scott says. He draws his hand away, but not before squeezing hers quickly. “That is if you don’t have to stay here instead.”

“I can swap with Kaitlyn or Meagan, they’re the ones minding the shop right now,” Tessa says. Just then Celia comes running back up to Scott, her freshly coloured bookmark in her hand.

“Oh, I love it, honey,” he says, kissing her on the cheek. “Should we go find a new book to put it in? Tessa said we can go look at her bookstore now if we want to,” he tells her.

“Yes, please!” Celia answers, and that settles it.

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Tessa leaves the booth in Eric’s capable hands, and she and Scott and Celia make their way through the fair and over to Tessa’s shop on the other side of the town square. Megan does swap with her, and Tessa gets to spend the better part of the next hour showing Celia all over their children’s section at the back of the store. She finds out she is indeed six years old, but is already reading at a level closer to a seven or eight-year-old - she also likes a lot of the same books Leo does, making her think, once again, that they might get along well together.

She sits next to Celia on one of the benches looking over books together, when it finally occurs to her to look at her watch she’s shocked at how much time has passed. Scott’s there nearby on another chair, holding a mug of coffee in one hand, and Tessa realizes she’s been so absorbed she hadn’t even realized Scott had gone to order a drink. From the looks of it he’s also been holding onto a few books in a pile of his own.
Scott just smiles and shakes his head at her, telling her it’s all completely fine. He’s only glad they’ve been enjoying themselves.

A short while later Scott does rally them to get going, though, knowing that they’re already a bit late to get home for some quiet time before dinner. He lets Celia pick her favourite two choices from the ones they’ve looked at, and promises they can come back again for more next time after she’s read these. Kaitlyn’s there at the till, capable and cheerful, waving hello to Celia and Scott. But Tessa happily rings them up herself, sliding Celia’s bookmark inside one of the books before placing them in a paper bag. She also adds one of the store’s cards, quickly writing her own cell phone number onto the back. She notices Scott noticing her do that, and she feels her cheeks flush a little pink as he does.

Finally she comes back around from the counter, everything all set. “Here you go, sweetie,” she says, giving Celia the bag to hold. “Would you like to carry your new books home?”

She takes them with both hands, smiling and nodding.

“Should we say thank you to Tessa?” Scott says, crouching next to Celia. “For the really great afternoon, and the cider and all the books?”

Celia brightens, like she’d forgotten about saying thank you but she’s so glad to do it now. “Thank you!” she says to Tessa. “For the afternoon and all the books.” She tucks the bag closer to her chest, under one arm.

“You’re very welcome,” she answers. “You can come back any time. Maybe next time my son can join us too, he likes a lot of the same books as you do,” she winks.

“That sounds like a great idea,” Scott agrees. “What do you think, Cee?”

“Okay,” she says, some shyness returning, but also that same curiosity.

Scott stands up then, ready to head out. They take a couple of steps towards the door and then Celia pauses, giving her books to Scott to hold. Then Celia turns back to Tessa, and quickly presses herself against her in a hug.

“Oh my,” Tessa blinks, just startled at first. It’s the first time the girl has initiated any physical contact with her all afternoon - and Tessa had never expected anything like this. She reciprocates, though, letting both hands come to rest on her shoulders. The girl’s little arms are tight around her legs, a smaller version of the way it feels when Leo hugs her. It’s a wonderful feeling.

Celia lifts her head then, looking up at Tessa. “I think you’re a good witch,” she says clearly, and happily, like she’s decided it and needed to tell Tessa too in case she didn’t know it herself.

Tessa’s breath catches in her throat. That warm feeling she’d had earlier with Scott comes rushing back to her, and she blinks again, her eyes suddenly damp. She swallows, and then smiles again, wanting to make sure the girl feels good about what she said, because it is good. “Thank you, sweetheart, I really like that.” She crouches down to give her a proper little hug, and Celia does just that, squeezing her tightly around her shoulders.

Then she stands, watching as Celia takes her father’s hand. Scott’s expression is a combination of amazement, and pride, and adoration. He offers Tessa a smile and another wave, wordless but grateful, and then he and Celia step out the door.

Tessa just stands there for a moment, not entirely sure what’s just happened, but also very glad for it. She looks over at Kaitlyn, who’s been pleasantly observing the entire interaction for the last few
minutes - probably for the whole last hour, it occurs to her now.

“Wow,” Kaitlyn says, a little amazed herself. She looks impressed and delighted.

“Yeah. Wow,” Tessa repeats, thinking that's a fairly apt response.

“I bet we see them again tomorrow,” Kaitlyn adds next, with a wink.

“You think they’re going to need more books again that soon?” Tessa asks, confused.

Kaitlyn chuckles, and then reaches out and squeezes Tessa’s arm. “They both adore you, Tess. I don’t think it even matters about the books.”

They trade places, then, as Kaitlyn walks off to help another customer in the store, and Tessa sits down on the stool behind the counter.

It’s been such a remarkable day. She feels lighter than she has in a long time. And for all her talk of not being someone who does spells or potions, she’s not entirely sure a spell hasn’t been cast over her.

Tessa doesn’t see them tomorrow, as it turns out. But she does hear from Scott - he calls up just after lunchtime, not on the shop line but on her cell phone number that she’d scribbled down for him yesterday. He thanks her again for the afternoon the day before, which makes her smile. He asks her about her day so far and she tells him all the mundane glamour of her Sunday life - spending most of the morning at home with Leo, before dropping him off at her mother’s for the afternoon while she works the shop. She doesn’t always manage the shop on her own on Sundays, but today she preferred to let Kaitlyn have a day off, given the hustle and bustle of their fall fair day yesterday.

She asks him about his day, and it turns out to be quite similar to hers - he’s spending the afternoon at the arena taking care of some preparations for the week to come, and Celia’s at her grandmother’s - along with her new stash of books that she’s very excited to read.

“Then I’m glad,” she says. “I expect a full review from her next time I see her, that way I can know what else to recommend her.”

Scott’s gentle laugh is audible on the other end of the phone. “Oh, you can count on it. She asked me three times this morning when we get to go back to the bookstore with the nice witch lady,” he tells her.

Tessa winces just a little at the description, but then realizes it’s all well-meaning. “Thank you, that’s...it was very touching, spending time with her.”

“Celia has a way of discovering who the really great people are around her,” he says, a little more softly. “And it’s clear that you’re one of those people.”

Tessa swallows, not sure what to say to that. She’d mostly just wanted to help the girl feel welcome in her shop - in her town, for that matter - and hadn’t expected anything else. She clears her throat. “Well, you guys are welcome any time,” she says, her voice heartfelt.

“Except for when you’re closed on Mondays and Tuesdays, I remember,” he reports.
“That’s true,” she says. And then another thought occurs to her. “Oh, you could come to our house! On days I’m not at the shop I always get Leo from school and we spend the evening at home. We make dinner and sometimes watch a movie.”

“Oh, that’s...that sounds great. We’d love to. Well, I’ll check with Celia to make sure but my vote is definitely yes,” he tells her. Then there’s a brief pause. “Are you sure, though? I don’t want to interrupt your solo evening with Leo if it’s just for you guys.”

“It will be great,” she insists. “I’ll check with Leo, too, but I’m sure he’ll like it. Does Celia like pizza? Because Leo’s been asking for a make-your-own-pizza night for a while and I think tomorrow’s the night.”

“Yes,” he says definitively. “The answer is definitely yes. I think you just sealed the deal, Tess.”

And so, it’s a date. They make arrangements that he’ll pick up Celia from school and then come to Tessa’s about an hour after that - discovering in the process that Celia and Leo both attend the same school, which delights Tessa further. She’s now surprised she hasn’t seen Scott at school pickup before, and makes a mental note to be more observant on the days she gets Leo from school.

Sure enough, Leo is more than excited about the idea of a Monday pizza party with a new friend. When Tessa tells him Scott’s daughter is a fan of some of his favourite books he immediately starts telling her the best parts of the latest book, and that morphs into details about he wants to make some changes to his monster-hunter Halloween costume. All in all, she’s glad it was a good call to make the invitation. She does remind Leo about how some kids are a little quieter on the outside than he is and to remember to let Celia make friends with him at her speed. He nods, because it’s a familiar conversation, but she can also see his wheels turning, already excited.

Tessa’s hoping Leo and Celia will get along well, especially if the girl hasn’t made as many friends in town yet. But she’s looking forward to getting to know Scott a little more and have some more one-on-one time with him. And vice versa, hopefully - she’s felt a bit like she has an unfair advantage, having met him while reading for him and learning about the important recent events in his life.

They show up right on time, smiles on both their faces. Celia’s carrying her little backpack and looks like she’s put on a fresh set of clothes just for the occasion, which charms Tessa completely.

Leo’s right there next Tessa, somehow still full of beans even after a full day at school. “Hi, I’m Leo! My mom said you like the monster hunter books too,” he says, eager.

Tessa laughs a little, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Sweetie, let’s let them come in and take their coats off first, okay? Then you both can go play.”

They step into the front hall, Celia close at Scott’s side and her hand in his. But the girl has that same wide-eyed, intrigued look on her face that Tessa remembers from Saturday, and that’s a good sign to her. She smiles at Celia and gives her a wave. “We’re happy to have you guys over.”

Minnie approaches then, too, winding herself around Tessa’s and then Leo’s ankles. She looks over at the new visitors, as though presenting herself for the welcoming committee too.

Celia brightens, pointing at Minnie. “She does have a black cat!” she reports to Scott, half-whispered.

Scott laughs. “She does. Maybe it’s a nice cat, too,” he says.
“Oh, she is, once you get to know her a little. I know people make up all kinds of superstitions and nonsense about black cats. But you don’t need to worry about ours, I promise.” She looks at Leo, nodding for him to introduce the cat to Celia properly. She’s talked to him before about these ideas people have about black cats - always with her son concluding that ‘people are just dumb sometimes,’ and she can hardly argue with that logic.

“Minnie is the best cat in the whole world!” Leo explains, like it’s the most obvious thing. “She’d never be mean to anybody,” he says.

Tessa smiles, knowing that Minnie would absolutely never do anything mean to Leo, and since it would never occur to Leo to do something mean to anybody, by that logic he believes the same of his beloved cat. But she also knows that’s not entirely true - Minnie’s all but become Tessa’s screener whenever she’s brought home a gentleman caller. The men that ended up with a scratched hand upon trying to pet Minnie were the ones that never got a second invitation back.

“And anyway she isn’t even totally black, she has some white on her front paw, see?” Leo picks the cat up around her middle and holds up one of her front paws with one of his hands. Sure enough the others can see the little patch of white in between the pads of her toes. Minnie just cranes her head a little to sniff at Leo’s hand and then give it a couple of licks in approval.

Celia lets go of Scott’s side and approaches Leo and Minnie, her hesitation fading away bit by bit. When she holds out a hand to gently pet Minnie, the cat sniffs her briefly but lets Celia pet her head and ears, closing her eyes in satisfaction.

“See, she likes you. She can tell you’re nice,” Leo says. When he puts the cat down again she winds herself around Celia’s leg and the girl giggles and then pets her again.

“She’s a nice kitty,” Celia agrees.

Tessa just grins at them, then looks to Leo. “Honey why don’t you two go play, alright? We can have dinner in a little bit. You can show Celia all the important parts of the house,” she tells him with a wink.

“Yeah,” Leo reacts, excited. “Come on, you can see my room! And the rec room and the library. And we even have a secret passageway.”

Celia’s expression lights up, and she looks back at Scott for a second.

Tessa also glances back at Scott, her voice low. “It’s what used to be the old servants’ staircase at the back of the house,” she murmurs, and he nods back knowingly.

“Go on, sweetheart,” he says, patting his daughter on the shoulder. “Me and Tessa are going to hang out and chat. You guys can show me the secret passage a little later, okay?” He winks at Leo.

“Oh!” she says. Scott helps her out of her backpack and jacket, and Celia goes with Leo and they head off and up the stairs, Minnie trailing behind them.

Tessa’s pleased to see Scott’s relaxed expression when they turn back to each other.

“Well, that went well,” he tells her, looking happy, and a little surprised.

“She’s lovely, Scott, really. I think she and Leo will get along great.”

“I hope so,” he answers. “He looks just like you, you know,” he tells her, clearly intended as a compliment.
Tessa happily accepts it. She likes hearing that. “I know, it’s the freckles. And the brown hair that won’t stay out of his eyes,” she says. She turns to lead him back into the house and he follows.

“And love of stories?” he asks.

“That, too. But all of his energy is all his, I’m still never sure where it came from. He’s such a little extrovert some times.”

“Really, he seems like a great kid - no surprise there given he has such an awesome mom,” he says, a second compliment in as many minutes. “But yeah, I’d love it if Celia had some more new friends in the neighbourhood. And I know it means a lot that he’s a year older and in Grade Two, that’s huge, Tess.”

She laughs a little. “You’re right about that I think. Leo sometimes has trouble making friends his own age, too. A lot of the kids he spends time with are either a little older or a little younger. It’s like he either needs someone to stick up for, or someone to stick up for him,” she shrugs and lets out a sigh.

They walk through the first floor into the kitchen that opens out into the big rustic dining room towards the rear of the house. There’s bright afternoon light coming in through the windows and Tessa feels a surge of pride being able to welcome Scott to her home on such an inviting day like this.

“Does he get teased?” Scott asks gently, bringing her solidly back to earth.

Mentally, Tessa gives him some points for intuition. “Yes,” she says simply. “I’ve talked to his teachers and to the other parents...and to him,” she adds. “And it’s better than it used to be, but still. It’s hard being the child of someone who’s still the target of rumours.”

She pours them both coffee and he takes the mugs to the dining table while she gathers a small plate of cookies. “The worst was about two years ago, when I opened my second bookstore location out at the mall,” she explains. “No one expected me to have so much success with it right away - but I did. And both store locations are still thriving. But there are a lot of business owners struggling to stay open for more than a year at a time, and I think there must have been enough envy among some of them, and…” she lets out a breath.

“How long has she been your daughter?” Tess asks, taking a sip from her mug. She knows from their first conversation that she’s not his biologically, but any more than that is still a mystery to
“Four and a half years,” Scott says without missing a beat. He reaches for a cookie and takes a bite. “Or at least, that’s when I became her guardian,” he adds. Tessa nods, just listening. He finishes the cookie and dusts his hands, letting one come to rest around his mug. “She’s the daughter of two very good friends of mine. They died in an accident when Celia was a year and a half old,” he explains, in a way that’s clear he’s done it many times before, but that it hasn’t gotten much easier to do.

“Did they live around here?” she asks, knowing that he said he’d only just moved back here.

He shakes his head. “No, they were in the States. Michigan,” he says. “We’d been friends for a long time and I’d just moved there to start a coaching job on their team. It was a year after that that they…” his voice trails off, and then he swallows. “They’d named me as Celia’s guardian in their will. And, the thing is I’d always known they’d done that - they’d asked me about it right after she was born. And of course I’d agreed. But it’s just the kind of thing that, until it happens…”

“You’re never sure if you’re ready for it or not?” she finishes for him.

“That pretty much sums it up,” he nods. “It was hard in the beginning. The whole first year, really. There were some days…” he shakes his head, and then he’s just quiet for a moment. “But eventually it got easier. We celebrated her second birthday, and then her third. She started calling me Daddy,” he tells her, his whole face and body seeming to light up when he says it. He shrugs, then. “And we’re a family, now,” he says simply. “She’s mine and I’m hers. And we will be officially, once the adoption paperwork goes through. Hopefully that’s any day now.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful, Scott. Truly. Anyone could see how much you love each other and belong together,” she tells him, her voice gentle. “I certainly can.”

“Thank you,” he says, his tone mirroring hers. “She’s the best part of my life, without a doubt. And I’m sure I could say the same about you and Leo. How long has it been just the two of you?”

She lifts her eyebrows a little, appreciative of the way he’s asked the question. “Since he was born, actually,” she explains, taking another sip from her mug.

“It sounds like there’s a story there,” Scott offers, taking another sip, too.

“You could say that,” Tessa says, with some rueful laughter. “I was married to Leo’s father, but we decided to separate not long before I found out I was pregnant,” she explains.

His brow furrows a little, as though trying to work out what kind of circumstances would allow that to happen. “Was he involved with another woman?”

“Another man, as it happens.” She leans forward a little in her chair, resting both arms on the table.

“Ah,” he answers. “Well, that would certainly do it, then.”

“Not to put too fine a point on it, but yes, it did.” She lets out a breath. “I’d been with Simon for a few years by then and I’d never thought anything like that would happen. Maybe he didn’t either, I’m not sure. But it was around when we were trying for Leo that he’d started to realize he wanted something different.”

“That must have been difficult to navigate for both of you,” he says simply. He leans forward in his seat, too, closer to her.
“Yes, it was,” she says. “The truth is, in the end, I was glad he’d realized the truth about himself and what he wanted. He’s happier now, and it was right that we separated...and I still love him, in a different way. But it was also very hard for me knowing that I’d been with someone who’d been cheating on me. It was a very odd time.” She lets out a breath again. It’s been a while since she’s talked about this out loud with anyone, and it feels good to say these things so plainly. And to someone who seems to want to listen. When she glances back at Scott he has such a sympathetic expression on his face. “Does that make sense?”

“Yes,” Scott answers clearly. “It does to me at least. If I was in your place I’d probably feel the same way. And I would never…” he pauses, taking a breath. “In all of my relationships, I’ve never been unfaithful to the person I was with. And I guess I forget that other people don’t always act that way, too.”

A fond smile comes over her face. “Thank you,” she says, her voice soft. “I appreciate you saying that.” And truth be told, it’s something she’s glad to know about him.

“I can’t imagine anyone being with someone like you and changing their mind,” he says. “Someone as smart, and kind, and compassionate as you are.” He smiles back, and lets one hand come to rest on hers.

She can feel herself blushing, in spite of herself. “How can you possibly know all of that about me?” she asks, her smile deepening even more as she says it.

Scott shrugs a little, confident. “I have a good feeling,” he says simply, leaning in closer. “And my good feelings about people are usually right. Plus, I can’t imagine you’d have gotten as far as you have without being a pretty amazing person.”

Tessa laughs, brushing her thumb over the back of his hand. She often brushes compliments away just out of modesty, but the way he’s saying these things make her feel so seen, in the best possible way. Like there’s no hiding from it. “Thank you,” she repeats. “I didn’t plan for everything that’s happened, but in the end it’s all worked out pretty well.”

They’re just quiet for another moment, holding hands in the sunlight. “Does Leo see his father at all?” Scott asks eventually.

“A few times a year,” she nods. “He lives in Vancouver now, he and his new husband. So it’s a longer trip to get Leo out there, but we make it work at least once in the summer and over the winter holidays.” Her smile fades again as she thinks a little more. “Sometimes I’m not sure how Leo makes sense of it...how he has a father who’s alive and we both love him, but he lives so far away and belongs to someone else besides us.”

“I know what you mean,” he says, a distant look in his eyes. “Celia doesn’t have a lot of extended family. Biological family, I mean - it’s part of the reason why I was named as her guardian,” he explains. “But she does still have a biological grandmother who lives in the States, and we see her a couple of times a year, too.”

“You didn’t want to stay there?” Tessa asks. “You had a career there, you could have made your own little family unit there, too,” she offers.

“It’s true, we could have. And it probably would have been okay,” he says, like he’s thought about it a lot. “But it felt right to come back here. I’d always thought somehow that when it came time to start my own family, I’d do it here at home. So I decided to move us here. It seemed like good timing, with Celia starting Grade One, and the opportunity at the skating club came up, and….” he lifts both hands as though gesturing around at everything. “The rest is history,” he explains.
“It is indeed,” she answers warmly. “I’m so glad to have met you - both of you. And I hope we’ll see more of each other,” she says, feeling quite comfortable with more honesty just then.

“Good,” he says. “Me too.”

Her smile returns just as his does. And this time she’s the one to bring her hand on top of his, her fingers fitting so easily on top of his.

For a moment they stay just like that, looking into each other’s eyes and feeling their fingers entwined with the other’s. Then she feels herself licking her lips almost on reflex, her gaze flickering over all of his features, lingering on his mouth. She leans in closer towards him, almost like she’s being gently pulled that way. And he’s leaning in, too, like he’s going to meet her in the middle. Her lips are close enough to his she can almost feel the kiss before they get there. And then--

“Mom!” She hears Leo before they see him, running down the stairs and into the dining room with Celia just behind him.

Tessa and Scott spring apart, both of them pink-cheeked and a little breathless.

“Yes, honey? Are you guys having a good time?”

“Yeah! We’re going to fight monsters in the secret passage, now,” he explains, like it’s obvious. Behind him Celia has an excited expression on her face, and it’s then Tessa notices she’s wearing one of Leo’s capes from the costume trunk, and Leo also has a cape on as well as his pirate hat. Tessa laughs a little, delighted.

Scott gives them both a salute. “Do you need more reinforcements?” he asks, holding out a hand to Celia, who comes over to his side.

Celia nods, too. “Can we have a cookie first?” she asks, looking hopefully at the plate on the table.

Scott exchanges a quick glance with Tessa before picking up the plate. “I think that sounds like a good idea, better build up your energy before going monster-hunting,” he says. Celia and Leo each take one.

A moment later she stands with Scott. She looks at the clock and realizes that before too long they’re going to need the pizza-making setup to be ready in the kitchen. “You guys go explore, and by the time you’re done I will have dinner prep almost ready,” she says.

“Are you sure? Would you like some help with…” he pauses, looking at her in much the same way she was looking at him a moment ago. “...with anything?”

“It’s very tempting,” she allows, her voice lowering. “But it can wait until after dinner.”

“Okay. Good,” he answers, relieved and glad. The sun catches his cheek in just the right way when he smiles at her this time, and it’s all she can do not to kiss him right then.

But first, they have monsters to fight.

* 

Dinner turns out to be a big hit. Tessa sets out a bunch of toppings and lets everyone choose what
they like. Celia thinks very carefully about hers, eventually taking great care placing her mushrooms and pepperoni on top of the cheese and sauce. Tessa then notices Leo adding mushrooms to his pizza too, even though he doesn’t usually choose them. She can’t help ruffling her hand through his hair a moment later after they’ve put everything in the oven, pleased at how well he’s making friends with Scott’s daughter.

They eat dinner together at the big table, and this time Leo insists on sitting with Scott and Celia next to Tessa. They talk the whole time, in between big bites of cheesy pizza. Tessa just enjoys the whole thing, realizing it’s been a little while since dinner time at her house was this animated. She makes a mental note to correct that.

Afterwards they put on a movie in the living room. The kids pile onto the couch and Scott and Tessa sit on either side of them, next to their kids. Celia nestles close to Scott, and after a little while Leo does the same with Tessa. She holds one arm around him briefly, and then shifts so her hand is resting beside him, in the small space on the couch. Minnie jumps up and settles herself on Celia’s lap, and it’s just about perfect.

Before too long Tessa feels Scott’s hand on top of hers. They turn and look at each other, then, their gazes fixed over the heads of their children. She feels the warmth in his expression and lets herself hope for so many things.

* 

It’s when she and Scott are washing up a short while later that something else occurs to her. Tessa thinks about how lovely Celia is, and how glad she is that Leo has a new friend close to his own age, and how Scott had talked about how long it had taken his daughter to feel settled in their new home here and overcome her shyness. She thinks about how much she already feels for Scott and how she already feels so drawn to him, even though she’s only known him a few days. And she thinks about how easily she could see herself being with him, maybe even making a life with him…and how amazing and strange and even terrifying that is.

Tessa looks at him, standing next to her and drying off pots and pans with a dish towel with such practice and care, and smiles to herself, deciding something.

“Scott,” she starts, and even she can feel the shift of tone in her voice. Her hands are still covered in soap suds, halfway to reaching back into the kitchen sink.

He looks up, a little startled like he’s not sure what she’s about to say but that it’s clearly very important. “Yeah?” He puts the pan down on the counter and drops the towel on top of it, turning to face her.

“Scott, no matter what you and me…” Tessa starts, pausing when she wonders if she’s already being too presumptive. But she doesn’t think she is. “You and your daughter are welcome here anytime,” she tells him, as sincerely and gently as she can. “I know how important she is to you and I know how important Leo is to me, and if she and Leo want to be friends and play together, that’s a wonderful thing and I won’t do anything to get in the way of that,” she gets out, her words running together as she just tries to get them out like it’s her only shot at it. “She’s always welcome here, whenever she wants,” she insists again.

He’s smiling by the time she finishes her words, and seems to understand why she’s said it. “That means a lot to me, Tess, thank you,” he says, resting a hand on her arm. “And, I’d love to return the favour. You and Leo are welcome in my home, too. In fact…Well I’d thought about asking you
guys over this week, but it turns out you beat me to it,” he tells her, laughing a little.

“Oh!” she exclaims. “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to do that.”

He’s already shaking his head. “It’s okay, it’s completely okay. You guys can come over another time. Maybe trick-or-treating on Thursday, even? We’re not too far from you guys, we can join forces,” he offers.

“Yes, that’s a wonderful idea. I’ll ask Leo tomorrow,” she says. She turns her head to see if she can glance into the living room and would lay bets that both kids have nodded off by now.

“Great. I’ll do the same. I know she’ll love it.” He swallows, thinking about something else.

“What is it?” she asks, turning a little more so she’s properly facing him, too.

“I feel the same way about Leo and Celia being friends, and I’m so glad to know she has you guys, even if nothing happens between you and me,” he starts. He’s standing so close to her now, so that she can feel his breath on her cheek. “But I just want to say I would really love it if something happens between you and me,” he says, and she feels a rush of warmth run through her as he does.

“So would I.” she breathes out, and then she’s not sure who moves first but then they’re finally kissing. She presses her lips against his and it’s soft and comforting and wonderful. But just as quickly it becomes something more than that. She parts her lips and runs her tongue along his, and then his mouth opens to her.

She kisses him for a long moment before finally coming up for air, and when she looks back at him he looks just asdazed as she feels - but also like he wishes they hadn’t stopped kissing. So then she doesn’t. She wraps her arms around his neck and kisses him again, even more deeply, until she can feel his arms wrapping around her, too.

As she does she feels something shift inside her, so many feelings and impulses and desires rising inside her all at once. But when they part again, both breathless, she discovers it’s more than that. She runs her hand along his face, looking into his eyes deeply enough to realize she’s looking not just at him but at her whole future.

Tessa can see into the rest of that week - Halloween night spent trick-or-treating, ending up at Scott’s house afterwards, her entwined in his arms on his back porch while the kids count candy and watch movies in his living room; To two nights after that, when Leo’s gone for a sleepover at his grandmother’s house and Celia’s done the same - and Tessa takes Scott to her bed for the first time...and then a second, and a third; To the next week, and the next and the next, until it’s a year later and she’s standing next to him in front of all their friends and family, promising to cherish each other as long as they live; And then to another year later, when they’ll welcome a new child into their world - one they make together, knitting their families together in an entirely new way.

It’s almost blinding, enough to make her knees weaken. It’s been so long since she gave in to that sight, to let herself see what could happen - what will happen - if only she lets herself have it. She’s even more grateful he’s holding her so closely. His arms are still wrapped tightly around her, like he doesn’t ever want to let her go.

She wonders if Scott sees any of this too, as he gazes back at her. She can’t quite figure out what to say next, amidst everything she’s feeling. But he does.

“Wow,” he breathes out, running one hand along her cheek.

“Yes,” she agrees. “Wow.” It’s been quite a week for that word, but that it’s no less appropriate.
“Tess, I...I hope it’s not wrong to say this,” Scott says, his hands resting firmly at her waist now. “But ever since I met you I’ve had the strangest feeling,” he tells her, and she feels another thrill move through her. “It’s felt like there was another reason I went into your bookstore last week. It felt like I was just supposed to be there, you know? It felt so right. And I thought it was because I was meant to find those books but then I saw you again and I realized...it was you,” he says, so elated. Like he’s so glad to finally tell her this. “I know you and I were meant to meet. It feels like it wasn’t just the cards, but something more than that. I don’t...” he shrugs a little, looking for the right words.

“I know exactly what you mean,” Tessa says, feeling so happy and amazed. “Because I feel the same way. Ever since last week I’ve felt like that. I just...I guess I wondered too if that was strange.” She brings both hands to frame his face, then. “But it isn’t strange at all, is it?”

“No,” Scott agrees. “It’s the least strange thing I’ve felt in a while, in fact.”

“Maybe I should have known,” Tessa wonders out loud. She runs one hand along his forehead, brushing at the hair that’s fallen forward, along the furrowed lines on his brow that are now relaxing again. “When you walked into my shop that night, I should have known it wasn’t going to be like any other time.”

“Either way, I’m glad I did,” he tells her, his voice half-whispered. “So, so glad.”

She leans in then and kisses him again. This time it’s much more tender and slow, an affirmation more than a feverish embrace.

There’s so much else she wants to tell him, so much she suddenly feels ready to rush into. But for now she contents herself with this moment in his arms, kissing him like it’s the first time but no less like he’s the last man she’ll kiss for the rest of her life. Because she knows now without a doubt that that’s who he is to her.

After all, her cards have never been wrong.
kiss you like the sun grounds you

Chapter by falsettodrop, only_because3

Chapter Summary

Y’all ever just get horny in a pumpkin patch?

Chapter Notes

Rating: E
Tags: Fall Vibes, Explicit Sexual Content, Exhibitionism, Public Sex, Comeplay??
Word Count: 3.9k

Welcome to the shortest entry (and shortest collaboration) of spooktober. We just wanted fun fall vibes and some fucking. Enjoy?

Falsettodrop: I just want to say thanks to my dearest only_because3, for without her I wouldn’t have finished my first fic in seven months. Love you!

For the first time in a long while, they’re able to enjoy the season.

It had been hard to before, restricted by a tight and constant training schedule. Fall had been the time of year associated with mounting pressures and sore, overworked bodies, their days spent in an artificial chill instead of in the more natural cool-down from the summer. Even now it’s difficult to carve out time for each other, but it’s worth every ounce of overtime and every lonely night spent apart, just to have one full day together.

“Think we’ll have time to figure out Halloween costumes after this?” Scott asks when a group of kids amble passed them.

Tessa kicks a rock, shoulders hunching. “I still can’t believe Charlotte called us out like that.” Scott chuckles at the memory of his niece chirping them for planning to be a ballerina and a hockey player, even if he had been shocked. “You don’t want to do a couples costume, right?”

Scott arches an eyebrow. “Don’t want to be the princess to my Prince Charming?”

“Someone thinks highly of themselves,’” Tessa says, quick and dry, a crooked grin sent in his direction.

“You wound me, Tess.” He pulls the baseball cap she stole from him in the car and puts it back on his head.

“Oh, look at that one,” Tessa exclaims, finger pointing at a truly enormous pumpkin centred in the middle of the patch, their conversation about costumes abandoned. They’re still quite far and it’s a tad dark outside so they can’t see it very clearly at the moment; Scott can’t imagine how big it’ll be when they get closer to it. “We should’ve grabbed a wagon.” She looks back almost forlorn at the
entrance of the patch, the row of Red Riders further than the pumpkins.

He squeezes her hand, thumb rubbing circles over her knuckles. “What happened to ‘a small pumpkin will be just perfect’?” he quips, grinning when she scowls in reply. They’ve already passed quite a few, the best looking ones moved to the front of the patch, probably to make it easier on families. There’s something nice about the thought of cutting their pumpkins straight from the vine. He’s not exactly sure why… maybe it’s just the extra time he gets with Tessa’s arm wrapped around his own as they search.

She steals his coffee cup, taking a sizable gulp even though he knows she hates the way he takes it. A dramatic ah leaves her lips when she passes it back. “Thank you so much for deciding to carry our pumpkin.”

Scott lets out a loud bark of a laugh, and drops her hand to throw an arm around her shoulders, nose smushing against her ear as he kisses the side of her face firmly. “I’ll carry whatever you want.”

Her fingers absentmindedly interlace with the hand over her shoulder. “Good. Because we’ll probably need two. One for each side of the porch.”

They make their way through the valleys and hills of the patch, careful to avoid stepping on stems and pumpkins that rotted before they could be picked. It had been a nice day, sunny earlier, now settling with a breeze that kicks up dust on the long stretches of dirt the tractors have paved between planted patches. The wind carries the smell from the ramshackle cafe set up next to the entrance so all Scott can smell is warm, spiced apples, and Tessa’s vanilla lotion. It sets him at ease, muscles relaxing more than they already had been. He feels weightless, almost, with Tessa’s arm around his waist and her hand in his.

And yet there’s no disturbance to the pleasant heat that fills him when Tessa untangles herself. “Do you remember going to the pumpkin patch as a kid?” Tessa asks. The gourd she picked out before comes up to his knees and sits fat and elongated in the dip between the rows. She rolls it over then frowns. The back half is rotten.

“We’ll find another.” She nods with a sigh before fitting in beside him. “And I think?” He scratches at the back of his neck with the bottom of his cup. “There are definitely pictures, but I was so young.”

Tessa nods, a little hum in the back of her throat. “I can’t remember the last time I carved a pumpkin.”

He thinks it would make their mothers sad to hear this, make them think that they failed somehow as parents even though it had always been him and her pushing, pushing, pushing to keep going. And, sure, if you were to ask him or Tessa, they’d probably give away a healthy handful of their medals that sit in a box in the basement of their home, but they wouldn’t trade the time they spent together, fingers intertwined and palms flush with one another, for anything.

When they were younger, they had always looked toward the future as a means to keep going. Nights spent together, dreams shared in whispers between them during nightfall, where they discussed what that would entail. Scott knew that once they had both claimed some kind of mutual satisfaction with their career, they’d be able to settle into their future with clear minds, a future where they could both breathe sighs of relief from the certainty that they’ve worked hard enough and they could now relax, finally, knowing that they’ve truly earned it.

Now, in the autumn air, bundled together and happier than ever, there’s time to make memories. They have so much time to make memories now, and he couldn’t be more thankful that they’ve
reached this point together and still, somehow, aren’t sick of each other.

“You’re not gonna carve one of the enormous ones, are you?” he asks dubiously. He entertains himself with a ridiculous image of her halfway into the thing, struggling to scrape it clean. Not to mention how much gunk is inside of a normal-sized pumpkin. Any carving that they partake in will likely be done on the back porch; he doubts Tessa will want a mess of slimy orange pumpkin innards all over her kitchen. He cocks his head to the side. He’s not even sure Tessa will be okay with carving out on the porch, now that he thinks about it. Hopefully they have enough spare newspaper or junk mail to lay down while they get to work.

Tessa shakes her head, settling his worries. “I don’t think I have that kind of time. We can just get a normal one to carve out.”

The hayride bumbles passed them, half-full of families looking out at the farmland that stretches out around them. Half of the patch is no longer here, having done their visit during a primetime afternoon slot. As an adult, he’s not quite sure he gets the point of hayrides, but everyone seems to be having a good time, except for the one little boy sitting at the end with a forlorn look on his face. Tessa snorts when she catches sight of the same kid. “Look at his face,” she laughs behind her hand, whispering to him. The kid has a scowl that could rival Marina’s, and his arms are crossed so tight against his chest that Scott isn’t sure how he doesn’t topple every time the tractor hits a divet in the dirt.

They watch as it drives up to the corn maze before turning to make its way back to the front of the patch. Scott looks at the tall stacks of hay on the outer edges of it, and notices that no one has bothered to go inside. He grins, ducking his head to murmur into Tessa’s ear. “Let’s go in there.” He knows just how to turn this outing into something much more memorable.

Tessa’s nose wrinkles, clearly not picking up his implications. “Or we could go home and not waste precious hours surrounded by corn when we could be doing other things.” Her hand slides from his waist and into the tight back-pocket of his jeans. She doesn’t squeeze, but she does give his ass a firm tap.

Clicking his tongue, he turns so that Tessa has no choice but to wrap both her arms around him, his own finding a home around her shoulders. “Are you trying to pick me up, Miss Virtue?”

She rolls her eyes as she leans further into him. “This has been an amazing date, Scott but I don’t want to spend an hour more, wandering around a corn maze and bickering about which direction to go.” She presses up to kiss the underside of his jaw, nipping before pulling away. “I want to fuck you. Let’s pick some mediocre pumpkins so we can go home and do just that.”

Scott lets out an exaggerated hum, making her think he’s considering her proposal until she pinches the skin at his hip. He bats her hand away with a laugh. “Y’know, the corn maze is huge...” He wiggles his eyebrows. “We could get frisky in there.”

Tessa looks slightly taken aback, like that wasn’t what she had expected him to say, but she doesn’t seem against the idea. She glances over to the corn maze, a contemplative look on her face, then shakes her head. “It would never work. I’m wearing jeans.”

It’s his turn to roll his eyes. “When has that ever stopped us before?” Her eyes cut up to him, eyelids heavy and a smirk curving her lips. He wonders what time she’s remembering. For him, it always goes back to when they were pressed up against each other in the storage closet in her bedroom, their mothers downstairs with the contractors. They could have just as easily locked the bedroom door and laid out on the floor, maybe even gone into one of the bathrooms, but Tessa’s eyes had lit up before she dragged him in and Scott knew that it was the fact they hadn’t locked
anything, that they were stolen away in plain sight, that had her dripping down his wrist more than usual.

She shakes her head at him, a lingering smile on her face. “You’re such a tease, Scott,” she says, dismissing his suggestion.

Well, if she won’t believe that it can work, all he can do is attempt to persuade her with whatever means necessary. He catches her wrist, fingers tight as he spins her around to press the length of his body against her back. Wrapping an arm around her waist, Scott dips down to kiss behind her ear. “Come on, T,” he murmurs, leaving her shivering in his wake. “I promise I’ll make it good for you.”

He can’t see her face from this angle, but he knows Tessa inside out and this is the same old song and dance they’ve been doing for years. He trails his hand under her sweater, scratching his nails across her abdomen, and presses a wet kiss against her neck, just how she likes.

She hums, so quiet that he can only hear her because his entire body is against hers. “Scott,” she whines, “cut it out.”

He bites her earlobe. “You sure that’s what you want?” he asks her, voice steady and quiet. No one is around them at the moment, so he takes a second to slip his fingers slightly beneath the waistband of her jeans, a sweet promise of what is to come. “I remember how much you liked it last time,” he says slowly, a reminder of all the times they’ve fucked out in the open, buzzing from the thrill of potentially getting caught.

The last time has been particularly exciting, up against the side of her car during the concert they went to this summer, her skirt hiked around her hips and his jeans solely unzipped to get his cock out.

He peers over her shoulder, looking at the delicate slope of her neck, and sees her swallow thickly. “I remember how wet you were,” he tells her, low and private, “I remember how much you begged for it, how loud you were, even trying to be quiet.” Tessa’s breathing has gone sharp and quick, like she’s recalling the same instance he is, and he can feel himself getting harder just watching how much his words are affecting her.

“Scott,” she says once, a plea and nothing else.

He smiles, kissing her jawline. “You want to?”

She reaches around to pull him harder against her and breathes out a simple, “Yeah,” and he knows he’s got her.

Despite the fact that the patch is fairly empty due to it being eveningtime, it does take a good ten minutes to get inside of the corn maze and to a place that they’re sure no one would visit. She’s all hands as they weave through, on his arm, in the belt loops of his jeans, when she’s positive they’re alone, a quick graze against his dick. She laughs when he drags her quick into the corn stalks, his eye catching a patch that’s already have been trampled down, no doubt from impatient passersby making hasty ways out on their own. At least he hopes that’s what it is, and that they haven’t found the spot that others have created to fuck.

Scott places his jacket on the ground—he is a gentleman, after all—and he sits on top of it, Tessa immediately straddling and kissing him hard, all teeth and lips and hands. “Woah,” he laughs when he breaks away, chuckling into her neck as his hands crawl under her sweater. “So I suppose you
like your seat?”

She looks him dead in the eye and grinds down hard against his lap, rolling her hips once, twice until he’s groaning deep in his throat. “I’m not the only one enjoying it,” she whispers wickedly, feeling him hard against her centre.

He trails his hand across her back, digging his nails into her muscles in that firm way that he knows she loves. “You’re right about that,” he replies, jerking upwards against her. She moans into the side of his head, tightening a fist in his hair and pulling just how he likes it.

Tessa shucks off her jacket quickly, continuing to rub against his lap. “Want to take off your jeans?” he says into her ear, and she nods quickly in reply. It’s a feat in of itself to help her get out of her jeans in public, but she’s able to shimmy out of them with some help from Scott, both of them struggling to peel the denim off of her legs. “Did you need to wear pants this tight today, Tess?” he teases.

She giggles. “Yes,” she says instantly, “if only because of how you looked at my ass when I put them on this morning.”

She’s still in her baby blue underwear, and he smacks her ass jokingly in reply. “Touché.”

It takes some maneuvering, but eventually they get both of their pants off and folded next to them, both fully covered from the waist-up. There’s something special about nights like this with Tessa, where he looks up and all he can see is her and a beautiful darkening sky above them. It makes Scott remember all the mornings and evenings and nights they’ve spent together, not worried about anything at all, relishing in the presence of each other and the desperate way they still want each other after all of these years.

His eyes are going soft thinking too much, but the dark, needy look in Tessa’s eyes brings him back to the task at hand. He snakes his hand under her panties, feeling the firm muscle of her ass beneath the palm of his hand, massaging gently to work her up. “I didn’t bring a condom,” he whispers to her, knowing she won’t care. Knowing that it might even work her up more.

She rubs her centre against him, the hard length of him pressing against her in a way that is full of friction, and whimpers. Her lips quirk, and she bites on his bottom lip, licking over it after to soothe the ache. “S’okay,” she husks, “It’s better without one.”

“Yeah?” Scott whispers, helping her grind against him harder. Sometimes when she gets like this, he feels like he’s seventeen again, remembers the way they used to rub off each other in his basement when they were horny teenagers, trying to make each other come. He brings a hand up between her legs, feeling the way she’s soaked through the fabric of her underwear. “God, T, I can feel how wet you are.”

“Take your cock out,” she says urgently. “Make me wetter. Want you to come inside me.”

He moans. “Fuck, Tess.” Her hand reaches inside his boxers to touch him. He instinctively fucks into her fist, allowing her to pull along the length of his cock, rolling her thumb against the head of him as he gets wetter with precome. “Please,” he says to her reaching for her panties and pulling them to the side, not bothering to take them off. “Please,” he repeats, knowing nothing but his own desperate need to bury himself deep inside of her cunt.

“I’m going to ride you,” she tells him, letting his cock slip against her smooth centre, like he doesn’t already know. “And you’re going to come inside me, okay?”
“’Kay,” he says to her nonsensically, losing his mind in the feel of her hand against him. “You can ride me—oh—yeah, I want you to fuck yourself on me.” The tip of his dick slips into her and he groans loudly into her neck, temporarily forgetting that they’re in a public place. “Shit, fuck, fuck, fuck. Tessa.”

“God,” she whimpered, voice pitching higher and breaking as she sinks further down the length of his cock. “Yeah, that’s it. Feels good.”

He rocks up against her, slipping deeper inside of her. He stays still, catching his bearings as she shudders against him and settles down, finding her place with him inside her, a familiar feeling to them both. “Want to hear you,” he tells her, once he’s able to catch his breath. “Want everyone here to know you’re mine.” He emphasizes his point by bucking up, listening for her telltale stifled moan.

They both know that they can’t be too loud, otherwise they’ll get arrested for public indecency or something crazy like that, and they can’t risk any crazy headlines. Reading Retired ice dancers Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir get caught fucking in a pumpkin patch on the Toronto Sun is not something either of them want, so they make up for it in whispers and private groans meant only for the two of them.

“Moan for me, Tess,” he tells her, “Let everyone know how good I make you feel.” He relishes in the way she fucks him harder every time after he says something right. While he knows that he’s a bit too possessive to be alright with everyone knowing how Tessa sounds when she’s coming apart, they can still get lost in these little moments sometimes despite that. They can coast off this feeling, play along with it, knowing that no matter what happens, they’ll be okay. They’ll have each other.

And it’s a bit indecent, the way they’re fucking shamelessly as the sky grows darker above them and the stars begin to shine brighter, wearing most of their clothes. Scott’s hand is still on Tessa’s panties, pulling them to the side so he can thrust into her, and he loves the way she looks when she’s like this, wild and intense and determined. Her eyes have a slight sheen to them in the way they usually do when she’s getting close, and her body is hot and sticky against his as she moves. His thumb moves to rub gently against her clit, groaning as she sucks on the skin of his neck in thanks.

“You’re so good at that, Tess,” he tells her nonsensically. He always stops making sense around this time, when he’s close to coming, and he loses his filter. “You’re perfect, you’re so fucking wet and perfect.”

Tessa does this cute little laugh-moan, like she wants to make fun of him but also thinks something he’s said is hot. “Please shut up and fuck me harder,” she orders, voice filled with mirth and need, clearly edging closer to coming.

His left hand is on her hip, helping her inch off him as he fucks into her harder, rubbing her clit in firm circles, faster and faster in a way that he knows Tessa finds titillizingly sexy. “C’mon, T. Want you to come first,” he pleads. “You want me to come in you? I promise I’ll get you so filthy, so much that you’re dripping with me when we leave.” He bites down on her shoulder, licking the salt off her skin as she shudders against him, his movements growing sloppier as she reaches her brink. “I like it so much, how wet you feel after I come inside you. Gonna lick it out of you when we’re home, fuck you with my tongue and make you even wetter.”

Tessa gasps. “Jesus, fuck, Scott,” she sobbed, cunt clenching around him rhythmically, body shaking through her orgasm. He thrusts up into her, listening to the sweet sound of her cries as he chases his own, breathing hard against her breastbone as he comes inside her. Her hips rock against him, cunt fluttering with every jerk of his cock, and he scraps his teeth along her throat where he
can feel a whine trapped.

The wind ruffles the stalks of corn around them and goosebumps sprinkle across their exposed, sweaty skin. Without Tessa moaning in his ear and his own running narration of things he’s **definitely** going to do to her when they get home, it’s easier to hear just how close other patrons of the patch are. There’s laughter and shrieks, some yelling too, but thankfully it doesn’t sound as though anyone has caught on to their little tryst.

Still, it’s best not to tempt fate.

Scott tangles his fingers in the hair at the nape of Tessa’s neck, pulling her in for one more long, hard kiss. “I don’t think we need pumpkins anymore,” she sighs against his lips.

He laughs. “We can at least grab one on our way out.”

Tessa shrugs, breath hitching as she rises high enough on her knees for his softening cock to fall against his thigh. “Then when we get home, I’m shoving my panties in your mouth.” It’s her turn to laugh when his cock twitches at her statement, only hers is low and accompanied with an evil twist to her lips. Her knees hit the dirt as she scoots back but she doesn’t seem bothered in the least. She leans forward and grips his dick at the base before taking him in her mouth, sucking off the salty tangy mix of their come.

When she stands up to get her jeans back on, he mouths at the wet blue cotton, his nose nudging against her clit. “Promise?”

She jerks his head back by his hair, tangling her hand in his curls and kissing the tip of his nose. “A guarantee, my love.”
I never did believe in the ways of magic (but I’m beginning to wonder why)

Chapter by iwanthemtostay

Chapter Notes

Rating: M
Tags: possible haunted library, tired postgrads
Word Count: 9.9k

My story isn’t very spooky, but it might contain a ghost. Chapter title from "You Make Loving Fun" by Fleetwood Mac.

It's been a joy to get to work on a project with all these talented writers. I hope you enjoy my contribution. Thanks to only_because3, carmen_sandiego and EastFromEden for all their help and to type_a for answering all my law review/journal questions <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tessa’s not quite sure how she would have wanted to see Scott Moir again after three years, but she knows it wouldn’t have been in the Douglas Library coming off a particularly hard night shift on an adult intensive observation ward.

(The hard night on the ward for obvious reasons both emotional and appearance-wise, the Douglas Library because of the whole last time they were here together they fucked thing.)

Coming here probably wasn’t the greatest idea in the first place but she knows she won’t be able to sleep for a few hours and that should give her enough time to finish off her CAT essay so she can spend the weekend actually resting (in between doing her lit review for her research proposal).

He looks better now than he did then, has lost some of that boyish look he still had even though he was going on two years older than she was. She still sees photos now and then on Facebook, but he’s not really one for social media. He’s bent over a pile of books and foolscap notebooks, writing furiously, so he doesn’t notice when she sits down a few tables away from him, even though her chair scraping along the floor is the only noise to be heard as there’s no one else around. Scott always did have a laser focus when he really settled down to something.

Tessa tries to call on her own laser focus to critically analyse the evidence base for this therapy. She must do a pretty good job because all of a sudden it’s an hour later and there’s a large coffee in front of her and Scott is walking back over to his desk.

“Hey,” she calls, the sound echoing louder than it should.

Scott jumps a little before turning back around, his eyes on the ground before looking up to meet hers. “Hey. I was going to say when hi when I noticed you on my way out for coffee,” he shakes his own cup in his right hand, “but you were engrossed so… I hope that’s still the way you take it.”

One sip confirms that it is. She’s not sure how she ever disliked him. It’s not like she hadn’t
wanted to be late or not show up to that stupid evolutionary psych class most days. And there have been more than a few times over her last few years of working with kids that she’s realised that his comments during their developmental classes were actually helpful and relevant after all. “Thank you,” she says, hoping that her voice might convey a little ‘I’m sorry’ too. “I didn’t know you were back.”

“Me either. About you, obviously!” He scratches his head, laughing a little. “I hope I’m aware that I’m here.”

She joins in a little with the laughter. “What are you studying?”

“I’m in my second year of the sports psych PhD.” Tessa had known he wasn’t on the clinical or developmental programmes so sports does seem like the best fit. “What about you?”

“I’ve just started the clinical doctorate. I haven’t been at the library much because we had our induction and now our first placement. We’re only in class Mondays and Tuesdays.”

It’s clear how impressed he is just from his face, and his smile is a genuine one, not like those of some of her former classmates and colleagues when she told them she had got a spot. “That’s incredible, Tessa. Congratulations. How has it been so far?”

She’s about to give him the patented line of it being exciting but a challenge, but in the end that’s not what comes out. “It’s been… There is a lot to keep in mind. Where I worked before was really busy and there was pressure, but this is different.” This is being a student and practitioner all at once.

“Where are you on placement?” he asks. He’s shuffling a little and she wonders if she should ask him to sit down next to her, but she doesn’t want to keep him too long if he needs to get back to his work.

“In adult inpatients at KGH. It’s… a change from what I’ve been doing before.”

“Were you doing research?”

She shakes her head. “I’ve been working in the community with kids and families. I’ve never worked solely with adults or in inpatients before.” It might be a little early to be making this decision, but she’s fairly sure it won’t be her chosen specialty come qualifying.

Scott’s eyes widen just a bit. “Oh, I just remembered you saying you wanted to go into research and academia back when we were undergrads, I had figured you might do the PhD over the Psy.D. But, I get it, you know, plans change.”

It feels like a long time now since that was her dream. “Yeah. I’m pretty sure that’s not what I want anymore.”

Tessa wonders if he’s remembering the same thing she is — that time they’d got into an unnecessary argument about whether doing research or lots of clinical work was more beneficial. She can’t see herself ever telling him how many times she’s found herself thinking he might have been right over the past few years.

He clears his throat. “I’d better get back to it and let you do the same. It’s been good talking to you.”

“You too. I’m sure I’ll see you again here.” A feeling a little like hope creeps up on her.
“Definitely, I feel like I live here half the time. Good luck with your placement.”

She murmurs her thanks as he walks away. It takes her a moment or two to settle down to her essay again, but once she does it’s with a renewed energy. She feels a lot more alive all of a sudden. Thanks to the coffee, probably.

After not having seen her for three years, Scott then sees Tessa Virtue again three days later. He thinks she seems a little more rested when he notices her sitting at the same table she’d been using on Friday night. Her bun is more... Tessa and she doesn’t look as pale. Her method of article reading doesn’t seem any different to how he remembers it from the times they’d shared study groups or been in the library at the same time — she still has the same brand of pastel highlighters that she interchanges based on a system he had never quite figured out. She’s not wearing the glasses from Friday, she hadn’t worn any back in undergrad, but he thinks they suited her.

It’s not that he’s staring at her, not in a weird way, but he’s definitely looking in her direction and not concentrating on the paper he’s reading about sport programmes for young offenders when he sees Tessa’s pale blue highlighter fly off her table and land right in front of where he’s sitting. He doesn’t get how it happened, it didn’t fall and it’s somehow travelled about ten feet. If he hadn’t seen it he thinks he would have assumed Tessa had thrown it. But he doesn’t want to make it seem like he was watching her so he puts his head back down and only looks up again when he hears her approaching.

She stumbles a bit after she picks up the highlighter and then waves it around a little awkwardly. “Hi Scott. I’m sitting over there and uh, when I looked up my pen was over here?” Tessa is really quite flustered, her cheeks pink and her words streaming out. “I can’t figure out how it got here.”

Scott’s been trying, but this is the best he can come up with: “A gust of wind maybe?”

Tessa looks exceedingly doubtful, but she nods anyway. “Maybe.” He’s starting to wonder if maybe it is breezy or cold, because she wraps her arms around herself. “What is your research on? I, uh, didn’t ask you on Friday.”

It had only been a short conversation really, he hadn’t been sure she’d actually want to talk to him. The coffee had been something of an apology as well as him figuring she might need it. “I’m still honing in on things, but something to do with the benefits of sports programmes for young people who are at risk.”

“Oh.” Tessa’s wearing that surprised but impressed face he remembers from when he used to say things she clearly thought were insightful but didn’t want to admit to thinking so. Except this time she does say it. “That sounds great. I kind of presumed you were more on the performance side of things.”

He can’t fault her for assuming that. Most people do considering his background. Tessa knows as well as anyone that he’d started his undergrad two years later than his peers after spending time playing junior hockey. “I’m doing some of that on the side, but this seems more... useful, I guess.” He was tempted to say important, but that would probably make him seem full of himself.

“It is. It’s important,” she says, with that determined jut to her chin he remembers more often being used against than with him.

“Have you thought about what kind of research you might do for your dissertation?” He knows there’s more of a focus on the work placements in the clinical programme, but the research project
due at the end is still a hefty piece of work.

“Yeah.” He shouldn’t be surprised that Tessa would have gone in with a plan. “Hopefully working on whether sessions of play therapy could be beneficial at the beginning of fostering or adoption placements for children who have experienced trauma and their caregivers.”

He’s not sure he’d been expecting something quite that specific, however. “Wow. That sounds great, Tessa.”

She starts speaking faster, her voice getting a little louder than its previous hushed library level. “I did a little bit of it at my old job and it seemed to be useful for families and it’s the kind of thing that could maybe be useful policy-wise as well as on a clinical level so…” She stops and takes a breath, her cheeks a little flushed and her eyes with that flash they hold when she speaks about a topic she’s passionate about. Tessa is beautiful, this he knows, but sometimes the things you already know hit you harder again all of a sudden. She shakes her head quickly. “Not that I’m saying that my work could have major implications or anything.”

“It could though. That sounds like a care plan that could become standard practice, should become standard practice even.” He can think of a few kids he’s worked with in the past who could have benefitted from a model like that.

“Thanks.” She still seems a bit unsure, but she’s smiling. “I should leave you to your reading and get back to mine.”

Scott would like to talk to her some more, but he doesn’t want to delay her. “Good luck with yours. It was good talking to you.”

“Yeah, you too.” At first he thinks the trace of surprise in her voice is at what she just admitted, but then he notices that she’s looking at the highlighter that had flown across the room. Tessa lifts it up and examines it, like it might tell her how it had managed that feat. “Thanks to this and its new powers.”

He’d forgotten all about that. “If it can teleport I want the secret.”

Tessa laughs, muffling the sound with her hand and shooting a glance over to the group of students a few tables away from them whose entrance into this section of the library had passed Scott by. “I could do with that one too.” She backs away before waving. “See you soon, Scott.”

He echoes the sentiment, hoping that it’s true. He likes these little library chats, thinks he’d like them to be longer and more substantial. He wants to know what led Tessa down this path she hadn’t foreseen, but he doesn’t think he knows her well enough to ask. He’d like to apologise for not contacting her three years ago, but maybe that would be too little too late. It’s not that he thinks Tessa was sitting around waiting on a message, he wasn’t that arrogant now or then, but he still feels like he owes her an explanation.

He really had wanted to see her again, after the stress of exams and the emotions of graduation. Scott rubs his temple and tries to get back to the article he had abandoned. Now is not the time to be thinking of how he’d wanted to do more than just see Tessa, or how he’d still like more than that now. For all that seems to have shifted between them, that remains the same.

It takes two more short conversations with Scott after the highlighter incident (one as he’s leaving to go coach a hockey practice and she’s just getting in, the other when they’re both dawdling at the
water fountain) for Tessa to admit to herself that she’d like to talk to him for longer, preferably outside the library. She just doesn’t know how to go about asking him. It seems presumptuous to assume he’d even want to do something like that, it’s not like they’ve ever been friends after all. They were classmates who argued a lot (needlessly, most of the time), and then there was that one time they had sex in an alcove in this very library when they were jumped up on final exam stress. Would she have liked to hear from him after that? Sure, but she gets why he might have felt awkward about it. It’s not like she holds it against him. Or has thought about it much. Well, except sometimes when she gets herself off. And on the occasions where she wonders whether the sex was actually that as good as she remembers or if it was just the timing and location of it. But not a lot. Just enough to realise that she’s open to the idea of being more than friends.

That might not be what he wants at all though. He might not be interested, or he could have a girlfriend. He’s Scott Moir. He probably has a girlfriend.

Tessa would be happy with being friends. It would be good to have someone who knows the stresses of doctoral life but isn’t living in the exact same stress space she is, like her friends on the course whom she loves but sometimes needs a break from. Scott could be that friend. Jordan does a good job, but she has her own law school stress, which also affords her an amount of free time that Tessa thinks needs to be kept free rather than devoted to listening to the ramblings of her younger sister.

She would be fine with just being friends, as long as that still entails gazing at him in the library from time to time. Right now he’s got a bunch of papers spread in front of him and he seems to be drawing some sort of mindmap while gnawing on a pen, which shouldn’t be attractive but very much is. She hates it when people chew on pens, she doesn’t know why she finds it so distracting when he does it. She always has done, but in their first years of knowing each other she thinks she’d successfully tricked herself into believing that it just annoyed her. Tessa knows better now.

She’s about to put her head down and try and get into this Schore article when Scott takes his hoodie off, which is as distracting as it is confusing. As much as she wants to just focus on his arms she can’t understand how he’s warm enough to remove a layer when she’s basically shivering while wearing a scarf and sweater. She’s even been considering putting her coat on. There must be something weird going on with the heating or air conditioning or something, especially with that gust of wind or whatever it was that caused her highlighter to fly away last week too. She had tried googling whether there were any problems in the library but her search had only returned some article about the library potentially being home to the ghost of one of the first female students at Queens. Which was obviously preposterous and probably planted by the Haunted Walk of Kingston people. It is factually very cold now though and if it’s warm where Scott is sitting Tessa should logically move over there so that she is able to concentrate better and get to grips with the neuroscience in this paper.

So, for the good of her education, Tessa packs up her things and walks over to Scott’s table. She’s rethinking it a little as she gets closer, but when she reaches him he looks up and smiles and it feels like a very good idea after all. She gestures back towards where she was sitting, “It’s really cold over there and, uh, I was wondering if I could sit here?”

Scott is already clearing a space for her before she finishes. “Sure. I looked over a while ago and wondered why you were so bundled up. I’m finding it really hot in here today.” He wipes the back of his hand over his forehead and Tessa tries not to dwell on the memory of sweat on upper lips that tastes more vivid now than it ever has.

“Yeah, I was thinking about putting my coat on but I saw you were taking layers off so sitting here seemed like a better option.” She removes her scarf but it honestly it isn’t all that warm over here,
maybe he just runs hotter than she does.

He rubs his arms. “It was getting uncomfortable but it feels better now I think.” He puts some of his printed out papers into a pile. “How has your placement been going? Been swayed towards adults or inpatients yet?”

Tessa used to hate when he teased her, but it seems charming now. “Not yet, and I’m not holding out any hope.”

Scott furrows his brow. “It’s not bad though, right? They’re treating everyone okay, you and the patients?”

“Yeah, most of the staff are great. It’s just not what I want to do.” She’s about to elaborate when she catches sight of his unfinished mindmap. “I don’t want to distract you, I should get back to my reading anyway.”

He looks down at his work and back up at her again like he’s torn before nodding. “I’d better stick at it. Maybe we can take a break in a while?”

She returns his nod before settling back into her seat and finding her place on the second page again. It’s slow work, especially compared to her usual reading speed, but she makes it through and manages to tease out some interesting points along the way. When she glances up at Scott she finds that he’s put his hoodie back on and now that she’s closer she can see it’s their class one from their senior year. “I thought if you were going to choose to wear any of our class hoodies it would be the one from freshman year.”

His head bolts up from the list he’s making and he blinks, confused, before laughing. “Well, I’ve come around to your opinion that ‘Jung and Horney’ might not be the best slogan after all.”

“It only took you a few years.” They’d argued about that for what felt like forever until the rest of the class had voted and chosen his idea. He’d smirked at her and she had had the strangest urge to push him, which she now thinks she may have been confusing with something else.

“It took me some time to mature.” He taps his notebook, “And look at me now! Organising my study schedule and my ideas!”

“A postgrad will do that to you.” Tessa couldn’t survive without her organiser and her online and hardcopy calendars.

He rubs his eyes. “That it will. How is your reading going?”

“Finished the worst of it.” She lifts up the Schore article. “How come we still have to read neuroscience?”

She’s sure the grimace Scott is wearing matches her own. “That was the one class we never argued because we never spoke.”

Her laugh draws a loud ‘shush’ from a neighbouring table and they both slide down their seats a little. “I think you were right way more times than I gave you credit for,” she whispers.

“Yeah?” He looks surprised and it makes her feel guilty.

“Definitely.” She runs her finger along one of the highlighted lines of text in front of her, not paying any attention to its meaning. “Do you remember that time you said that research was important but that there were people out there who needed help now and we needed to focus on
them?” He murmurs a yes and she keeps going. “I’ve thought about that a lot since. Especially when I was working with the kids. I knew I could go into research and study why things happen or how we can help but… there are so many children and young people who need help now and can’t wait for some proven better way. And maybe it doesn’t really matter so much in that moment what the mechanisms are behind how they feel or why their caregivers are the way they are. It matters that we do something about how they feel and how they’re treated. It matters that we try and make it even one tiny bit better.”

She thinks of the bright rooms with the yellow suns and green trees and purple flowers on the walls, and of the stories she was told that seemed so at odds with them, so very foreign from the comfortable childhood she’d had where her stresses came from dance class and school and were mainly of her own making. And sometime in those rooms her plans had altered, and maybe she had too, heart seared and eyes opened wider by girls who couldn’t make it to school and boys who couldn’t settle in foster placements and little ones who wanted to come home with her than they ever could have been by peer-reviewed studies or cold statistics. She thinks of the young people she hopes she went some way to helping, and the ones she couldn’t.

Scott is just looking at her, eyes searching, and she had expected that he’d chime in with something before now. It’s exposing to be talking to him like this, about something she feels, something she cares about more than she can begin to explain without her hands starting to tense and her blood rushing, so much more so than arguing about theory or best practice had been. “I want to do something, to do what I can,” she blurts out, a defence to an argument he doesn’t look in any mood to make.

“You will.” His words are decisive, final. “You’re going to do great things, because you’re smart, and you’re capable, and you care.” There’s almost a hint of surprise to that last clause, and it makes Tessa bristle a little before she thinks of the way she cared back when Scott first knew her compared to the way she cares now. There’s a difference to caring in an intellectual and idealistic way to the visceral way you care about helping a child when it’s you and them in a room with their history and their pain and you don’t know what the fuck you’re doing but you’re going to do everything you can.

“Thank you,” she says, because she knows he means it and the way he says it makes it sound real.

Scott’s lining up his pens, tip to end to tip to end, and it feels like he’s working up to say something when his phone starts vibrating. He quickly stops it, swearing under his breath. “Sorry, Tess. That’s my brother, I was supposed to meet him twenty minutes ago.”

She apologises as he packs his things away. “I’m so sorry for keeping you.”

“No, I’m sorry. I would love to stay and talk but he’s waiting and…”

“Of course. You should go. I’m sure I’ll see you here, I have a research proposal due soon.”

Scott groans, rubbing his eyes. “And I have a big paper so I’m basically going to be moving in.”

“I’ll see you soon then.” For a moment Tessa thinks he’s going to hug her, but he doesn’t, just smiles and mumbles something about seeing her soon.

It takes her a minute or two after he leaves to get in the mood to work again, but it doesn’t feel like too much of a chore now. Her shoulders feel lighter, like a weight has been lifted that she didn’t know she was carrying. She must have been right about needing Scott as a friend.
Scott’s nearly asleep, his eyes glazing over from how many times he’s read this half-assed conclusion of his, when Tessa appears before him like an angel bearing an unhealthy amount of caffeine.

“Do you have time to take a break with me or do you just want to drink while you work?” she asks as she hands him the large cup.

He doesn’t answer with words, just saves his work and stands up, pushing his chair in and walking out to the hallway with her. On their way out he notices her notes and laptop neatly laid out at her usual desk. They’ve seen each other a few times since she sat with him last week but it always seems to be when one of them is leaving the library, their conversations limited to hurried hellos and questions about how they’re getting on with their deadlines. He’s not entirely sure he should be taking a break right this moment but he wants to spend more time with her.

Instead of going outside or down to the lobby like he expects Tessa just sits on the floor in the passageway laying her legs across the fading red carpet. He joins her, leaning his back against the opposite wall and lining his legs beside hers, not quite touching.

“How’ve you been doing?” he asks, taking a sip from the coffee that’s been made exactly the way he likes. He’s not sure when Tessa picked up on that.

“Living on adrenaline and caffeine,” she announces, her tone all ersatz cheer. “You?”

“Same.” This is the first paper since going back to do his postgrad that he’s been living dangerously close to the deadline on and it has him jittery. Sometimes in an almost fun, full of motivation way and others in a sickening, shaky way. He has an idea that Tessa really is feeling the same as him from the way she’s moving her legs beside him in impatient little jerks. “Pretty edgy quite a bit of the time.”

“I didn’t know just how bad I was about this proposal until yesterday.” She rolls her legs from left to right and back again. “There wasn’t anything for me to do on the ward yesterday so I went through my references listening to music and as I was listening to **Rumours** I thought, for at least a second I genuinely thought… this is an amazing album and they were completely off their faces on coke making it. Maybe if I do cocaine my research proposal will be amazing too?”

Scott recognises this is a completely illogical thought process, but **Rumours** really is a great album and for a moment he’s right there agreeing with her. “It honestly doesn’t sound like the worst idea.”

“Right?! We could just do it once and write our assignments and go back to normal.” He can tell she’s joking about the illicit drug taking, but there’s a definite yearning for this to be over soon and painlessly, which is an urge he shares.

“I’m almost there but it’s just so fucking hard to finish it properly.” He’s searching for the one perfect note to end on and it’s just not coming to him.

Tessa rubs her face with the heels of her hands. “I want to stop writing and sleep but it’s not ready yet, but if I look at it for any longer I’ll scream.”

“Tessa explodes into a big belly laugh. He thinks the stress has to be getting to her because it wasn’t that funny. She has a great laugh, one that could coax anyone into joining her.

After she’s calmed down some she manages to get out, “That does sound like a good idea though. I
think I need someone else to tell me whether it makes any sense at this point.”

“I’m at that stage too.” He’s found himself questioning whether words he’s using are actually words.

“It’s nice,” Tessa says, before stopping like she’s said all she needs to until he raises his eyebrows. “It’s nice that we can help each other like this now.”

“Yeah. It is.” He adjusts his position a bit, the wall isn’t the most comfortable against his back, especially after having spent most of the past few days hunched over his laptop. “I’m not sure anymore why we didn’t back in undergrad.” It’s not like they’d been unhelpful to one another, he’s certain that Tessa was the one person to send him notes one night he was freaking out before a neuroscience final, but it hadn’t been like this.

“I don’t even really understand why we didn’t get along for so long,” Tessa admits. “I think we just got into the habit of arguing in class.”

“At the start I thought you were a little too perfect.” She’d been just eighteen, ridiculously smart, always organised and so beautiful. Scott guesses he was intimidated and had retreated to some kind of elementary school self.

“I thought you were full of yourself and acted like you knew everything, which I think was just because I knew you played junior hockey and were a bit older and you actually did know a lot.”

Scott maybe had been full of himself in some ways, but not when it came to academics. College hadn’t really been in his plans until hockey didn’t work out so he thinks he might have overcompensated at the start, working hard to make sure no one could doubt that he belonged here. “I did a lot of reading,” he rolls his head to the left, “and pretended I didn't.”

“I knew it!” Tessa points her finger at him, shaking it with a lot of caffeine-fuelled exuberance. “I knew you were doing extra reading!”

“You knew because you were doing it too!” He throws his arms out wide.

“But I wasn't lying about it!” She’s exasperated but still triumphant.

“I guess you might be right there.” His acknowledgement draws that huge laugh out of her again, it’s so loud that he thinks the people still inside the library proper must be able to hear her. Her body shakes with it, her leg hitting off his and one moment he’s laughing along with her and the next their legs are pressed right against each other and he’s looking into her eyes and no one is laughing anymore.

It’s charged in a way it hasn’t been since they met again, the hallway suddenly hot and devoid of any other sensory input but Tessa’s gaze on his, their legs touching and the sound of their breathing, faster than usual. It’s like a dial is being turned, drawing them closer, and he wants to lean in, to have her now parted lips on his again. But he thinks of what he has to accomplish before this deadline and it seems like the same thought crosses her mind because they both turn their heads, their legs falling away from each other like a book opened at the middle.

Maybe it’s more than the deadlines though, maybe he doesn’t want this time to be a fast (if fantastic) coming together in the library but something more sustainable.

There’s no maybe. That’s what he wants.

“I’m sorry I never called.” The words that have been rolling around in his head for weeks now pop
out.

Tessa blinks, pushing her glasses back up her nose. “That’s okay. I never… I don’t mind.”

“It’s not like I think you were sitting around waiting for it.” He always knew she wasn’t. “I just… I said I would and then I didn’t.”

She pulls at the sleeve of her sweater. “I’m not saying I wasn’t a little disappointed, but I knew that it might have been awkward or… difficult, I guess, once we were out of that exam bubble. I didn’t know whether it had just been the build up of stress or whether there was more to it, and I thought maybe you were wondering about that too. Or you’d figured out your answer.”

“That was probably part of it.” Sometimes he’d questioned whether it had even happened or had it all been a very vivid fantasy. “But… I wanted to ask you out.” He sees the smile that escapes before she schools her face into impartial listener mode and it makes him feel more comfortable, less like he’s pulling himself open. He’s just sharing, telling her how he actually feels when sitting right across from her and not just rehashing a theory he’s read from halfway across a lecture hall or giving her his own views from the other side of a table. “I thought we could meet up back home, seeing as we lived so close. And then I got back and I realised I didn’t know what was next. I was having interviews and just missing out and I knew you’d started that internship at Western and… For the first time since I got into Queens I didn’t know what was next. I felt like everyone was moving on and I was back home working at the rink like I hadn’t just gone to college and worked my ass off for four years.” Even now, after getting a great job that took him back here to study for a PhD, he still feels useless remembering that time. “I wasn’t in a good place.”

“I am really sorry.” The words are easy, they could be glib, but the way Tessa says them isn’t. It’s real and heartfelt and it makes him kick himself again for not having called her back then because he thinks he could have done with hearing it. But he probably wasn’t ready. “It sucks. That feeling that everyone is progressing while you’re stuck.”

“I think maybe I always knew you wouldn’t think any less of me but… I did.”

She reaches out to take his hand and he’s about to tell her more but then he doesn’t need to, it’s okay just to sit here holding on. He still has those feelings sometimes but he’s learned how to feel them and keep going. Maybe next time he can talk to Tessa or just remember this.

They sit there for a little longer before the conclusion that still needs concluding starts pricking at his brain. He helps her up, and is surprised when she steps in closer rather than away once she’s on her feet. She hugs him, her arms tight around his and her fingers lacing behind his neck. They’ve never hugged before and when she moves away he has to work not to ask if she’ll promise they can again.

Her cheeks are pink as they walk back into the library and she stops right before the entrance. “We should do something after these deadlines. Outside the library.”

“I’d like that.” His words chase hers, no breath in between, and their laughter draws disapproving glances from a girl at a desk right by the door.

“Okay, it’s settled.” Tessa starts walking in but then turns back towards him. “I have a stats final next week, so maybe after that too?”

“Sure.” He has a paper he can get started on.

They walk back towards their tables, heads bowed but he can still catch her smile. When they reach
where they were seated they see that all of Tessa’s neatly piled notes are now on the ground, somehow pooled right beside his table. They both drop to their knees and start to tidy them up.

“Is there some kind of weird weather event that happens at my table?” He hasn’t heard her grumble like that in a while.

“Maybe it’s a poltergeist.” It’s a joke, mainly, but he swears it seems like Tessa seriously considers the idea before she grins back at him.

“Or someone who’s mad because we talk.”

That could explain this, but not those weird temperatures or the flying highlighter… But there’s surely some rational explanation out there, just one they haven’t thought of yet.

Once her things are gathered back up Tessa places them on his table. “I may as well sit here now,” she whispers. “It will make things easier for reading each other’s work anyway.”

He’s not really sure how that works when they’re emailing each other documents, but he’s not going to argue with her. It feels right to have her working beside him. Like it’s how things are meant to be.

Tessa was not planning on going to the library tonight. She had handed in her research proposal and sat her stats final and finished off her work experience for the week. She was looking forward to drinking wine and ordering pretty lingerie online ahead of her date with Scott next week. Not that he will necessarily see it then, or that it’s necessarily a date, but Tessa likes to be prepared. Those plans had to be changed though when Jordan had sent her a paper for her to copy edit before she submitted it to the *University of Toronto Law Journal*. It wasn’t like she could say no after the papers her sister has trudged through for her lately. She’d considered reading through it at home but she’s pretty sure she would have ended up asleep on her couch, so the library it is.

The sides of her lips turn up automatically when she sees Scott sitting in his usual spot, but her cheeks heat up a little too. It’s almost odd seeing him here in the flesh and fully clothed, not like in those incredibly vivid dreams she’s been having lately. Tessa has had sex dreams before, but these are something else. During the night, or in the early morning, she’s been waking up with her legs splayed, her hand underneath her bottoms or gripping the sheet beside her. In those dreams she can feel how the bookshelf had dug into her back before Scott had moved them and when she wakes up it’s like the scent of the aftershave he used back then is lingering in the air and on her skin. She’s even had an unexplained bruise on her back that matches one she had back then that she’d spied when getting changed one morning. It’s far from the worst way to be woken up, but it’s weird.

Tessa tries to banish those thoughts from her mind when she goes to sit down across from Scott, which isn’t as difficult as she expected when he looks up at her with such a warm smile, like she’s made his day just by being here. “I wasn’t expecting to see you,” he whispers, even though they’re the only ones here right now.

“Jordan needs me to read through a paper for her,” she explains as she gets out her laptop.

“A law paper?” he asks, some serious trepidation in his tone.

“I’m just looking out for apostrophes and commas, I don’t need to really get into what it’s about.” Usually the ideas are fine, it’s just very dry.

“You’re a good sister.”
She’s about to tell him all that Jordan has done to help her out, but she notices that the nib of his pen is leaning on a half-finished bullet point so she just smiles and lets him get back to his work. They can talk more later, when they’re ready for a break.

By the second page of this treatise on tax law Tessa thinks she could do with that respite. She could swear that the heating is being slowly but surely cranked up and it’s making her eyelids droopy and the words in front of her start to swim. Scott seems to be working steadily, so maybe she should just rest her eyes for a few minutes, get a little rest before she continues. Her full attention is needed for catching any grammar and punctuation errors.

She rolls her shoulders back, sinks down in her chair and lets her eyes drift shut.

*The library is different now. Sunset rather than late at night, the evening sun streaming in through the high windows, bathing Scott in golden light. She reaches forward and grasps his hand, standing up and pulling him towards the shelves, avoiding the psychoanalytic section because no one wants to fuck in front of Freud. His eyes are on hers as he pulls up the skirt of her blue floral sundress, his fingers now warm and steady on her thighs. Tessa makes quick work of opening his fly and shoving his jeans down while he kisses her neck, licking the beads of summer sweat from her collarbone. He’s hard in her hand and she’s dripping onto his fingers and waiting seems like such a waste (though she cannot tell if this is the first time or every time, an eternal loop of hushed moans and soaked underwear on hardwood chairs). He lifts her up with ease, like it’s something they do all the time, and she slides down on him, her satisfied sigh swallowed by his mouth on hers. It feels so good like this, but why is it always the same? Why can’t he spread her out on one of the tables if no else is around, or, better still, take her home? Her back can only take being held against a bookshelf, however gently, so many times. But why complain when he’s driving into her at the most delicious pace, fast enough to make her breathless but slow enough to feel the veins of his cock rubbing along her walls, his head bowed at the neckline of her dress while she pulls it down to give him access to her breasts (why isn’t she wearing a bra to the library?). He seems to like it when she circles her hips, saying her name louder and louder as she tugs at his hair and…*

“Tessa?”

Her eyes jolt open and she realises a number of things in very quick succession: 1. Her right hand is cupping her boob. 2. There is literal drool on her face. 3. Her body is at an awkward angle from how she’s crossed her legs and moved to the side somehow. 4. Scott is staring.

Shit, Scott is staring. Scott just saw her have a sex dream about him!

His cheeks are a little red, but his pupils can only be said to be dilated so it can’t entirely be a bad thing seeing as they’re blessedly still the only people here. He nods insistently down towards the table like he’s been doing it for ages and it’s then she realises that her phone is vibrating and she understands why he was trying to wake her up.

Just as she’s about to answer Jordan her phone screen goes blank.

And then the lights go out.

Tessa jumps and she thinks she can hear Scott moving in his chair too. Her phone screen is still blank so she goes to open up her laptop and get some light from it. But it’s impossible, like there’s a massive weight pressing down on the cover that she can’t lift.

“My phone and laptop aren’t working!” She only registers just how fast her heart is beating and how her stomach is churning when she hears the panic in her voice, let loose out into the world.
“Mine either,” Scott echoes. He’s scared too.

She can’t tell who reaches out to who, but his hand is firmly holding hers across the table and it helps. He’s here with her and that makes it seem like things are going to be okay. She stands up and edges her way around the table so that she can sit beside him. It feels like there’s a push to her back and then she’s in his lap.

He hugs her to him, rubbing her back with broad circles, and she relaxes just a little. He smells different to her dreams and memories, more mature now, and she likes it so much that she has to work to stop herself from burying her head in his neck.

“I really did mean to sit beside you. I think the ghost pushed me.” It’s a joke, but…

“Did you read those articles online too?”

“Yes, but… Ghosts aren’t real. Right?” It’s not a rational explanation for what’s been happening. But she’s not sure there’s one to be found.

“Well, I didn’t think so.” She feels him shuffling his legs beneath hers. “But… some pretty weird stuff has been happening. The highlighter, and the temperature, and now the lights and our phones not working. And, uh, the dreams.”

Tessa freezes. What do the dreams have to do with anything? “What dreams? Have you been having weird ones?”

He coughs. “I think I’ve been having similar ones to you, judging by earlier.”

There’s a hint of teasing to his tone, and she’s not going to deny that the general thrust of her dream wasn’t obvious, but how does he know these dreams are similar? “We could be having them about different things.”

“Yeah, but I know I’ve been saying your name in mine and I heard you say mine earlier.”

Fuck. In both a good and bad way. “Oh. Right.”

His hand pauses on her back. “I’m sorry if I’ve made you uncomfortable. I didn’t really know what to do, waking you seemed rude and I didn’t want to leave you alone in case someone else came into the library.”

“No, it’s okay.” She’s embarrassed that Scott saw her like that in the library, but less embarrassed than she would be if it had been anyone else. “If this all is, you know, because of a ghost… Why are they doing it?” Do they want her and Scott to get together?

“Uh, maybe they saw us here during finals that time and… thought we should do that again?” He’s hesitant, but also hopeful.

Tessa thinks the ghost has a point. “Not here though. Not with an audience. And we work with children, we can’t be caught having sex in public places! What if we were to be charged?! What would we do then? I don’t have any other career plans!”

It’s only after she says all this that she realises they haven’t actually said in as many words that they both definitely want to be together like that again. They’ve both hinted at it, or danced around it, but neither of them have said it loud enough for there to be no doubts. But Scott just says, “Definitely not here. Hopefully the ghost will be okay with different locations this time around.”
She smiles when he says locations, so wide that she wonders if he can see her teeth in the darkness. It gives her the bravery to say, “I don’t want it to be just sex. I’d like to see where things go.” Relationships are scary, but she would like to try with Scott.

“I want that too. I really, really want that too.” He holds her tighter as he speaks, each word drawing her in and filling her up until the darkness doesn’t bother her anymore because they’re in it together.

Kissing in the library seems acceptable, especially with the lights out, so, after a little bit of a stumble pressing her nose against his, she joins their lips. It’s gentle at first, in a way they didn’t get to savour the last time, his chapped lips on her smoother ones and then his tongue exploring while Tessa tightens her grip on his shoulders. He tastes like coffee and the library, but also of something sweet she can’t quite name, just knows that it makes her happy. She kisses him in a way she hasn’t kissed anybody in quite some time, like it’s the beginning of a long story, maybe a special one.

They kiss, and they kiss, and they kiss, and when Tessa opens her eyes the lights are back on and the library doors are open.

Scott’s eyes seem to be struggling to adjust and it makes him look all boyish again, so she gives him another kiss before fixing his hair.

“I guess the ghost has decided we can go,” he says, voice a little gravelly.

“I think they’re a nice ghost.” Tessa climbs off his lap somewhat reluctantly and goes to pack up her things. She’s had enough of the library for today.

“I like the results.” Scott is shoving his stuff in his bag like he’s in quite a hurry.

She winds her scarf around her neck. “Maybe all ghosts are good and all the monsters are here with us.” Tessa’s certainly seen and heard of more than enough over the last few years. Scott takes her hand in his and squeezes as they walk out and it lifts her from the mood that’s threatening to pull her in. Facing the world and its monsters isn’t quite as frightening with someone at her side to help.

The night is overcast when they exit the building, just a few solitary stars and streetlights to guide their way. Tessa isn’t ready to say goodnight.

“My apartment isn’t too far a walk, would you like to come in for a while?” She wouldn’t mind if he stayed over, but he might need some time to himself after all that’s happened.

Scott smiles, slow and warm like the glow of the lights above him. “I’d love to.”

They’re walking along the tree-lined road to Tessa’s apartment block, the crisp smell of autumn all around, when her phone starts buzzing. She’s more relieved that it still works than annoyed by the interruption to their chat about whether how long the ghost has been in the library and why until she reads the contents of the text.

“Shit, I need to finish reading that paper for Jordan.” Her sister has helpfully sent her questions about a section she’s not sure she punctuated correctly.

“I can go and we can do this again another time?” There’s a hint of disappointment to his tone but no resentment or irritation.

“It shouldn’t take me too long, I can skim read it more or less. But I understand if you want to head
“I can work on something too. Trying to write somewhere other than the library or my kitchen table might be good for me.” He shifts his weight from one foot to the other. “If that’s okay.”

Tessa takes his hand and tugs him down the path.

Showing Scott her apartment is like seeing it with new eyes. She falls in love again with the big bay window in the living room and the old-fashioned sink in the kitchen. She takes in the photos of her family and friends on the coffee table and the pictures of the lake in the bathroom. It feels good to be sharing this space with him.

They settle on her couch with some tea, biscuits and their laptops. The focus she has in the library isn’t there, she’s not sure if that’s just down to the change in setting or more because Scott is right beside her and she was kissing him forty minutes earlier. She’s more aware of him than ever before, joining in with the rhythm of his breathing and listening out for every move he makes. It’s hard work to shut him out and focus on the tax paper in front of her.

Eventually she does manage to wade through Jordan’s paper but when she finishes it’s one a.m. She’d already noticed that Scott hadn’t been moving about as much but she hadn’t realised he was actually asleep. His laptop is still open but his left arm is leaning on an armrest with his head lolling on top of it. He looks surprisingly peaceful but it can’t be a position that will be comfortable in the long run.

She closes her own laptop and then his, making sure to save what he’s working on, before tapping him on the shoulder. “Scott, do you want to sleep somewhere more comfortable?”

It takes him about a minute to wake up, and even then he’s just mumbling and rubbing at his eyes. “Sorry, Tess. Do you want me to lie down here?”

“You can sleep with me in my bed. You spend enough time hunched over in the library without having to sleep squashed up on a couch at night afterwards.” She’d been hoping to have him in her bed to do more than just sleep, but she’s pretty exhausted herself. Her nights haven’t been the most restful lately between her assignments and then those dreams.

Tessa doesn’t think Scott actually fully understands what’s happening until they go to her room and he takes in her books on the bedside table and the prints of dancers on the walls. “This has happened in my dreams before,” he says, his voice all rough with sleep.

She laughs and tells him to get ready for bed. He keeps his back turned while she changes which seems sweet and old-fashioned. By the time she finishes cleansing and moisturising he’s already in her bed and she can tell from how ram-rod straight he’s sitting that it’s a struggle for him to stay awake.

Even though she knows nothing is going to happen right now a thrill of excitement still rushes through her, making her blood fizz and her skin tingle, when she slips in beside him. She lies down and he follows suit, sighing a little as he sinks into the pillows. “I’m sorry that this isn’t what you probably had in mind,” he says in between yawns.

She reaches out for his hand. “This is good, too. And we can blame my sister.”

“The ghost will be disappointed.” Scott turns to lay on his side, bringing him closer to her. Usually she doesn’t like sleeping this close to someone, especially the first night they’re in her bed, but with him it feels natural.
“I’m sure we’ll make up for it.” Her words draw a lazy smile from him, and then a quick kiss to her cheek. She looks up to the sky and sees the stars glimmering through the skylight window on the ceiling. The blind is broken and she’s been meaning to get it fixed but now with the darker nights and mornings there’s not much need for it. She goes to warn Scott about the sun in the morning but after she says his name she hears that steady type of breathing that signifies sleep. There’s something about it that makes her feel warm and secure. It’s a peaceful, comforting sound, one that she likes having in her ear as she falls asleep.

Tessa wakes to bright sun streaming in and Scott’s arm draped across her midriff. It’s not a bad way to come to consciousness. He stirs beside her, his eyes blinking rapidly as he adjusts to the light.

“Hey,” he croaks out. “Did you sleep well?”

She nods. “Better than I have in weeks.” Her voice is husky too and she can tell he likes it. “No way too vivid dreams helped, I guess.”

“The dream is here,” he jokes, and she laughs before leaning in to kiss him.

His hands are soft on her face as he kisses her sweet and slow and when they part he traces her cheek with his index finger. “It’s nice to see you in daylight.”

“You too,” is all she manages to get out before she starts kissing him again. He looks good in the sunlight, his hair shining and his skin bright, rather than the slightly odd waxen colour they’d both had under the library lights. He looks good here in her bed.

Their kisses progress quicker than they had last night, her t-shirt and underwear and his boxers soon cast aside on the floor. His hands leave little bursts of magic on her skin as they map her body and hers learn his like she’s wanted to for weeks. When his fingers slide over her folds and he works her clit with his thumb as he adds one, then two, then three she wonders if he somehow learned this from the dreams. He can’t remember exactly how she likes to be touched from three years ago, and she’s sure things have changed since then anyway. It’s either the dreams or how good he is at reading her reactions and she’s not sure which would be more like clairvoyance. Soon, though, she isn’t thinking, is just calling out his name like she had in those dreams, but here there is no need to keep quiet.

Somehow, she seems to know what he wants too when she takes him in her hand. It doesn’t feel like a memory as she varies the pressure of her hand while she traces one long, prominent vein with her thumb, it just feels right. And she knows it feels right for Scott because he tells her so, tells her how fucking good it feels.

It feels even more fucking good when she helps him roll on a condom from the box beside her bed and then slides down on him. He’s sitting up in her bed, her white pillows behind his back with the sun flooding in from above, and it’s so very different from the rushed and hushed fuck in the library that summer. It’s slower, until it’s not, and louder, until it’s not, both their voices quietening as they become breathless. Even though her body is working hard as she circles her hips, moving in time with Scott, it almost feels like floating. She comes hard, shaking with the pure pleasure that fills her up, and when he comes it brings on an aftershock, both their bodies quivering and then calming.

She rests her head in the crook of his neck as their breathing regulates, his hand rubbing her back like last night, except in such a very different circumstance

“Better than the dreams,” Scott says.
Tessa just nods and kisses him.

It is better than the dreams. It’s real and tangible and moving forward. Reality is messy and difficult, but beautiful too. She much prefers knowing the real Scott than the one she had in her head all those years ago, she much prefers being honest and open with him than keeping him at arm’s length.

Tessa is sure they would have ended up here anyway, but if a ghost did help them along then she won’t be ungrateful. Maybe they needed a little push in the right direction.

They’re here now and she’s going to hold him close and look forward to the future. The day is dawning and so are they.

Chapter End Notes

I definitely did not actually go through that thought process about cocaine while listening to *Rumours* during essay season. Not at all.
Chapter by rookandpawn, Walkinrobe

Chapter Summary

It's never easy, is it?

Chapter Notes

One day rookandpawn left a comment on walkinrobe’s So Dramatic saying “I think your Tessa and Scott would be friends with my Tessa and Scott.” and walkinrobe said “I was going to leave the same comment on Me Without You!” and the world’s greatest internet friendship was born.*

Then we realized that we’re basically the same people living 12,493 kms apart. The next stage in this epic journey? Write a story together. Luckily spooktober came along and gave us the excuse to do just that.

Leave your guess on who wrote Scott and who wrote Tessa down in the comments. Or don’t or just say how brilliant we are.

*(not the world’s greatest internet friendship. That would be iwantthemtostay and only_because3 because they created the incomparable “redemption has stories to tell”. If you haven’t read it you should immediately go do that. Well, read this first and then go read it.)

She can’t tear her eyes away from the way his chain glimmers around his neck as he makes his way down the theatre stairs. She considers daring to look in his eyes, but if looking at his chest is dangerous, looking into his eyes might kill her.

“Is anyone sitting here?” he asks. She dares a look at his mouth. He’s smiling and her heart leaps.

“Oh, no,” she manages to squeak out. He sits right beside her.

As discreetly as possible, she looks around, and sure enough there are plenty of empty seats in the theatre. Which means only one thing.

He sat beside her on purpose.

The cutest boy on campus, the one that caught her eye during the first day of frosh week, is sitting beside her.

On purpose.

She’d been so disappointed when it turned out that he was the group leader of another group of freshmen. He was in third year engineering and the engineers didn’t spend much time with the
dance freshman. She’d hardly seen him after that first day. Just glimpses of him leading his troops across campus. The way they adored him, must have been reflected in her face. He was always smiling, always having a good time, and God did she want to be a part of that.

She kept her eyes open all year, but she rarely saw him. Just the occasional glance from across campus. The dance building and the engineering building weren’t anywhere near each other and she rarely went to parties or bars where she might run into him. Although, she’d been tempted to when she heard he was a bit of a partier. But a drunken hook up didn’t interest her. As silly as it sounded, she wanted to know him, to understand him and be a part of his life.

They’d only crossed paths once her whole first year. She was crossing campus late one night. It was raining, that special kind of rain that seemed to exist only in Vancouver, the type her friend PJ called a light misting. You couldn’t protect yourself from it with an umbrella, because it was the kind of rain that didn’t seem to fall from the sky, so much as surround your entire being. There was no point in trying to stay dry, because you couldn’t. The rain pervaded every space. It was easier to just give in and get wet.

But on the up side, the world took on a supernatural glow when the weather was like that. And for some reason, one she couldn’t quite explain, she felt at home on those nights. Even though campus was nearly deserted and there was something almost eerie about the silence around her, she felt at peace when the weather was like this. She stops for a moment to look at the crescent moon that appears through the clouds. When she lowers her eyes, he’s there across the campus. Their eyes meet for a moment and just when he raises his hand in greeting, the skies open. It feels like the temperature around her drops and then the hail starts, and they both take off in opposite directions. It’s the last time she sees him for the rest of the semester.

And now, on only the second day of her second year at university, he’s sitting beside her.

“Are you a drama major?” he asks, while the other students file into the room.

“Oh, no.” She’s shocked that words are actually coming out of her mouth. “Dance.”

“That’s so cool,” he says and she chances a quick peek up at his face. He looks like he genuinely means it and doesn’t just want to know if she’s bendy like every other guy does when she tells them she’s a dancer. “I used to take dance classes when I was a kid. They were hard work. Harder than Engineering anyway.”

“I doubt that,” She can’t help the giggle that comes out of her. “Engineering looks pretty hard.”

“That’s what we want you to think, but it’s really just one big party.”

She knows he’s lying. She’s seen the workload first hand, when her brother went to school for his degree. She likes that he’s modest about it. Most guys are more than willing to tell you how smart they are.

“So, why are you taking an intro to acting class, when you’re what, a third year engineer?” She already knows he’s in his final year at school, but she doesn’t want him to know she knows.

“I need to fulfill my fine arts credit, and this looked like a fun way to do it,” he shifts in his seat so his almost facing her. She looks him full in the eyes for the first time and she finds such a childlike glee there that she can’t stop looking. “And, between you and me, I always thought I might be good at it. I like pretending to be someone else. Is that weird?”

“No, not at all. I feel that way when I dance.” It’s her favourite part of dancing, losing herself in a
character, becoming someone else. Finding the different parts of herself, the secret parts, and letting them be free on stage. “It’s amazing.”

“It would be.” He’s studying her like her really sees her. It’s terrifying and freeing and she has to look away. Luckily, the teacher starts the class.

“I’m Scott, by the way.” he whispers.

“Tessa,” she whispers back, and she can feel his smile.

Professor Zoueva, an intimidating Russian woman, rambles on for about fifteen minutes about her expectations regarding how to behave in an acting class and then tells them to pair up. She tells them their first assignment will be worth half their grade, and to choose wisely because they’ll be working with that person for half the semester.

Scott’s already asking her to be his partner before she has a chance to blink, and all she can do is nod dumbly in response.

They’re up on their feet and participating in a series of improv exercises that leave them in stitches. She’s so excited to have him for a partner, not just because he’s handsome, but because he takes every exercise so seriously, unlike some of the other students in the class who obviously took the class as an easy credit.

The professor tells them she’ll be handing out their scenes the next class and they’ll be working on them until the semester break, pointing out that they’ll need to do work outside class time, before dismissing them with a wink.

“So, I should probably get your number. You know, so we can practice outside class time,” Scott says as they’re gathering up their things. He sounds nervous, which makes her like him even more.

“Do you want me to put it in your phone?” she tries to sound casual and maybe a little sexy. She thinks she’s about twenty percent successful.

“That would be great.” He hands her his phone with a smile, and for a moment their fingers brush, and their eyes lock.

She’s about to speak, when the theatre light above their heads pops and sparks fly out of it. The rest of the lights blink on and off three times before returning to normal.

“Stupid old theatre,” the professor grumbles, shaking her head as she leaves the room.

“It’s electrifying,” Scott sings, mimicking Travolta surprisingly well.

She giggles as she puts her number in his phone and hands it back to him.

“It was nice to meet you Tessa, uh…” he says and checks his phone for her last name. His face has no colour when he looks up at her. “Is it Virtue?”

“That’s right,” she says, but he’s not looking at her anymore, frantically gathering up his stuff instead.

“I have to go,” he mumbles and then runs out of the room, leaving her behind to wonder what the hell just happened.

*
One thing he knows for sure is that when something seems too good to be true, it’s probably too good to be true.

He’s walking as quickly as he can across campus, offering ‘excuse mes’ and ‘i’m sorrys’ as he tries to put some literal and metaphorical distance between himself and his Introduction To Acting class partner.

Tessa.

Virtue.

Tessa Virtue.

Out of 7850 females students attending the University of British Columbia he had to share his most enjoyable class of the past four years with the one girl he shouldn’t be anywhere near.

He needs Paul.

Now.

He eventually spies his confidant across the quad, showing a card trick to a gaggle of freshman. They haven’t got time for that bullshit right now. If only people knew the real reason Paul was such a talented illusionist.

“I’ve lost my dog and need your help” he blurs, not even stopping to acknowledge the four women fawning over Paul.

Paul’s head flies up as he drops his cards before brushing the black curls from his face to reveal a look of panic. “You absolutely sure?”

“One hundred percent.”

Paul scrambles to collect the cards from the floor and apologises to the assembled freshman, “Ladies, I’m sorry to cut this short, you hang on to these cards until the next time we meet.” The lone redhead of the group gives a shy smile and extends her arm to take the cards. Paul hands them over and gives her a soft smile in return.

As they scurry away Paul hisses in his ear, “If I find out that you gave me the imminent danger signal for no good reason, you’re a dead man.”

“Well, you tell me if it was no good reason. My acting class partner is Tessa Virtue. And are you supposed to speak to me in that tone? What would my mother say?” He can’t help but give Paul a sassy wink.

The taller man comes to a grinding halt, turns and places a firm hand to his chest, “That’s not funny, Scott. It’s not appropriate to joke about this kind of thing.”

“I’m sorry for joking. I don’t understand why…”

Paul cuts him off by holding his hand up in a way that unequivocally signals they’re done talking about this for the moment. They walk the rest of the way back to their apartment in silence. Every now and again Scott glances at his phone, Tessa’s name searing a mark into his retinas. Perhaps there’s a way around this?

“There is no way around this,” Paul states.
“Did you just read…”

“Nope,” Paul’s cuts him off. “I’ve just come to know you very well over the past three years.”

He feels Paul flick his forehead. Hard.

Motherfucker, it smarts.

They climb two flights of stairs to their humble off-campus home and barrel through the front door. He goes to speak again.

“Not yet,” Paul instructs.

Paul closes his eyes and raises his finger to shoulder level, then he mutters under his breath before swirling his finger in a tight circle. The room flashes brightly before they’re enveloped in a shimmering, opaque dome.

“Cone of silence spell, geez, we haven’t needed that one since I lost Mum’s bracelet in that poker game. Must be serious, eh?” he attempts to joke.

“Still not funny,” Paul glares, “you’ve been taught about this since you were a kid. The Virtue Family are manipulative and dangerous. As a Moir, you will be a target. I’m going to suggest to your parents that we immediately evacuate and return to Ontario.”

“Hang on, that seems like a complete overreaction. It’s my last year here, I want to graduate. No way am I leaving. She’s been a student here for over a year, I’ve seen Tessa around every now and again. She’s never initiated any contact. She didn’t even initiate contact today, I did. Surely there’s no risk?”

He gives his best puppy dog eyes to Paul.

“You’re kidding just now, right? That dopey look on your face doesn’t affect me.”

He begs to differ, he uses this face on Paul all the time. It definitely works.

“This time it’s non-negotiable. You’re from the most powerful and well-respected sorcerer dynasty in eastern North America. The Moir lineage goes back over three thousand years. The Virtues, despite their name, are amoral peddlers of black magic. They’re essentially underworld mafia with no respect for the laws of pure magic. This is a coven war that is bigger than one warlock who wants to finish his Engineering degree.”

Paul gives him a stare that tells him he won’t be fucked with on this issue.

But he doesn’t care.

“Paul, Paulie, Paulster… buddy, I feel like the folktales afford magical sidekicks a much cooler vibe than you’re giving off right now. I think we’re up to the part where I convince you that we should give this another shot. I know all about the dangers, it’s been drilled into me since I was a child. But the risk seems low, what if I try to swap classes or if that doesn’t work continue with the class but I agree to find another partner? I can’t pull out. I need that credit to graduate.”

He feels a flutter of hope as he sees Paul consider what he said. If that’s all it takes to change Paul’s mind he’s gonna be equal parts ecstatic and disappointed that he doesn’t get to argue his points further.
“This isn’t a game, Scott. You could get hurt. Your parents have entrusted me with your well-being. At the first sign of danger, you follow my instruction and we leave. We’re going to bind this agreement with a magical seal. Agreed?” Paul extends his arm.

He hates magical seals. They’re iron clad agreements with no wriggle room for change. But he wants to graduate, so he’ll pay the price. He takes hold of Paul’s hand and shakes. When he removes his hand his wrist burns and the word ‘AGREED’ appears under his skin.

He gets to his next ‘Introduction to Acting’ class five minutes early with the intention of speaking to their professor to arrange a partner swap. As he peers into the theatre he sees that Tessa is already there. Her perky ponytail is bouncing along to the beat of whatever she’s listening to on her AirPods.

Ah, shit. This is a crappy situation. She’s cute. She’s funny. She’s also part of a family filled with murders and tax cheats.

Tess hasn’t seen him and she’s distracted, so he takes the opportunity to speak to their professor. To say it doesn’t go as he’d hoped is an understatement.

*  

She knows he’s there as soon as he enters the room. There’s a prickling at the back of her neck and the hairs on her arm stand on end. She just knows.

He doesn’t stop and sit next to her like she was expecting, instead he walks right past her to the prof. She turns off her AirPods but leaves them in her ears. It’s not that she means to eavesdrop, but they are in a public place, she has every right to hear the conversation.

“It’s just I need to change classes,” he explains to the Professor Zoueva. Tessa must not have heard him correctly. “There’s one on Thursdays that would work and I just need your signature.”

He flashes the prof a smile, it’s both boyish and panty dropping, Tessa would certainly say yes to anything he offered with a smile like that, but Professor Zoueva remains unimpressed.

“It’s too late to change classes, Mr. Moir. Partners have already been assigned and work has begun.” She gives him a glare that lowers the temperature by several degrees.

“Then maybe I could just change partners? I mean that will solve the problem.”

“Mr. Moir, did I not make it perfectly clear that there would be no changing of partners at anytime?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Scott practically wilts under the professor’s gaze. It would be funny if only he wasn’t talking about dumping her as a partner. What the hell? She thought they were getting along, more than getting along.

Scott looks over towards her and she immediately starts bopping, like she’s still listening to music. Even throws a little wave in the selfish asshole’s direction.

“Do you have some sort of comprehension problem? Is English not your first language?” the prof is still telling him off and Tessa is loving every minute of it. He just shakes his head, too stunned to answer. “I know that engineering students don’t generally have a great deal of respect for the arts, but it is my understanding that you need this class to graduate, so I suggest you return to your partner and get to work.”
Scott scrambles away from the professor and sits down four seats away from Tessa, and doesn’t look her way once. His cheeks are pink from embarrassment, and she’d almost feel sorry for him if she wasn’t equal parts livid and confused.

The professor passes out their scenes and hers and Scott’s, of course, is full of sexual tension. They’re going to fail because even though she puts her rapidly increasing dislike for him aside, he refuses to make eye contact with her and mumbles everything he says. They have the sexual chemistry of rotting fish and just about as interesting.

As class draws to an end, she’s had enough.

“Ok, I get it. You don’t like me. But do you have to be such a dick about it?” she whisper yells at him. She doesn’t want the other students to overhear. They all look like they’re having a great time.

“I…” he just stops speaking, his mouth gaping open like the dead fish she imagined earlier.

She can feel that tickle in the back of her throat, the one that always starts just as she’s about to cry and she shoves it away. She will not cry in front of him. It’s just she really liked him and thought that maybe…

“It’s clear that you don’t care, but I would like to get a good grade, so I expect you to change your attitude for next class.” She thinks she sounds pretty put together and she knows she looks great as she makes her way out of the class. Can feel his eyes on her ass.

Until she trips going up the stairs and almost face plants. She does not look back but storms out of the room where her best friend PJ is waiting for her.

“Ooooo. We need Mel too?” PJ says after a quick glance at her face. “And I’m thinking ice cream.”

PJ thinks every problem can be solved with ice cream.

“Thanks for cutting class,” Tessa says as Mel joins them at the cafeteria table.

“Literally no one, including the dinosaur of a man teaching the class, is interested in Macro Economics. You were doing me a favour,” Mel sighs as she reaches for the cookies and cream ice cream PJ has already purchased for her. The ice cream in the caf. is subpar, but it’s still ice cream. “What’s going on? PJ told me there was a crisis but didn’t say what.”

“That’s because I didn’t know,” PJ explains

“Then how did you know it was a crisis?”

“I could tell by the look on her face.”

The only slightly serious bickering from her friends does calm Tessa a little until Scott and the guy who’s always following him around campus walk into the cafeteria. He takes one look at Tessa and walks back out again.

And then she can’t stop it. Like a tidal wave, all the anger and embarrassment of the last hour overwhelms her and she slams her hand down on the table at the exact moment a clap of thunder echoes from outside.

“That’s weird,” Mel says at the same time as she shoves Tessa’s vanilla ice cream closer to her. “I
thought it was supposed to be nice out all day.”

“No, no, no nope. I heard rain.” PJ shakes her head so hard that her hair starts to fall out of the bun on her head. “Nothing weird about that.”

If there’s anything weird it’s PJ, but Tessa’s known her since she was six and she’s always been a little odd.

Mel just shakes her head and asks, “Tell me what happened?”

“Do we need to cut a bitch?” PJ’s willingness to “cut a bitch” is both endearing and a little frightening, but Tessa’s positive she’s kidding.

Well, mostly positive.

By the time she’s finished telling her friends about the situation, she’s had to talk both of them out of exacting revenge but she also feels a lot better. Who cares about Scott anyway? He’s just a stupid boy. She’ll get through her scene, and then never see him again.

At least that’s the plan. She just wishes the plan didn’t make her so sad.

* 

Their exit from the cafeteria was light-years away from being subtle. Tessa caught them mid-retreat and he felt the fire of a million suns burn at the back of his eyes. He’s not sure if the pain was a Virtuesque attack or just sheer embarrassment from the look of fury she shot in his direction.

He and Paul leave the building to a crack of thunder and an explosion of heavy rain. It’s the shortest rain storm he’s ever experienced. His heart sinks. Paul looks to him and gives a grunt of displeasure.

“Coincidence?” he weakly offers to Paul.


It makes him mad. This whole situation is unnecessarily over-complicated. He just wants a quiet life. He wants to finish his degree. Moreover, he wants to finish his degree and go out with the cute, funny girl. Being the son of Joe and Alma Moir has a definite downside. Right now, three thousand years of Moir ancestry is a pain in his ass.

“Stop wallowing in unnecessary self-pity,” Paul interjects.

“You said you weren’t reading my mind!”

“I’m not, you’ve got that sulky look you get when you’re asked to do everyday, menial tasks like cleaning the kitchen. You’ve got resting sulky face.”

“Listen, I’m doing everything you asked,’ he kicks a defenceless stone down the pathway in front of him. ‘Fuck. I tried to move into another class and couldn’t. I tried to dump her as my partner and couldn’t. She’s furious with me. I can feel expert level anger radiating off her body. It’ll be a miracle if either of us graduate, we’re doing so badly in our acting class.”

What he doesn’t tell Paul is the truth.

The truth is he is furious too. And frustrated. He really likes this girl. Tessa’s captivated his attention like no other person has in his entire time at university. She’s intelligent and dedicated to
her studies. She’s got this aura that attracts others to her, she remembers things about people, asks them questions, really engages them. She’s got an adorable habit of tilting her head to the right when she’s thinking. Plus she’s got this magnetic smile, it makes his heart flutter.

He wants to get close, ask her to the movies, hold her hand in the sunshine. He loves her wickedly dry sense of humour and how she got the class laughing with her funny ad libs. Surely she’s not an evil genius, ready to make animal sacrifices for the sake of winning the lottery.

Four weeks march by and he discovers he has another problem. He can’t escape Tessa. It’s like they’re drawn together by a mystical force. Which is possible, he was made to study mystical forces, along with a whole stack of other sorcery subjects, by correspondence when he was sixteen.

He rounds a corner. There she is.

He searches for a book in the library. There she is.

He grabs a coffee. There she is.

He collects his mail. There she is.

He gets into an elevator. There she is.

Finally, he’s had enough.

“You’ve gotta stop following me,” he implores as the elevator doors close. “I just want to graduate. I am not interested in getting mixed up in our families’ bullshit. They will force me to leave if they think you’re a danger to me.”

Tess stands there with wide eyes. She blinks twice before speaking.

“Firstly, I’m not following you. You must be subconsciously following me. Every time I look over my shoulder you’re there! I’m glad you bought it up. It’s creepy and has to stop. Secondly, I don’t know your family. I don’t care about your family. My family doesn’t care about your family. That’s also creepy. And thirdly, a danger to you? What am I going to do? Dance you into oblivion? You’re a moron. I just want to pass my acting class and never see you again. Deal?”

She holds out her hand, inviting him to shake on it. He doesn’t hesitate to take her hand because every part of him - even the supernatural part - is telling him that she believes every word she is saying. She clearly doesn’t know about the coven war, in fact he’s not even convinced she knows she’s a witch. He slips his hand into hers. It’s soft and warm. He imagines that’s exactly what her lips would feel like. Touching Tessa is lovely, somehow familiar. Delicate.

More than that, it’s a very big mistake.

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The moment their hands meet the air around them starts to shimmer. She’s overwhelmed by a feeling of well being as the shimmer extends from the air into the walls of the elevator. She lets her hand slide up his arm and and touches his face. His cheek is so soft and warm, that it takes her a moment to realize he’s touching her cheek too. She leans into his touch and just lets herself feel for a moment.

The the whole elevator lurches and they stumble apart. She shakes her head and the shimmer
disappears when her back makes contact with solid wall.

“That was strange,” she breathes out and resists the urge to touch the place his fingers explored her cheek.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Scott just shakes his head and refuses to make eye contact with her, but there’s a blush that runs from his neck to his cheeks. She wants to touch him and see if those places are as warm as they look, but she also doesn’t want to seem like a lunatic.

And she’s not completely convinced he’s not a lunatic either. As silence overwhelms the incredibly old and slow moving elevator, she finally has a moment to think about what he said. Their families? Danger? Why does he have to be insane and cute?

Finally the doors open and they step out onto the fifth floor of the library, where every book in every stack as far as the eye can see, is now facing out instead of in.

“That’s…” Scott says as his blush fades from red to pink to the palest white.

“Someone sure has a lot of time on their hands,” she shakes her head. “What a weird practical joke, but I guess it’s kind of Halloween-y. Kind of creepy, right?”

He turns and looks at her like she’s insane, before he…

Well, there’s no other word for it. He flees.

Which, she’s not going to lie, is not great for a girl’s ego.

Mel and PJ are rushing about in a whirlwind of activity when she gets back to the apartment she shares with them. Mel has curlers in her hair and is hot gluing something together and PJ enters and exits the bathroom four times in the two minutes she stands at the doorway watching.

“Why so glum, bubble gum?” Mel yells over the music filling the apartment.

Tessa throws her backpack across the room, almost knocking over a stack of books that PJ swears she’s going to read, before storming into the kitchen.

Storming might be a grand way to describe what she does since it takes a total of five steps to make her way from the door to the sink in the tiny apartment.

“Scott Moir!” she yells.

“Justin Abernathy,” Mel yells back.

“What are you two doing?” PJ asks, poking her head out of the bathroom.

“I think we’re yelling the name of the boys we like.”

“I do not like Scott Moir.” How dare her friend insinuate as much, especially with that smirk on her face. “I hate him.”

“That’s good,” PJ says and then blinks. “I mean why?”

“He thinks I’m following him around and he said something weird about families knowing each other.”
“That is weird.” Mel agrees, distracted by the fact that she seems to have glued whatever she’s making to the table.

“Not really,” PJ says as she paces the living room. “Virtue is a really common name.”

“No it’s not.” Tessa has never met anyone with the same last name as hers that she wasn’t directly related to.

“Sure, not in BC but in Ontario it’s like the third most common name after Smith and… Wong.” Sometimes she worries that PJ might be on drugs.

“Ok, sure.” Mel agrees. “But it’s time to put annoying boys out of your minds because we have a party to get to.”

The costume party, she remembers, as Mel holds up the creation she’s been working on. Apparently she’s going as bubbles and her boyfriend is going to be a duck. Her friends are so weird.

“I don’t want to go. I’m too tired and pissed off.”

“No way. You promised. Both of you promised.” Mel gives both of them a glare that would be scary if she didn’t know her best friend was incapable of violence. She’s a little intimidated nevertheless.

“I don’t want to go because I’m socially awkward, so my excuse is valid,” PJ explains.

“That’s what I was going to say,” Tessa whines.

“You’re both stupid and you’re both going.” Mel gives them the look that says she will hear no further arguments. They both know she means it. “Go get changed.”

PJ groans, but Tessa reasons that a party might be just the thing she needs. A couple drinks plus a couple of cute boys and she should be able to forget all about Scott Moir. A task that might be made easier if she didn’t somehow still feel the press of his fingers into her cheek.

She has to admit that she looks good in her costume.

A black bustier top and short black skirt accented with black thigh high leather boots and a cape, finished off with a witch’s hat might be the sexiest thing she’s ever worn. Her mother would be shocked if she saw her now. Tessa reasons that’s what university is for, sexy outfits and shocking your parents. And obviously an education. But as she walks out of her bedroom, education is the last thing on her mind.

“What do you think?” she asks as she enters the room and spins for her roommates.

PJ immediately sprays the Coke Zero she’s drinking across the room and starts coughing.

“You’re a witch!” she manages, between hacks.

“You look so good.” Mel whistles and her balloon bubbles sway.

“Don’t you think that’s inappropriate?” PJ asks, her eyes darting frantically around the room.
“Why would it be inappropriate?” Tessa

“Because she’s… because… she’s showing a lot of cleavage.” PJ finishes and shakes her head.

“Says the girl who’s practically falling out of her top!” Mel snorts. She’s not wrong, PJ’s corset is just barely holding in her generous breasts. As far as she can tell she’s dressed as a cheetah with really big boobs.

Tessa looks down at her outfit and comes to the same conclusion that she had earlier. She looks hot. Scott-Moir-eat-your-heart-out-hot. Wait, why is she thinking of him again?

“It’s not my fault it doesn’t fit,” PJ yells back. “I have big boobs.”

“I know you’re overprotective of T, but you gotta let that girl live,” Mel chastizes. “If she wants to put her tiny titties on display, then she should be allowed to.”

“Exactly!” Tessa cheers, even though she’s not sure she likes having her boobs described as tiny, but at least Mel is on her side. “Let’s go.”

It’s a perfect fall evening, as they walk over to the party. The air is crisp, but not so cold that they have to wear jackets over their costumes and there isn’t a cloud in the sky. Oddly, the sound of children’s laughter rings across the campus and she can swear she can smell apple cider and cotton candy in the air. It’s almost as if electricity buzzes around them.

The three of them giggle as they make their way to the house party that Mel’s boyfriend and his housemates are throwing. Even PJ seems to have cast off her strange mood from earlier, and joins in on the off key rendition of the song “Wannabe”. They’re flushed with excitement as they enter the house and are immediately absorbed into the crush of bodies.

It takes mere moments for Justin, who somehow manages to make a rubber duck costume look sexy, to spirit Mel away, leaving her and PJ alone. PJ scans the room and plays with the tail on her cheetah costume, completely oblivious to the appreciative stares of several guys, while Tessa tries to figure out if there’s anywhere to sit. Her stilettos are sexy but really uncomfortable.

“Is that Paul Poirier?” PJ’s question comes out several pitches higher than her normal speaking voice. “I’m just going to talk to him for a minute.”

Tessa just waves her friend away because she’s locked eyes with a man in full skeleton makeup, dressed in a top hat and tails. The air crackles between them, and she can not look away. Maybe this the easiest way to get over Scott Moir, find someone else equally interesting, if that’s possible.

*  

The universe is trying to kill him. It’s trying to slowly torture him to death with temptation and unsatisfied want. There’s approximately six billion Halloween parties happening across their campus at the moment and he’s at the one with Tessa Virtue.

Of course she’s at this party.

Tessa is looking smokin’ hot in an outfit made of well, he’s not sure of the names of each item, but a perfect combination of leather and bare skin. It’s aesthetically pleasing, if your definition of aesthetically pleasing includes quickly fantasising about places on her body he wants to put his mouth. She’s wearing a lace eye mask for fuck’s sake and it looks sexy as hell.

“Please don’t ever make that noise again,” Paul hisses from beside him.
“Huh?”

Paul looks disgusted. What’s he on about?

Paul clears his throat, “That strangled groan. The one that was halfway between extreme sexual satisfaction and pure misery.”

Oh, he had thought that was an internal groan. Appears not.

“Paul, she’s heaven on a stick. Look at her in that outfit. She’s the world’s most gorgeous witch.” I have never wanted any girl as much as I want this one, he finishes off in his head.

“You’ve wanted plenty of girls as much as you want this one. You just can’t have this one. So it’s amplifying your feelings,” Paul shakes his head.

“You ARE reading my thoughts. I knew it! As soon as we get back to our place I’m doing a mind-close sp…”

But he doesn’t get to finish his sentence because Tessa’s friend, MJ he thinks her name is, strides up and taps Paul on the chest. Paul looks terrified.

“PJ,” he squeaks.

“We need to talk,” she declares, “right now.”

Paul nods and disappears with PJ into the crowd. He can see them intermittently, PJ’s cheetah’s tail popping up behind her like a lighthouse beacon. They make quite a pair, a Cheetah leading a man dressed as John Travolta from Saturday Night Fever.

When he turns back to grab his beer off the table to his right he finds Tessa standing next to him.

“Hi,” she smiles, “I’m Tessa.”

She goes to shake his hand and he takes it, grateful for the gloves that are part of his skeleton costume. No way is he gonna risk touching her skin again.

“Hello Tessa,” is all he can manage.

She doesn’t recognise him with his face painted and wearing his top hat. He’s gotta admit his face does look excellent. Paul conjured himself up a temporary face painting talent. It definitely worked.

“Know any body here?” she nods towards his costume. It’s a lame joke but it’s adorable.

“That was terrible,” he laughs.

“I could probably come up with something worse,” she tilts her head to the side in that endearing way she does.

“Highly unlikely. Lay it on me,” he invites.

Tessa leans back against the wall next to him, mirroring his body position and tilts her head again while she thinks. She looks to him and her eyes light up.

“Why can’t skeletons be the church musician?”
He grins and shrugs his shoulders.

“They don’t have any organs,” she deadpans.

It makes him chuckle, both at the ridiculousness of her joke and the delightful way her eyes sparkle. “Your turn,” she challenges.

He scrunches up his face as he thinks. She gives him a shy smile and flicks a non-existent hair behind her ear. She’s so distracting when she’s all flirty. The back of her hand ever so slightly brushes against his glove.

“Why do skeletons hate winter?” he teases.

She gives a big, genuine laugh.

“Too easy. The cold goes right through them.”

“There you go, knowing all the answers, just like in our acting class,” he chuckles. It feels so right to chat like this, so easy.

Tessa looks momentarily confused, peers at him hard. Then she looks furious. “It’s you! Why are you... You don’t like.. Why even bother to…” she’s so mad she runs out of words. She pushes off from the wall. He grabs her hand just in time, bringing her to a stop.

“Tess, please wait. I want to explain,” he speaks softly.

Fuck the coven war. Fuck Paul and the seal. Fuck families steeped in magical history. This girl is pure magic, the best kind.

She responds in an equally quiet voice, staring at the pointy toe of those incredibly sexy boots she’s wearing. “You don’t like me, Scott. You have gone to great lengths to prove that over the past four weeks. I’m not stupid, I get it.”

He takes both her hands. “How could anyone not like you? I’ve thought of nothing else but you over the last six weeks.”

Tess’ head flicks up, “I don’t under…”

He doesn’t mean to cut her off mid-sentence, but he does. “I will explain, but first dance with me? Please?’ he gushes.

She gives a small sigh, “OK. Just one dance.”

* 

Of course the skeleton is Scott. It’s like there’s some kind of magnetic force around him that constantly pulls her in. She shouldn’t dance with him, but at the same time, how can she say no.

The dance floor is already jammed with people, but as if by magic, as spot opens up for them as they walk towards it. The crush of people parting ways to allow them entrance and then closing in around them, almost to offer them privacy.

She loves to dance, it’s her major after all, but she wasn't expecting Scott to be able to keep up with her. She was sure she was in for another episode of white man’s overbite, but instead he moves with her, feels the music in his whole body, and fuck if it isn’t the sexiest thing she’s seen in a long time.
They start a reasonable distance apart but before she knows what’s happening they’re pressed up against each other. Their bodies moving in time to the music as the shared heat between their bodies ignites something in her she’s never felt before.

“Tell me about your family?” he says, as he spins her around and presses her back to him. His breath on the back of her neck is intoxicating.

“We’re pretty boring. My dad’s a lawyer and my mom stays at home. I have two brothers and a sister. All equally boring.” It’s true there’s nothing remarkable or interesting about her family and they are the last thing she wants to talk about. To make her point clear, she drives her ass against him. It’s the boldest she’s ever been with a guy and the groan he makes in response is enough to make her want to do it again. And again and again.

So she does, again and again, enjoying the power she has over him, the growing evidence of his arousal, and the groan that comes with each movement. She can’t stop the laugh that starts low in her chest and rumbles out of her, and earns another groan.

When the music slows down, he spins her back to face him. Her hat comes off and lands somewhere in the crowd, but she can’t be bothered to look for it.

“I want to see your face,” he growls, his hands on her hips, his thumbs pressing into her skin. His eyes flare with mischief and desire. If she thought she was intriguing before she was so, so wrong.

“So take my mask off,” she dares him. Something about him makes her bold. There’s a bubble around them. She can see the other dancers, knows they’re there, but it’s like they’re behind glass, their sound and movement muffled and blurry.

He runs his hands up her torso, just skimming the sides of her breasts, his fingers ghosting her neck, her cheek, until finally stopping at her mask. He winks at her before slowly reaching back to untie the ribbon holding it in place.

“Maybe I should keep this for later,” he whispers, playing with the delicate lace. She can hear him even though the party and music are so loud.

“Is there going to be a later?” she whispers back. They’ve almost stopped dancing entirely, just bodies pressed hard up against one another, swaying slightly to the music.

“God, I hope so.” His lips brush her ear and a shiver runs through her body.

“Me too.”

“Do you want to get out of here?” He runs his hands back down her body coming to rest on her hips again. Why does he have to be wearing gloves? She wants nothing more than to feel his bare skin on hers. “My apartment isn’t far.”

“Yes,” she answers without thinking. There’s no thinking around him. Only feeling.

The bubble stays with them as they leave the dance floor and make their way out of the house. She doesn’t bother looking for her friends, doesn’t care about anyone’s opinion but hers.

He grabs her hand as soon as they leave the house.

“Could you take off your gloves?” she asks and he takes them off an instant, lets them fall to the ground without a thought.
As soon as his skin touches hers the electricity is back, but this time instead of shooting through her it hums and crackles, builds and builds. All she can think about is how badly she wants to touch every part of his skin, taste every part of him. If the way he’s looking at her is any indication his thinking the same. His hand creeps up her arm and the skies open.

It rains harder than she’s ever seen, and living in Vancouver she’s seen more than her fair share of rain. It’s almost as if someone is pouring buckets of water on them. She’s soaked in an instant, The water washes away Scott’s make up, revealing his face a stream of water at a time.

There’s no point in trying to stay dry in a rain storm like this. So they stand and revel in it. The rain should be cold but for some reason it’s warm and refreshing. He pulls her into a tight hug and they let the rain soak into their bodies. She rests her head on his shoulder as his hands wind through her hair. As his lips find her neck, she thinks she’s never felt so whole.

But it’s not long before the feeling of his lips on her skin, their bodies pressed against each other ignites a fire that the rain can’t dampen.

“Come on.” He pulls her in the direction of his apartment and they can’t stop touching as they walk. The rain is pounding against her skin and obscuring her vision, but it doesn't matter because all she can see is him. All she can feel is him.

“I could get you a towel,” he offers. She’s not sure how they made it into his apartment, but there she is dripping a steady stream of water onto his floor.

“Oh you could just take off my clothes.”

He doesn’t have to be asked twice. Her cape is on the floor before she can blink, his hands linger at her collar bone and his lips follow as he works the fastenings on the front of her bustier. His fingers work quickly and she briefly wonders how many such garments he’s removed but realizes she doesn’t care.

He removes his lips from her body and backs away slightly as he arrives at the last fastening. His eyes meet hers, flares, and then he looks down her body, as he lets the garment fall to the floor.

His groan of appreciation at her naked torso is otherworldly, sending a spark down her body that makes her slick with anticipation. He doesn’t take his time with the rest of her clothes. Yanking her skirt and underwear off in one go, until she’s standing naked before him in only her boots.

“I don’t suppose you want to leave your boots on?”

“No,” she says even though his smile makes her want to.

The promise of a next time is enough to set him in motion, and he kneels on the floor in front of her. His hot breath is fire against her pussy as he works the zipper on the back of each of her boots, and she can't stop the noises that spill out of her every time he leans closer. By the time he’s helped her out of her boots, her knees are shaking. It would be so easy to press a little further forward and feel his lips on her, but he hasn’t even kissed her yet and she wants that even more.

He seems to realize at exactly the same moment and he slowly stands up, keeping his mouth close to her body, but never actually touching her. They stand there, lips inches apart for a few moments, their breathing syncing before he finally leans over and kisses her.

They do not take their time, seem incapable of going slow, as they explore each other’s mouths. Outside there’s a sudden crack of thunder and the room lights up from a bolt of lightning as the storm intensifies. She’s distracted for a moment. There are hardly ever thunderstorms in Vancouver
and yet there have been two in one week, but she doesn’t ruminate for long because his lips are both distracting and demanding.

He pulls away slightly as he starts to work his tuxedo jacket off his shoulder.

“Could I undress you?” she asks into the kiss. If there were ever a man who deserves to be undressed, to be revealed one layer at a time, it’s Scott Moir.

“God, please,” he groans.

She steps back and stops the kissing because as much as she wants to continue, she does not want to miss a second of this show.

First she takes care of his jacket, easing it the rest of the way off his body, before folding it in half and placing it on the back of a nearby chair. She likes the way he watches her as she moves, the little noises of appreciate in makes in response to the sway of her hips or the bounce of her chest.

Next, she removes his bowtie and flings it across the room. They both giggle as it bounces off a wall and lands somewhere on the other side of the room. All laughter ceases as she begins the torturous work of removing his shirt, button by button as she reveals his chest. She’s suspected he was ripped from the way his t-shirts always pulled across his chest, and she’s not disappointed. His chest and arms are muscular and well defined and she allows herself a moment's break to explore the promise of his abs. He hisses as her finger tip counts each. She wants to count again with her tongue, but there’s still his pants to deal with.

He hisses again when her hand makes contact with his belt buckle, groans when she eases down his zipper and moans when her hands make contact with his thighs. Once his pants are on the floor, she copies him and kneels to help him with his socks and shoes. The expression of pure lust on his face and quickening of his breathing keeps her fully distracted as she works.

She doesn’t bother to stand as she hooks her fingers into his underwear and soothes them down. His hard and glorious cock is revealed to her inch by inch by inch. She doesn’t have much time to consider his considerable girth though, as he grabs her by the wrists and hauls her to her feet. He presses her hard against him and all she can think about is the feel of his skin against her. How it warms her and then there’s the familiar feeling of electricity brewing between them. She can almost hear it crackle, can almost see a glow around them.

The wind and rain batter the window so hard that it sounds like the storm is trying to get inside.

Her hands are shaking. She wants him. Desperately so, but is this moving faster than she’s used to.

“I’m just going to slow us down for a second. You seem a little nervous,” he states, almost reading her mind, as his finger tips explore her back. Up and down her spine, dipping lower with each pass.

“How far do you want this to go tonight?”

“I want everything…”

“But?” he prompts.

She wants to have sex with him, wants nothing more, but her rational brain isn't so far gone that she doesn’t know that it’s a bad idea. Too fast and too much. The potential to get hurt is overwhelming. That as good as it might feel, it’s still a bad idea.

Her irrational brain, the one that has directed her hands on to his incredible, firm, peach like ass, can only think about how good he might feel inside her. She doesn't trust her irrational brain not to
control her mouth on this particular occasion, so she just shakes her head. She’ll give her brain back control in just a moment.

“I agree.” He says, stopping his tongue from its magnificent work on her nipple for just a moment. “But you wouldn’t object to a few orgasms, I assume?”

“She rates?”

“Oh, at least two of them will be yours.” He winks at her and gets back to work.

Fuck his tongue is talented, she thinks as he moves to the other breast.

His tongue deserves an Academy Award, she decides as he makes his way down her torso to her belly button piercing. He mumbles something when he gets there, words of appreciation that she can’t quite understand, and doesn’t care to when he nips and tongues her piercing.

Give him the fucking Noble Peace prize, she nearly shouts as he finally, finally parts her folds and her knees give out.

“We should go to the bedroom,” he says as he catches her. “I do my best work horizontally.”

The storm rages outside the window. She can almost feel its power as he leads her the short distance to his bed and she’s not sure what turns her on more, his finger on her or the storm.

He takes his time settling her onto the bed, making sure she’s comfortable before he kisses his way back down her body until he’s where he was moments before. He maps the outside of her folds first, spending more time there than she expected or hoped for. She’s writhing with pleasure when he finally parts her and finds her clit.

She was right, his tongue deserves all the awards. Should be bronzed and kept in a museum, but only after she’s done with him.

“Please, god, keep making those noises,” he pauses for a moment and then doubles down his efforts.

As her orgasm builds, the storm outside rages, seeming to grow in ferocity as she edges closer to her climax. And when she finally comes the storm reaches its height and shakes the windows.

When she comes back to herself, he’s resting beside her. Running his fingers in a slow, sweeping motion along her stomach and side, skimming the underside of her breast as he follows his path.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” he whispers.

“That was…” she can’t quite put her thoughts into words. “You’re really good at that.”

“I’ll make sure to put that on my resume.” He laughs and tickles her ribs. “Sounds like the storm has calmed down.”

“Good thing, I thought the windows were going to rattle out of the frames.” She can feel him hot and hard against her thigh, and loves that he hasn’t made a move to move things forward again.

“Were they? I didn’t notice. I was busy listening to other things,” she giggles again and then kisses him.

She lets her hands explore him this time, only interested in his pleasure, although she seems to be the only one who is, because his hands are all over her again. Their lips stay fused together as their
hands wander, eventually both of them working lower and lower until she finally takes him fully in her hands.

The sound he makes is unholy and settles deep into her. Shakes the bed with its savagery.

“Fuck, Tess,” he moans as his fingers find her clit and she strokes in time to the rhythm he sets.

Her world narrows to sound and touch. The feel of his lips, his hands, him hard in her hands and she feels herself building again, as she matches him. It’s almost as if they’re feeling the same thing at the same time and she thinks she could get addicted to this. That she might be already addicted to him.

“Scott…” she manages to vocalize his name even though words float around the room and not in her mind or her mouth.

“Tess…” he says into her mouth, biting on the T, wrapping his tongue around the S’s.

She gasps as she comes at the same moment as he does and spills into her hand. It’s so much, so overwhelming that the bed shakes and the light bulb above them pops and winks out.

“Must have been a power surge,” he says as she returns to reality. “From the storm.”

She nods into his chest, only half conscious.

“Sleep?”

“You really don’t seem evil,” he mumbles into her hair and she’s out before she can ask what he meant.

*

He’s woken by a rhythmic thumping on his bedroom door. This is quickly followed by a muffled female voice insisting that the door be opened immediately. By the time he’s fully conscious there are three people standing at the foot of his bed.

“Motherfucker,” yells Paul. “You slept with her!”

He glances at the clock on the wall behind Paul’s stupid head. It’s 3:46am. It’s too early for him to form coherent thoughts, he tries to piece together some words to defend Tess’ honour but he’s too slow.

“You’re an asshole. My girl did not fuck your boy on the first date,” PJ storms from next to Paul.

At the yelling Tess rouses and rubs her eyes. “What? Why are you two here?” As she tries to sit up the sheet falls away from her shoulder, almost exposing Tess’ chest, he grabs it and carefully tucks it up under her chin. She gives him a sleepy smile in return.

PJ looks crestfallen, like someone stole her dog. “Tess, tell me you didn’t sleep with him,” she begs. “Not that there’s anything wrong with that.”

PJ tries to discreetly place Tess’ clothes in a pile at the end of the bed. It doesn’t work, Paul wildly gesticulates in the direction of Tess’ clothes and mutters something about ‘doubtful they were playing naked cribbage’ under his breath. PJ pinches Paul on his forearm and he squeals.

He’s a tad more awake now and has successfully moved into being pissed off by this ridiculous turn of events.
“Why are the three of you aren’t standing in my room at a quarter to four in the morning?” he shouts.

“Three?” questions Tess.

“Yeah, I’m here too,” Mel offers from where she’s draped across the chair in the corner, the one where he usually dumps his clothes. She’s still dressed as a bubbles, squishing her costume down from her face to get a better look at them before uttering words that make him outraged on behalf of Tess’ perfect breasts. “You should probably put on a shirt Tess, to cover your tiny titties.”

“Oh, make no mistake, we are standing here. We most definitely are standing here. That’s because your parents are arriving at any moment. So get some fucking clothes on,” Paul spits.

“How did you know I was here?” Tess asks PJ.

Paul gives him a steely look, “The weather was a dead give away.”

“Oh, fuck.

“Enough,” he says slowly. “Everyone outta my bedroom.”

He snakes an arm around Tess’ waist and draws her to his side. She snuggles into him while Paul, PJ and Mel file out into the hallway.

“OK, let’s get that door shut,” he flicks his finger towards the door and it slams behind Mel. Tess tilts her head to the side and raises her eyebrows.

“That was...odd. The door blew shut at the exact same you moved your hand,” she frowns.

He ignores her comment.

This is not how he wanted to spend the morning after the night before. He wanted to wake up Tess by kissing her neck, running his hands over her hips and down the back of her legs before he placed his...

Tess’ laugh interrupts his thoughts. “Um Scott, not to be a demanding house guest or anything but what the hell is happening right now? Why are our friends here in the middle of the night?”

He sits up in bed, moves his back against the headboard and slides Tess across his body so that she’s straddling his lap.

“Hmmm, and not to be an ungrateful house guest,” she winks as she wraps her arms around his neck, “but is this the right time for part two?”

He can’t help but laugh too. She is so wonderfully sexy in this moment with her confidence and bed hair and cute as fuck smudged eye make up.

He kisses her nose.

“I want you to know that whatever batshit crazy stuff happens in the next little while that last night was amazing,” he brings her flush to his chest so he can whisper in her ear. “You are amazing. I loved every minute of being with you and I want to do it all over again. With a few added extras.”

He feels her shiver against him. Her hips give the tiniest roll in acknowledgment of his confession. They’re both naked and she’s sitting in his lap, so there’s a significant amount of below-the-waist touching going on at the moment. It’s incredibly distracting. He gives a low moan.
He gently moves her a little way back from his chest so he can see her face. “I really like you Tess. I think we’d be great together.”

He runs his hands up her arms, over her shoulders and cradles her cheeks. This could be the last time he kisses her, so he takes his time when softly placing his lips on hers. Their mouths dance together while an argument flares up between PJ and Paul in the living room.

“This is all so dramatic,” she sighs. “It sounds like you’re breaking up with me before even asking me out. And what could those two possibly be fighting about?”

Paul’s voice booms through the closed door, “I’d say there’s only sixty seconds before you’ve got your parents in that room and they aren’t gonna be as forgiving as PJ and I were!”

“Up, up,” he motions to Tess, “get dressed as fast as you can.”

She quickly grabs her underwear and skirt from the end of the bed while he throws on shorts and a t-shirt. Tess can’t find her bustier. It doesn’t matter, it is a totally inappropriate look for parental chastisement. He ferrets around in a drawer then throws her a thick sweater, it’ll keep her warm and hide the fact she’s not wearing a bra.

The air is filled with the crisp scent of Chanel No. 5. Already? That’s his Mom’s perfume, he would know it anywhere. There is also something else he can’t quite put his finger on. There is no doubt his mother is arriving in about fifteen seconds. He doesn’t want Tess to see her arrival. How the fuck would he explain it?

“Tess, you’ll find a spare toothbrush and a comb in the bathroom.”

“Thank you, just what I need,” she smiles as she sails into his en-suite and closes the bathroom door behind her. Poor Tess. She has no clue of the shit that’s about to go down.

And to be honest, neither does he. When the room starts to quiver he’s smacked with the overwhelming realisation that they’ve reached the point of no return. His parents are going to be furious with him.

The room vibrates and all the colours intensify before there’s a flash of light and four people stand before him.

Four? What?
Shit, shit, shit.

This is infinitely worse than he could have imagined.

* 

Tessa walks out of the bathroom to find her parents and what she assumes are Scott’s parents staring at her. She stares back at them until an awkward and unnerving silence overwhelms the room. What is she going to say exactly? Was my orgasm so loud you heard it in Burnaby?

Tessa’s mother finally breaks the silence by bursting into loud, ugly sobs, before engulfing her in a hug. “Oh, my poor baby!”

As she tries to get her mother to stop crying, she decides that this is the moment has killed her potential relationship with Scott and any chance she might want to have sex in the future.
“Now,” her father says, as he tries to peel his wife away from his daughter. “Let’s not over react.

“She could have died, Jim.”

The sobbing intensifies as Tessa manages to wiggle free of her mom’s vice grip. Once she’s free she mystified about what to do next. Should she go stand beside Scott, who’s avoiding eye contact with her? Storm out? Burst into her own set of tears? She's leaning towards option three when the quiet man she assumes is Scott’s father because they have the same eyes, steps forward.

“Perhaps we should take this into the living room?” he casts his eyes at the rumpled bed and back at his son. “That might be a more appropriate location.”

With a flick of Joe’s fingers, the door flies open and the parents file out of the room.

“What’s….” she doesn’t actually know how to finish her question.

“I’m sorry,” Scott says and kisses her hand. There’s so much going on his eyes, guilt? remorse? And something else that she can’t quite name.

He takes a deep breath and walks out of the room shaking his head.

She’s the last one out and takes a quick survey of room. PJ and Paul are standing side by side mumbling at each other, while the parents are displaying varying stages of anger, disappointment and worry, while Scott tries desperately to blend into a wall. So she decides the safest place to sit is beside Mel, who looks completely confused but at least friendly.

Everyone is silent for so long that she’s starting to wonder if she’s supposed to be talking, when suddenly Scott’s mom yells at PJ and Paul.

“I can’t believe you two let this happen!”

“Now, Alma,” Scott’s father starts as PJ and Paul begin to offer explanations.

“It’s your job to keep them apart,” Alma roars back.

“But I was distracted by a cute boy?” PJ offers and then immediately turns a very deep red.

“And what’s your excuse?” Alma turns on Paul.

He turns to Scott, opens and closes his mouth and then looks at Alma helplessly.

“He was also distracted by a cute boy,” PJ says helpfully.

“I can’t believe you told them that.” Paul gives her a look and starts to raise his hand.

“Don’t you even think about using magic on me, we both know I’m more powerful,” PJ growls and Paul instantly lowers his hand. It’s a side of her easy going friend that she’s never seen before.

“If I’m going down, I’m taking you with me.”

“Can someone, anyone, please tell me what the hell is going on?” Tessa yells.

She’s had enough. This is her life they’re talking about and it feels like she’s watching a movie that doesn’t make any sense.

“I’d really like someone to explain it to me too,” Mel says into the silence that follows Tessa’s interruption. She shifts in her seat and her bubble balloons squeak against one another and one of
them pops.

“Why is she here?” Kate matches Alma in volume if not in intensity, probably because she’s still crying.

“She wanted to come,” PJ says and refuses to look anywhere but at the floor

“You brought a non-mage into this?” All four parents yell at the same time.

“What’s a non-mage?” Mel whispers.

“What the fuck is a non-mage?” Tessa yells. It feels like the whole room grows sweltering hot for a moment before returning to normal. She turns to the only person in the room she can trust. “Scott, what’s happening?”

*

No way, no, no, no.

He’s not going to be the one to explain to Tess that she’s a witch. That’s definitely a parents’ job. It’s right up there with the sex talk as big moments in a mage kid’s life. And while they’re at it, they should probably explain why they didn’t tell her ten years ago.

“Righto, this is awkward,” he starts. “Perhaps I’ll just say two things before handing over to Mr and Mrs Virtue. Firstly, Paul did try and keep me on the straight and narrow. In his defence I ignored his advice. Repeatedly.”

His mother’s shoulders drop down a smidge from where they were up around her ears. Her balled up hand relaxes to such an extent that he thinks her nails are no longer drawing blood from her palm. Paul gives a nod of thanks then subtly moves his foot so his heel presses down on PJ’s toes. Hard. She glares at him in a way that can only be described as malevolent. Paul quickly retracts his foot.

“Secondly, I did exactly what I shouldn’t have because Tess is incredible. So incredible, I have never met anyone like her. I have no regrets,” he glances to Tess, where she’s squished up next to Mel across the room, half covered with a multitude of balloons, “but I do apologise for that atrocious weather.”

Tess still looks baffled.

His Dad steps forward, “Jim, Kate, perhaps you might like a moment alone with Tessa?”

Jim looks at Kate and it’s clear they’re reading the other’s minds, having a telepathic conversation. He’s reminded that he still needs to close off his mind to Paul. That sneaky motherfucker. He turns to Paul, who gives him a guilty look. You’re an asshole, he thinks in Paul’s direction.

If his parents are going to read him the riot act he’d like the privacy of his own thoughts, and he certainly doesn’t need Paul reading his bloody mind too. He conjures a simple mind block spell and hears Paul whine from the corner of the room, ‘You’re no fun, I was looking forward to that.”

Jim and Kate finish their conversation, then Jim steps forwards, “Joe, we’d appreciate that. Thank you,”

‘There is a small lounge area out near the stairwell,’ Mel helpfully offers.
'Thank you Mel, but not necessary,’ Kate responds, ‘Tess, would you please join you father and I over here’.

Wordlessly, Tessa complies with the instruction. Once she’s standing next to Kate her father circles his finger and an opaque dome slithers to the floor.

“Holy shit,” breathes Mel.

Behind the watery wall Tess is listening to her parents. Her Mom reaches out to hold her hand but Tess snatches it away. From inside his chest feelings of betrayal and confusion bubble up his throat. He’s so hurt that he coughs down a sob and his eyes sting. Then outrage fills his entire being, Tess stamps her foot and uses her finger to point in his direction. Their eyes briefly lock together and all he feels is devastation. He’s experiencing all these emotions but he’s not actually feeling these things himself. It doesn’t make sense.

What the fuck is happening?

Wait. He’s studied this.

Is he feeling Tess’ emotions? Did she invoke some kind of soul sharing spell?

“Tess, can you hear me? Don’t look at me, just answer with your mind,” he silently instructs.

“I..., I can hear you,” comes back her answer.

*

“Just listen to what they’re saying. They’re telling you the truth,” Scott’s voice fills her mind and it’s at once terrifying and comforting.

It’s also very confusing. And overwhelming. She has to take a couple of deep breaths to calm down.

“Tessa,” Scott’s voice echoes through her head.

“Shut up,” she yells.

“Tessa, I know that you’re upset, but that is now way to speak to your mother,” her father snaps at her.

“I’ll be quiet,” Scott whispers and then suddenly his voice isn’t in her mind anymore, but she still feel him lingering there, almost as if he’s holding her hand.

“Darling, you really do have magic,” her mother says and starts to step forward, but thinks better of it.

“I don’t believe…”

“Just try something for me?” Tessa agrees to the request with a nod. “Raise your fingers and now think about how if you snap them a flame will appear. A small flame, like you might find on a candle.”

Her father’s voice is almost hypnotic, so she raises her fingers and even though it’s ridiculous, she imagines a flame there.
“Can you see it?” Two voices chime at the same time. Her father’s by her left ear and Scott’s, a whisper of a kiss through her mind.

“Yes.”

“Now snap.”

She snaps and a flame ignites, rushes out of her hand and pops the bubble around them.

She winks out of herself for a moment and when she comes back, everyone is staring at her.

“Will one of you motherfuckers please tell me what the actual fuck is going on!” Mel yells, her eyes wide and all of her balloons in popped shreds around her.

Tessa would laugh at the absurdity of it all, if only a fireball hadn’t just shot out of her fingers.

“Tess is magical,” PJ explains because everyone else is stunned into silence.

“And you knew?”

PJ nods.

“And you didn’t tell me??” Mel screeches.

“It was a secret,” PJ yells back.

“I told you how I lost my virginity.”

“Not the same thing.”

“Not that this isn’t fascinating,” Paul cuts of the argument with a look and a silencing spell. “But the important part is that the Moirs and the Virtues have a blood vendetta against each other. Because the Virtues are evil.”

“Tess,” Scott’s voice returns to her head as she frantically looks at her parents for an explanation.

“That’s not exactly true,” Alma says while the revelation is still bouncing around the room, and PJ mimes ‘I’m going to kill you’ at Paul.

“What do you mean it’s not exactly true?” Scott demands.

“So not only am I magical, I’m also evil?” She’d like to wake up now, because this is the worst dream she’s ever had.

“You told him we were evil?” Kate can’t keep the hurt out of her voice.

“At least we told him he has magic,” Alma shoots back. “What were you thinking?”

“We wanted her to have a normal life.” Kate starts crying again, large devastated tears roll down her face. Tessa wants to go to her and wrap her in a hug, there’s nothing quite as upsetting as seeing your mother cry. On the other hand, the fact that she’s been lied to by everyone in her life makes her want to stand her ground. An island in a sea of insanity.

“We thought it would be fine with you living so far away,” Jim adds and puts a careful hand on
Kate’s shoulder.

“Can someone please explain what the fuck is going on?” Scott explodes and she feels all of it. His emotions swirl with hers. Mix and roll, morph into something else that hits them both at the same time. They both take a deep breath and the room dims. Everyone starts to move as if they are trapped in molasses. Like they’ve receded into the background of her mind. Only Scott stands out in sharp contrast. He takes a few steps closer to her as the people around her move in barely noticeable increments.

“Are you ok?” he asks as he takes her hand. There’s no popping of lights or dramatic shots of electricity, instead a warm buzz lingers on her skin.

“I’m overwhelmed.” She knows no other word to describe what’s happening. She has magic? He thought she was evil? He can speak to her in her mind? How is she supposed to process all of this?

“I know.” He rubs his thumb across her cheek and for the first time she feels calm.

“Is this…” she looks around the room at the faded figures, how they seem to blend into the background and all she can see, and feel and think is him. “Normal?”

“It’s a psychic bond,” he explains, touches her cheek, her hair, her neck. “They’re rare but they happen sometimes, but I’ve never heard them described the way this feels.”

“Did you do this?”

“No.”

“Did I do this?”

“I think we did it together.” He smiles and takes both her hands in his. Runs his thumbs across her knuckles.

“How long will it last?” Not that she wants it to end, that’s the last thing she wants, but she’d like to understand the boundaries.

“Sometimes forever,” he pulls her a little closer, so he can wrap his arms around her. “But we can only do this when we’re close to each other. We can talk to each other as far away as a couple of kilometers but any further than that and the connection breaks.”

“Ok.”

“Tess,” he presses his lips to her temple. Whispers into the tender skin there. “If I don’t get to say it later, I really would have liked so much more with you.”

As she’s about to answer the room whirls around her, turns topsy turvy. When she finally rights herself, everything is back to how it was a moment ago. Scott is across the room with the same frustrated look on his face, which disappears in a moment.

“Scott! Language.” His mother barks.

“We had to tell you all of those things,” Joe’s quiet yet powerful voice cuts through the din like a sharp breeze. “To protect you.”

The room hushes and it’s only then that she realizes that no one noticed the moment she and Scott shared. It’s almost as if time stood still for a moment.
“The Moirs and the Virtues aren’t enemies. In the past our families have been great friends,” Joe explains. “But there was a long history of strange things happening whenever a Moir and a Virtue touched. Little things like uncontrolled weather, animals appearing out of nowhere. It became clear that the combining of the two families magic made things, well for lack of a better word, unpredictable.”

Joe shrugs and looks at his son with such sympathy that Tessa’s heart hurts for him.

Kate sighs and continues the tale, “Both families agreed that it would be best if they were forbidden from any contact with one another. But as happens when something is forbidden, a Virtue and a Moir fell in love. They ran away and were married and when they consummated their marriage, well, let’s just say it was catastrophic.”


“To keep future generations safe, the Virtues agreed to move to the other side of Canada.” Kate finishes through gritted teeth.

“And it was a good solution until Scott decided to go to school out here,” Alma adds.

“They tried to talk me out of it,” Scott whispers into her brain. It’s comforting now, instead of terrifying. “But something in me told me I had to come here.”

“We all talked about it, and considered forbidding him from going, but given how enticing it was in the past, that didn’t seem like a good idea,” Alma continues. “We figured the chances you’d even run into each other were low, it’s such a big campus, and we sent Paul and PJ to keep you out of trouble.”

Paul sputters out a protest and PJ tries to speak but can only point at her throat.

“Release her Paul,” Joe says in a tone that leaves no room for argument. Paul flicks his wrist and PJ unleashes a torrent of curses about exactly what she plans to do to Paul that would be embarrassing, if it weren’t so funny.

“We knew something had gone wrong when the weather happened,” Joe ignores PJ’s outburst although he does look impressed by both the breadth and depth of her cursing.

“There was a rainstorm, it’s not that big a deal,” Scott protests.

“There was a hurricane, a complete power outage for the province and a mild earthquake,” Alma shoots back.

That explains the bed shaking, she thinks as she feels a blush overtake her entire body. Scott sports the same deep shade of red.

“Now we have to figure out whether or not you set off another plague.”

“We didn’t have sex,” she blurts out.

“Oh, thank God,” several voices, including her mother’s cry, out at once.

“I knew my girl wasn’t sex on a first date floozy,” PJ shouts and Paul looks like he wants to put another silencing spell on her. “Not that there’s anything wrong with that.”

“PJ,” Kate says quietly. “This really isn’t the time.”
“We need to get you two apart,” Alma says. “Scott pack your things.”

“Don’t we have any say in this?” She’s tired of listening to everyone make decisions for her.

“Oh, darling, I’m sorry but no,” Kate says and moves to hug her, but Tessa stops her with a look. She turns to look at Scott hoping, praying that he’ll back her up, but he just shakes his head.

She’s never felt quite so alone.

“Come on, we’ll explain everything,” Jim says as he starts to lead her out of the apartment.

“I’m so excited to teach you magic,” PJ whispers and squeezes her hand. Even though she feels a little betrayed that her friend never told her the truth, she forgives her. She’s going to need her now more than ever.

“This is the most exciting day I’ve ever had,” Mel bubbles.

“Your first lesson is going to be how to erase Mel’s memory,” PJ whispers, but she barely hears her because she looks back to see Scott’s sad face as the door closes.

She misses him everyday. She shouldn’t, because he was only a part of her life for such a short time. But somehow he filled up all the empty nooks and crannies she didn’t even realize were there, and now that he’s gone it feels like a part of her is missing.

The missing takes on an almost physical force on the day of what would have been their theatre class performance. It’s Thursday afternoon and as she watches group after group, she can feel the pull of him and everywhere she walks, she leaves a trail of ice in her path.

When she lays down in bed that night, he’s on her mind and his name is a soft sigh on her lips.

The room dims, everything slows down, the air smells like molasses.

And he’s there laying on the bed beside her.

“I thought…” she reaches out to touch his hair and he’s real. She can feel the silky curls as they run through her fingers, his sweet breath as it caresses her cheek. He wraps her up in his arms, stroking her back in long, comforting strokes. She sighs against him. He’s so warm and she feels so safe. “I thought this wasn’t possible.”

“I’m starting to realize,” he says, turning her to face him then pulling her close, “that when it comes to you and I, anything is possible.”

A giggle full of joy and hope bubbles out of her and she and burrows into him.

“Fall asleep with me, Tess” he murmurs in her ear.

“OK…” she responds as a delicious tiredness wraps around her body.

When he comes downstairs his mom is waiting for him at the kitchen table.

“Did it work?” she asks expectantly.
“Better than I could have hoped. It’s perfect,” he responds. “And the weather?”

“No change, not here or in BC.” Alma smiles.

‘Really? Do you think...’

“I’m not sure, Scotty,” she cuts him off. “But we’re going to try our very best and it’s a step in the right direction.”

She wakes, rested and clear headed.

The room is still dim and the smell of molasses hasn’t dissipated.

Scott’s still there, solid and corporal, his chest rising and falling against her back. She moves and he wakes, kissing the back of her head.

Her eyes flick to her mobile phone, it’s resting on the bed just out of reach, but she can read it. It’s still Thursday evening, no time has passed.

She takes his hand, weaving their fingers together.
i'm no sweet dream, but i'm a hell of a night

Chapter by hartmaddox

Chapter Summary

Tessa never wanted to be a succubus.

And she hadn't known she was one, had no idea demons were even a thing that really existed, until she had her first real boyfriend at seventeen.

A hundred years ago.

Chapter Notes

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I hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The ribs below her hands rise and fall with a shudder, the gasp from the man’s lips making her eyes flicker open languidly as she takes in the slight frown on his sweaty brow.

Tessa smirks, pulling her hands away so that one rests on his abdomen and the other trails up her own body, over the curves and brushing teasingly against her nipple, across her collarbone, before sinking into her hair. The long silky curls she finds there make her almost wince.

She bounces more forcefully then. No longer content to let him off easy but taking what is rightfully hers. With practiced ease she sinks onto him, grabbing hold of his jaw forcefully and draws his mouth to her own, feeling the life flow through his breath and into her. Through her. It’s heady, a dark rush powerfully coursing around her veins. She smirks and sits up again, her hips crashing against his— one, two, three— more times before she clenches around him with a series of guttural moans.

His eyes are closed and skin gaunt as she climbs off. Methodically, she slips the tight black dress, with more mesh than should be deemed decent, over her head. Tessa’s eyes catch sight of herself in
the dusty, finger-marked mirror and watch unamused as the long mousy blonde curls fade back to a
dark brown bob, how the voluptuous curves shrink away, and a phantom twinge of pain ignites in
her calves before she redirects her newly absorbed power to the area.

Tessa rolls her eyes at the passed-out man between the rumpled sheets, puts her stilettos back on,
and knows the sound of her walking away will echo through his mind. That’s all she is to them.
The best sex of their pathetic life and nothing but a distant memory.

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Tessa never wanted to be a succubus.

And she hadn’t known she was one, had no idea demons were even a thing that really existed, until
she had her first real boyfriend at seventeen.

*A hundred years ago.*

She hadn’t wanted to be married off young. She had instead been focusing on her studies and trying
to absorb as much information about the world as she could. And dancing. She’d *loved* dancing.
But nonetheless hormones got the best of her and a boy caught her interest. He’d had light brown
hair that would turn sandy in the sunshine and his nose would crinkle adorably when Tessa would
say something vaguely snarky under her breath, amusement lacing his lips that made her heart
flutter.

She still wasn’t interested in getting married, years upon years of her mother and father arguing or
just not talking to each other at all putting a lump in her throat whenever the idea came about, but it
was the done thing, and so it went that they were betrothed to one another. He didn’t make a fuss.
Didn’t do some grand exhibition in front of the town that would make her want to sink into the
ground and never come out. He just lay under the stars with her and talked about their dreams.
Where they’d travel, the adventures they’d have, the things they’d achieve— together, if she would
do him the honour of being by his side. He traced a circle around her finger, looked over at her
with softness in his eyes and she smiled back with a gentle nod. Light giggles fell from her lips
while the sparks tingled through her body as their mouths met over and over again.

She doesn’t know if it was love, a youthful infatuation, or just lust anymore. The memories hazy
but marked upon her soul.

Tessa gave herself to him. Once, twice, maybe half a dozen times.

And she killed him.

Just *fucked* the life right out of him.

A soft smile still on his lips as she tried to shake him awake to no avail.

She ran to her mother crying on that fateful autumn night, feet dirty and hair a rumpled mess,
which led to the doctor and townspeople flocking to the barn— *the scene of the crime* —while she
wept in her sister’s arms. Eyes stared upon her one by one before the whispers started. The shouts
of accusation. The stirrings of a lynch mob that called her ‘witch’ and ‘killer’ and ‘whore.’

Tessa had packed up a bag in the middle of the night in October and never said goodbye to her
sister or her mom, not wishing to burden them with the desire to stop her from leaving or lie to
people about where she’d gone. Tessa knew she was strong enough to make it on her own. The pit
in her stomach made her want to still travel, adventure, achieve something even more. If she was
responsible for taking that dream away from him, maybe she’d be able to carry it forward for both
of them.

Or so she naively thought at age seventeen.

The thing is, she’s never thought of herself as much of a party girl. She learnt she can be charming and capture attention during a conversation, with men and women alike, but she doesn’t have the time to play the long game. Go out, find a demon, fuck their brains out. Lather, rinse, repeat. Her body is a temple that needs constant maintenance but her mind doesn’t need the stimulation to survive, no matter how much she craves it. She has to keep herself occupied in other ways, she’s travelled the world three times over, discovered friends in the highest (and lowest) places, has accolades to her ever-changing pseudonyms.

She refuses to admit that she’s lonely. She could stop it all if she wanted to. Some days it feels like she should. So much hurt has already been caused by this burden she carries. But something inside tells her she’s waiting for something more. Something that will turn her world upside down. Tessa just doesn’t know what it is.

It comes with the territory. Whenever she senses the burning beneath her skin that ramps up until every cell mimics molten thick lava, she spends her night at whichever of the seedy clubs takes her fancy. The conquests keep her alive. The power she gets from them is like a drug she can’t give up. The ultimate strength and the ultimate weakness.

The Angels and Demons night the Friday before Halloween is just too ironic not to attend. The wings on her back are a charcoal colour, flecks of white that catch the strobe lights but only draw enough attention to her to make her seem intriguing. She only ever needs the bad ones to see her. And they can’t resist a dark, mysterious woman who will smile at them like an angel but fuck them like a whore. The dumb ones never know what she is until it’s too late. The smart ones, she knows, see her as a challenge.

Except they never see her. They see what they want to see. She’s been everything from blonde to brunette to a redhead. Legs appear longer, boobs appear bigger, skin appears more tanned. Tessa becomes whatever they want her to be, which means she never has to worry about them finding her again. If they survive her, that is.

She kills rarely now.

The good thing about targeting other demons is that they can handle her gift. She can take from them, and it may not be as sweet or as euphoric as the purity of a good soul, but it also doesn’t make her feel rotten to the core like it does when she snuffs out the future of an innocent all because she needs sex to survive. Tessa’s haunted the world long enough to have discovered a few loopholes that mean she can still stand to look at herself. At least for a few moments. In particularly charged places or times of the year, she’s still haunted by them. Her victim’s faces lurking in the shadows and corners.

With dark makeup smudged around her eyes highlighted and accented with white glitter, she’s the perfect dichotomy of good and evil. Coming as a demon seemed too mundane and attending as an angel made her feel fraudulent. She’s always wanted the best of both worlds. There’s something about the atmosphere in the party that makes her ravenous, and she knows there aren’t just demons here, that there’s something bright and wholesome and delicious in attendance that makes her mouth water and thighs clench pathetically. It’s more than human. More than simple innocence. It’s transcendent. She rolls her eyes at her own primal nature and grabs another drink, downing it to distract herself.
It feels like the dancing bodies part to show her the man casually leaning against the wall with a beer in his hand. His pants are black, his shirt a crisp white, and he wears a waistcoat over the top that’s a comforting maroon colour. His hair sticks up slightly making it look like he just rolled out of bed. It’s devilish in the most simplistic way, and she can’t decide if it was deliberately done or if it’s a prime example of a last-minute “costume.” Unassuming and subtle are not things that immediately come to mind when one thinks up a demon, but that’s why she likes it. Temptation isn’t supposed to be obvious, it’s meant to lure, captivate, wear down defences until there’s seemingly no option but to give in.

As if on cue, his eyes find hers, and Tessa can’t remember the last time her breath caught in her throat like that. A chill runs down her arms making goosebumps flare up across her skin. She’s so used to being unaffected, to having the upper hand, to being in control. The word that immediately comes to mind is Dangerous. And when she looks back up the man isn’t there anymore. Tessa doesn’t know if she’s disheartened, relieved, or some confusing combination of both as she makes her way across the sticky floor.

Several drinks and a quickie in the back office later, Tessa still sits observing the people at the party. She feels rejuvenated from her orgasm. The demon had stumbled out of the bar a few minutes after she jumped off the desk, her cool and composed demeanour returning lightning-fast, but she’s too antsy to go home. Something inside compels her to stay.

“Did it hurt?” a smooth and amused voice commands her attention, sliding into the seat beside her. His shirtsleeves have been unbuttoned and pushed up to his elbows and he looks a little rumpled, but she doesn’t smell sex on him, so notes it as just the typical disarray of a night out.

When I fell from heaven. Tessa rolls her eyes. “How many times do you think I’ve heard that line tonight? Ballpark?”

He laughs, and that shouldn’t be so sexy, especially off the back of a lame come-on like that. “What do I get if I guess correctly?”

She smirks, taking in his soft brown eyes and the way little crinkles appear at the corners when he smiles. Her heart picks up speed and she mentally tells it to shush. “A few more moments of my time. More than the rest who started that way.”

He clicks his tongue as if to scold her. “You’re dressed like a fallen angel, you must have anticipated it.”

“Maybe I thought I’d be worth more of an effort.” Her eyebrow arches in a challenge.

“Or maybe…” he leans closer, his voice dropping in a way that makes it feel like his next words travel up each vertebra of her spine until she’s shivering, “you’re so beautiful they didn’t know what else to say.”

Tessa blushes in spite of herself and crosses her legs, folding her hands over her knee and straightening her back. “You haven’t been rendered speechless it seems.”

His eyes trace slowly across her face, spending longer on her eyes, then her lips, followed by her collarbone. She runs her tongue along the inside of her lip hungrily. Tessa thinks she could physically cut the tension between them with a knife.

He looks away and out to the floor, his fingers tracing nondescript patterns across the table. She finds herself captivated by him, eager to hear his thoughts, stimulated in a sharper way than usual. “A fallen angel is an interesting choice. The concept of innocence lost, somebody who committed
a mortal sin and was cast out of heaven, doomed to live somewhere in between good and evil, because they’re not destined for hell but they’re no longer pure either.

“Purity is overrated,” she whispers, drawing her eyes away before he can turn to meet her gaze.

Tessa can feel his eyes upon her profile. It makes her feel seen. Naked in a completely different way than is second nature to her. She swallows and she’s pretty sure the only reason it’s not audible to the man beside her is because of the music pulsing in the background.

“No, it’s not.” It’s not even an argument. His tone is so decisive, so knowledgeable, with so much conviction it makes her heart clench. A finger falls to her upper arm, the lightest touch cascading down and across her skin. Her breath hitches and her eyelids flutter closed. “The purity of a simple touch can be taken for granted. The goodness of a heart, of a soul. Everyone has a little good in them.”

She clenches around nothing, because god knows she wants his goodness in her. Tessa knows, in spite of his costume, that he’s not a demon, he’s not dark in any way. His touch is like a flare lighting up her insides. She wants wants wants, but she can’t have. Tessa sighs wistfully.

“Maybe you think too much of people. Some are just born evil. No falling from grace required.” She reaches her right hand over to the forearm where his touch rests upon her skin intending to remove it, but he smoothly slots his fingers between hers until they’re inexplicably holding hands.

“What are you doing?” She could move to pull away, use her strength to break their connection and dispel this situation in record time, scare him into never looking in her direction again, but for some reason, she can’t.

“You don’t need to be saved or rescued. You just need to believe,” he says with a joyful grin. He smiles with the innocence of a boy but carries himself and caresses her with the expertise of a man. With confidence he brings her hand up to his lips, gives the softest kiss that lingers a moment too long, his eyes wide and watching for her reaction with bright interest. Tessa shudders at the feeling and pulls her hand away reluctantly.

“Who are you?” she murmurs, not even really to him as much as herself.

“Scott,” he replies, pushing himself away from the table. “Scott Moir.”

“Tessa Virtue,” falls from her lips before she even thinks about it. She hasn’t told anybody her real name in so long that panic immediately floods her chest like a dam breaking and water rushing in.

He nods gently, forehead frowning with the slightest hint of worry. “Tess,” he asks, far too familiar and holding out his hand towards her, “would you like to dance?”

“I always do,” she replies, trying not to let the sudden sadness creep in. It doesn’t make sense how this man can make her feel more alive than she’s felt in a century, how there’s a brightness to him that shines so magnificently even in this seedy bar in London. She’s too scared to ask him what he sees when he looks at her. Does she resemble herself at all? Her name sounded so natural on his lips, maybe he knew someone else with her name, a “Tess” that he can almost imagine she is instead.

It’s late enough that the music has evolved into slower songs as the crowd thins out and the drunken people either leave with their chosen companions of the night or are beginning to slump from the alcohol coursing through their tired bodies.

Tessa feels more awake than ever.
As they sway together, their bodies seem perfectly in tune. She can imagine, with palpable clarity, how beautiful they would look in a four-poster hotel bed overlooking the Eiffel tower, what a gorgeous golden colour his skin would turn lying on a beach in Spain, how the bright lights of the Tokyo streets would sparkle in his eyes. She wants to give him the world. And she doesn’t even know him. Tessa gasps and rests her head in the centre of his chest.

“Alright, angel?” he asks with a confusing combination of teasing and soothing. She almost laughs.

“Who are you?” she repeats, gently shaking her head back and forth against his now-wrinkled shirt. His bare skin is right there and it takes all of her willpower not to lift her head and press her lips against it.

His arm wraps tighter around her lower back, pulling her impossibly closer. “Just a man,” he answers and she can hear the smile around the worlds as they’re murmured into her ear.

Tessa pushes her upper body away so she can look at him, and he looks down at her with such softness, such wonder, that it makes her blood run both hot and cold. “I don’t think that’s true. Lying is a sin, you know?” she twitches her eyebrows imperceptibly and he laughs loud, throwing his head back. She thinks it’s a sound she could hear every day and never get tired of.

“No one is without their vices, I suppose.” He leans down and presses their foreheads together. “The beauty of life.” The undercurrent of that, the depth to it, makes her think he might be talking about her. Tears fill the corner of her eyes.

“Six.”

“Hmm?” he hums questioningly.

“How many tried that line before you,” she elaborates. “There were six.”

“I guess they just didn’t have the charm to pull it off.” He presses a kiss to her cheek and a tear slips from her eye, cascading down the opposite cheek. She melts into him and brushes it away before he can see. “Not to be forward, but would you like to get out of here? I’m not…” he chuckles bashfully, “I’m not ready to say goodbye to you just yet.

Tessa’s eyes trace him, the way a few strands of his hair slip down and curl into his forehead, a nose that’s bigger than average but adds an attractive sense of character to his face, eyes that hold so much power, soft and passionate and intense all at once, lips that she wants to taste, to feel upon her skin, to breathe life into rather than take it away. She blinks and nods, hoping the sincerity shows.

He grins, once again youthful and sweet, and walks over to the bar with a bounce in his step to settle his tab.

Her body shakes and shudders as one, then two, then an uncontrollable amount of tears start to overflow from her eyes and fall across her skin. By the time he turns back around, she’s gone. Her feet taking her home as fast as physically possible. Every step feels like a dagger in her chest, but she knows it’s for the best.

Whoever Scott is, she vows that she’s never, ever going to hurt him.

She only knew him for a short while, surely he’ll be easy to forget.

She only has an eternity.
Tessa presses a hand softly to the little girl’s back. “Just straighten up a little and you’ll find it easier to point your toes, Stacey.” A little frown of concentration appears on her face as she does as Tessa advises and it makes her smile. “Good job,” she whispers her praise.

It’s the first time she’s covered this ballet class, but she’s made sure she knows every student’s name. It strengthens her bond with the kids even if they only see her occasionally or even just the once. That way she’s not just a substitute. She’s part of their journey and improvement.

“Thank you, Miss Vice,” Stacey replies with a bright grin.

Even if they don’t know her real name.

She’s packing up her stuff at the end of the session when a tiny cough alerts her to the group of three girls that have stayed behind. Tessa smiles at them softly. “How can I help?”

“We were just wondering if you were going to teach us again?” pipes up a dark-haired girl with a high-pitched voice who she recognizes as Lana.

“I’m not sure,” she answers, trying not to disappoint them. Truthfully she’d love to take on a regular class but it’s just too risky. Tying herself down to any one thing, staying in one place too long. They’re all red flags she learned not to succumb to decades ago.

“Please, Miss Vice!” Stacey blurts out. “You know so much.” All three girls nod enthusiastically.

Tessa smiles. “So does your regular teacher, girls.” It would be impossible for anyone to have the level of expertise that she does at the age she appears to be. That’s the catch-22. She can’t do much with it other than teach, and even then she can only teach sporadically. She once had a student back in the nineties who found an old photo of her. She’d had to play it off like it was a deceased relative and that dancing just happened to run in the family. The panic attack she’d had when she got to her car caused her to leave the city the very next day and on to the next place. Don’t get attached, don’t get discovered, and don’t leave a trace.

All rules she’s broken at one time or another and suffered the consequences for.

The girls are disheartened for a moment before they leave but she can still hear them chatter away excitedly as they discuss the class. It’s the best she can feel when she’s not on top of or below another person, it’s nice to feel satisfaction from doing something good.

Her feet move quickly down the stairs of the building and down to the shop area below, now open and with a few patrons that weren’t present when she came to start the class.

“Miss Vice, is it?” A voice, that is all too familiar and makes her blood run cold, calls out.

She spins slowly, finding Scott Moir, of all people, behind the counter.

“Yes,” she replies stoically.

There’s pain behind his eyes, such a striking contrast to the softness and sweetness that was held there the night before last. She wonders if hers still look a little puffy around the edges from the tears that just wouldn’t stop coming no matter how hard she tried.

He shakes his head and walks out from behind the counter. The closer he gets the faster her heartbeat thumps and her legs scream again telling her to run run run. “Of all the gin joints in all
the towns in all the world...she walks into mine.”

Her head tilts and she smiles in spite of herself. “I didn’t know it was yours.”

“The big ‘Moir’s Skate Shop’ over the entrance wasn’t a clue? How many of us in a twenty-kilometre radius did you think there were?” he teases.

“I was given a spare key to slip in the back to set up for class, I wasn’t...I wasn’t paying attention to the sign.”

“And I guess I wasn’t paying attention to the signs when I turned around and you’d vanished.”

She shakes and lowers her head, his eyes too confronting.

He brings his hand up to her jaw, his thumb tugging at the corner of her lips while his fingers trace back and forth against the skin below her ear. Tessa’s breath hitches. “Please, stop doing this to me. I can’t.” She knows how desperate she sounds. She’ll plead and beg him to leave her alone if she has to, even if every cell of her body is screaming at her to do the opposite.

“Tess,” he whispers. And her eyes burn as she lets herself look back up into his gaze once again.

She wraps her hand around his wrist, so close to pulling him away but just shy of able to make the motion. “I need you to let me go.”

“Why?” he implores. “Look, I think there’s something here. Something that could be really great. Why are you running away?”

She knows her eyes are glistening with unshed tears as she shakes her head at him. The words have left her, the excuses, the myriad of reasons, they all get caught in her throat.

“Give me today,” he says decisively, putting his hands on her shoulders before slowly travelling down her arms. It feels like he’s tethering her to him with every gentle touch. Tessa feels rooted to one spot in a way she’s never experienced before, it makes her mind hazy. “Just the day to prove to you that this is a good thing. That…” his mouth twists for a moment in hesitation, “that you are allowed to have this?”

She really doesn’t understand how he can read her so well. Or why she trusted him with her name. Or why she’ll probably be swayed into trusting him with so much more of her darkness. He’ll likely be the end of her. And she, him.

Tessa brings one of his hands up to her heart and sighs mournfully. Her eyes close and she nods her agreement. “One day,” her voice rasps.

He pulls her into his body, light and warmth and joy practically seeping from his skin. He whispers, “Tell me, Tess, do you skate?”

She laughs into his shoulder. “Of course.”

- 

She watches him for a little while from the boards as he zooms back and forth down the ice with overwhelming speed and precision. It’s satisfying to watch him do something he’s so obviously good at and she’s enchanted. His edges smooth and deep, his footwork natural and complex. He shines against the white even brighter than he does in other settings. She feels drawn to him like a moth to a flame.
“Virtch!” he calls, and she raises her eyebrows at the new nickname. He scratches to a stop in front of her, ice kicking up everywhere, and offers her his hand. “I didn’t bring you here to stay on the sidelines. Skate with me.”

She chuckles and does so, linking her fingers through his in an odd but cosmically comforting handhold, her little finger sliding between his index and middle ones while the rest of her digits clench tightly to the space between his thumb and fingers. It only takes a couple of laps for them to fall into sync with each other. Any bystander could be fooled into thinking they’d been doing this their whole lives.

He’s full of even more life and joy here than he is off the slippery surface, and she feels like it’s bleeding into her skin and settling into the fabric of her being. Her face hurts so much from smiling at him she thinks it may be frozen in the happy expression.

“How does it feel to you?” she asks breathlessly as he sets her down on her feet, having lifted her gently by the hips as he’d skated from one end of the rink to the other.

“Closest to heaven here on earth,” he answers, leaning forward to brush their noses together. When he pulls away she arches an eyebrow at him again and he just ducks his head bashfully.

“Guess I’m not the only one with secrets.”

He skates backwards executing complex footwork and she mirrors his movements a beat behind him. The light in his eyes increases in wonder and she sticks her tongue out for a moment in response.

“Did you ever consider trying for the Olympics?” Scott asks. There’s a vague disappointment in his words that she wants to know more about.

Tessa smiles gently and casts her mind back. “Once. But…” She shrugs. “Too much notoriety. I prefer to fly under the radar.” The panic when she thinks about everybody seeing her in the spotlight still manifests even though she’s taken decisive action to make sure no one ever notices too much of her. She has the scars to prove what a terrible choice that is.

“As long as you fly!” He winks and scoops her into his arms causing her to squeak. “I wanted to play hockey, my family wanted me to try figure skating. Something just...never quite clicked.”

She rests her forehead against his cheek. “Why?”

Scott’s hand travels up her thigh, his touch igniting her skin even through her thick leggings. “Maybe if I’d found the right partner, at the right time.” He shrugs. His fingers dig in a little harder as he swings her around before gently bringing her back down to the ice.

Tessa slides her palms against his until they’re just touching by the tips of their fingers, almost like a foreboding image of how she’s going to have to let go again when the clock metaphorically strikes twelve. “Where to next?”

“I make a mean hot chocolate. Will you actually come home with me this time?”

Tessa’s expression becomes pensive as she pretends to think about it. “Will there be mini marshmallows?”

His face twists like he’s affronted by the question but amusement sparks in his eyes and the corner of his lips in a way that’s so achingly attractive that it makes her want, for the briefest of moments, to kiss him and bring that sweet smile fully to the surface. “Of course,” he answers.
“Then I’m powerless to resist.”

In Scott’s apartment, masculine but mature, and homely in a way none of her residences ever have been, hot chocolate turns into breakfast-for-lunch. Scott flips pancakes methodically and confidently while her eyes trace the photos of his family; brothers, parents, nieces and nephews all with wide smiles and adoration for this good soul in front of her. There’s a child’s drawing attached to his fridge with a homemade magnet, a tiny bear that has ‘Uncle Scott’ written on it perched on a shelf and staring at her in a way that feels almost judgemental. Tessa wants to feel comfortable instead of out of place, but she’s never spent time with someone so loved and so obviously worthy of that love. She doesn’t know why he’s not married with his own hoard of kids tugging at his pants for a bite of his pancakes.

“You’d think I’d be able to cook more than just eggs at my age, but it’s just never been my skill,” Tessa says, watching him add a sprinkle of sugar.

“How old are you?” Scott asks, his eyes not leaving the batter.

“117.” It’s deadpan, the way she says it. She’s already given him so many pieces of her, she wonders if this will finally be the one to make him run the other way.

He freezes for a moment, blinking twice quickly, before letting his eyes flick back up to meet hers.

“You look good.”

“Pilates.” She can’t contain the smile when she looks at him and they simultaneously burst into laughter. Tessa has to pat at his arm to get him to focus back on the food, Scott shaking his head as he dumps the scorched pancake into the trash.

It’s when Tessa goes to help him clean up, his shout of warning just a half-second too late, that she burns her hand against the still-hot stovetop. She hisses and he rushes to her, apologies pouring from his lips.

“It’s fine,” she tells him. She takes a deep breath and starts to conjure up her energy.

“Wait,” Scott interjects, his fingers lightly taking hold of her forearm and slowly travelling down towards her hand, a trail of goosebump emerging in his wake. “Just wait...let me...” He traces his fingers against the burn, and it stings only for a moment before she can feel it healing in front of her eyes. He smiles guiltily and gives her the softest kiss on the cheek that makes her lungs feel heavy with the need to sigh forlornly.

“Just a man, huh?”

“Flesh and bone, as God intended,” he answers, his words both mysterious and soft. He’s so confusing.

Tessa hums. “And the rest?”

“A little,” He raises his hand, bringing his thumb and forefinger close together and squinting, “...angel blood.”

She can feel her body burning beside him, it’s like the dark pit of her soul is screaming, telling her to get closer and closer and until his power is all hers. She’s disgusted by that part of herself and winces as she turns away, her steps carrying her to his couch without any purposeful direction or thought.
“You really didn’t know?” he asks, his feet plodding against the floor as he follows her.

She folds her legs under herself and sinks her nails into the couch cushion, denying the impulse to climb into his lap and sink her hands into his hair. “I could feel you were more. Before I even met you, I knew you were irresistible. All my body wants is yours.”

“I wouldn’t say no to that, by the way,” he quickly urges as he tucks a few strands of hair behind her ear. His eyes are full of desire and wonder, a more innocent hunger instead of her primal, evil, monstrous one.

She takes his hand and pushes it away from her, ignoring the hurt that flashes across his face. “I am a succubus.”

Understanding flashes across his face as she finally gives him the missing piece to the puzzle. “So —”

“We cannot pursue this, whatever this thing is between us. You are important. To the people in your life and apparently higher powers too.” She stares at him harder than she’s ever let herself before, it’s like a thousand needles piercing her chest when she takes a breath before her next words. “I will not hurt you.”

“How do you know you will?” he asks in a small voice, his confidence deflating as the reality begins to sink in.

“It’s what I’m designed to do. I’ve done it before, and I will not let anyone else I care about die because of me.” She knows he can see it on her face, that she doesn’t need to explain all the gory details of a fiancé who didn’t make it past the age of eighteen because of this darkness inside of her. She wants Scott more than she ever wanted James. There’s something about the way they move together that’s all-encompassing and wholly overwhelming. It’s more than comfortable, it’s more at home than her heart has ever felt. Even before she had sex she was itching to run away and explore. Escape. It’s as if Scott has a lasso wrapped around her heart, tugging her into his aura, healing and torturing her all at once. She wishes, more than anything, that she was allowed to have him.

They’re quiet for a long time. Both needing time to process. An angel and a demon walk into a bar…

“I can see how much it wears on you,” Scott says, his arms crossing and his hands twitching like they want to be touching her. She can almost feel the phantom press of his fingertips against her wrist, shoulder, cheek, spine, thigh, all the places he’s been able to touch so far. Tessa sighs and looks down. “I guess I’m just curious about why you do it? Why you didn’t stay celibate and live a normal life.”

She laughs brokenly. “My life was never going to be normal. Not after what happened. But I did. I was celibate. For a long time. Until I wasn’t.”

He hesitates for a moment before pulling her foot towards him, her legs relaxing between them. Scott lets his hand wander up to her shins, his touch as light as a feather and making it feel like he’s healing her scars from the inside out. Scars he doesn’t even know are there. “What changed?”

“I…” she swallows and averts her gaze, her mind casting back to memories she tries to forget but never really does. “I was a dancer. I’d always loved it growing up, and I’d settled down with a fake name after…” He nods in understanding at her pause. “I think I was Carmen back then.” A shudder goes through her body and Scott leans forward, resting his chin against her knee in an attempt to
bridge the distance and prove he’s going to hang on to every word she offers him. “I didn’t get involved with anyone, I kept to myself. Once you’ve watched someone you care about die at your own hand, it just...doesn’t seem worth it to try.”

Scott hums in response, a subtle way of asking her to continue. He draws patterns against her skin and it makes her feel like a crackling log in a fireplace— as if she’s going to crumble to ash before his eyes.

“My fiancé’s uncle, his friend, and his son...the three of them had spent years tracking me down, unbeknownst to me. I guess I was gaining some popularity with the troupe…”

“Oh obviously. You’re stunning.”

She smiles sadly at his sincerity. “One night I was leaving work and they um...they ambushed me.” Tessa closes her eyes, the harsh memories flooding back in a wave that feels almost suffocating—like she’s submerged underwater and her arms are too heavy to lift her to the surface.

“Tess, I’m sorry, you don’t have to…” he whispers urgently, but she’s already made it this far. If there’s anyone she feels safe to tell, to let into the darkest parts of her history, it inexplicably feels right that it’s him.

“James, that was my fiancé, he’d mentioned how his uncle was a total nightmare. When I left, it kind of felt like time should stop there. That I was never going to see anyone again because I had removed myself from that life. I was cautious, of course, but not like I should have been.”

“Not like you are now,” he supplies.

“Frank and Bobby grabbed me, and Joseph, practically a kid himself, kept watch. They…” She grabs Scott’s hand and traces his fingers along the scars he was inadvertently touching before. “They took a crowbar to my legs.” A tear slips from her eye and before she can whisk her hand up to brush it away, Scott’s thumb is there caressing her cheek. When she lets her eyes meet his, she finds them full of anguish and anger. She remembers the blinding pain, the screams that were so loud ringing in her ears that she didn’t even realize they were coming from her. She remembers trying to muster up the strength to crawl away, unable to feel anything but agony below her knees.

“Do you want to hear the rest? Because you may think differently of me if you do.”

“I won’t,” he vows. Tessa grips his fingers hard enough to hurt but he holds her back just as tightly.

“Joseph, despite following them around the country for years, felt bad, I guess.” She can’t help the sneer that crosses her face. “He got me help, visited me, maybe he fell for the poor damsel in distress who couldn’t walk because her bones had been pulverized in a dozen different places.” She scoffs. “I pretended to forgive him, to need him, when the very sight of him made me sick to my stomach.”

His fingers rub softly across her palm. “You killed him.”

“And I liked it.” She can feel the darkness spreading around the chambers of her heart and out into her body like black ink staining her insides. She knows her eyes flash black for a moment, but Scott doesn’t recoil, just watches and observes and waits for it to fade. “And then came Frank, who never saw me coming. And Bobby, who was so drunk he wouldn’t have recognized me even if he wasn’t seeing his dead wife.” She shudders and Scott grabs a blanket off the back of the couch, throwing it over her shoulders and tugging her closer to him as if his proximity will somehow push away the trauma reignited in her senses. As if he can protect her from something that happened over ninety years ago. “I killed them all, Scott. And I felt good doing it.”
“They battered you and left you for dead, Tess.” Scott looks so pained when he says it, his eyes shining with sympathetic tears. “If I had been there I would’ve probably killed them myself.”

Tessa brings her hand to the back of his head, weaving her fingers through his hair, and drags him as close to her as she can. She lets her lips brush against his for the briefest moment, all that she can allow for herself, and then lets him go with a mournful sigh. “I don’t think that’s true, but thank you.” She untangles herself from him and moves to get up, her body feeling raw and unsettled now she’s moved away from him and back into the fog of her past. Her legs twinge uncomfortably.

Scott’s hand hasn’t let go of hers despite Tessa creating some distance. He brings his other hand up to meet them, both wrapping solidly around her left hand in a desperate plea. “Don’t leave.”

“I have to…” she trails off. “I have to go out tonight, it...it hurts too much, Scott.”

“You won’t hurt me,” he tells her, full of naive confidence. He turns her hand over and brings his lips to her palm. “You couldn’t hurt me, I know that. I know you.”

“Not well enough.” She tugs her hand away from his grip and walks out of his apartment with assured steps. This time she’s almost numb to the pain as her feet carry her away from him.

Tessa is used to men seeing her as whoever their fantasy desires when she fucks them.

But she’s not used to her mind conjuring up the same thing.

His eyes were too piercing, his smile too sinister, his muscles too defined. All things she wouldn’t think twice about before. All attributes that she would have found attractive before Friday when a certain angel waltzed into her life and turned things upside down.

She’s in the foyer of some dingy, dilapidated house with floorboards that sound mostly rotten as they creak below their activities. Her leg is wrapped high around the demon’s waist as he thrusts inside of her, powerfully and at a steady pace.

The only way her breathy moans pick up is for her to imagine it’s Scott beneath her hands. That he’s the one making her feel this way, that it's his shoulders beneath her nails, that it's his grunts pulsing into her ear.

But he’s too tall and his hands feel too foreign across her skin. It’s hot enough to make her blood sizzle and her legs ache in a reminder of why she’s doing it but it’s not right. She brings her lips to his, drawing some of the darkness into her, and then turns her back to him so her mind doesn’t have to see him and pretend anymore.

Reaching her climax has never felt like so much work before, like such a chore.

And when she comes, she drags him down across her back so she can take as much of his power as she can allow, the smirk slipping from her lips right after he comes and slumps to the floor beside her with a gentle thud. Tessa pushes the energy to every part of her body that begs for it.

But her heart feels more hollow than ever.

Tessa lifts her head from her book for the first time in hours, blinking the haze out of her eyes as each word in front of her seems to blur into one. The peace and history and life that encompasses
the library soothes her mind. The stories embedded into the framework of the shelves makes her feel both old and young, wise and that she still has so much more to learn.

As she wanders around the rows of books, her heart stops when she hears the warm voice, her body spinning on the spot to see none other than Scott at the reception desk dropping off flyers, she thinks from a distance they look skating related.

She’s so frozen by being confronted by him again so soon that she doesn’t hide quick enough when he turns around to leave, his vision falling directly into her path. She closes her eyes guiltily as a hot and cold flash sparks down her spine.

Tessa doesn’t need to open her eyes to know he stands before her, waiting for her to acknowledge his presence.

“I can wait all day,” he says, equal parts bitter and teasing. “Or forever.”

She inhales quickly through her nose to try and dissuade her gasp. Her eyes flicker open but she doesn’t let herself meet his gaze, just stares at the steady pulse of his heartbeat in his neck. It’s a striking reminder that he’s alive and safe because she’s left him alone.

Forever feels like how long it will take to forget him.

“You’re thinking very loud, may as well say it to my face,” he continues. Tessa’s hand shoots up to press a finger against his lips in a shushing motion, her eyes wide as they finally lock with his.

“I said all I needed to say,” she whispers, but her body betrays her anyway and edges closer to him. It’s as if she’s a plant seeking out the bright sun, but she knows she’s more like Icarus flying too close. She knows he’ll be her undoing and then she’ll be his, but there’d be no coming back for him.

He brings a hand to her hip almost hesitantly. “Well, I didn’t,” Scott says seriously. He swoops forward, all at once pushing her against the shelf and covering her mouth with his own. It’s explosive and intense and nothing like their first kiss where she gently brushed her mouth against his. That was a goodbye, this is one hell of a **hello**. He brings his hand to her jaw, directing the kiss and burying his fingers in her hair. Her body knows well enough to kiss him back despite her shock. She's so weak for him that her legs shake beneath her and she gasps as she pulls away to breathe, her fingers clutching hard to his jacket.

“I…”

“Legs again?” he murmurs, placing sweet kisses against her cheek, jaw, neck.

“No,” she replies, arms wrapping tight around his back for a moment. “Just you.”

“Good.” She can hear the smugness in his tone and scratches her nails slightly on the back of his neck in retaliation. He chuckles low and smooth, the vibrations floating from his body and into hers.

“We still can’t do this,” she shakes her head against him. “You’re only making it harder on us both.”

He presses his fingers into the base of her spine and pushes her lower body into his until she knows for sure just how hard it is.

“I think we can,” he says, and she’s about to protest before he stops her with a look. “I’m serious, I
have something to show you.” He lets his touch whisper up and down her spine tenderly in stark contrast to the heat of a few moments ago, it’s soft and sweet and comforting. He lets his touch travel up her back and down her arm until he’s holding her hand and tugging her away from the privacy (or lack of) of the tightly-packed shelves and to one of the computers. He sinks into the chair and pulls her down to rest on his knee, typing away with a look of dire concentration that makes her want to kiss the frown away from his forehead.

“I don’t know how I got angel blood, just like I’m sure you don’t know how you got demon blood, right?” he asks, his gaze turning from the screen to her.

She nods. “I’ve always thought it might have been from my father’s side. But I’ve kept a close eye on my…” She gets sad when she thinks of all the family moments she’s had to miss. “No one else since has shown signs of being a demon.”

“And none of the many, many Moirs are angels.” He looks proud of himself for seemingly figuring something out. Scott nods his head towards the screen. “Read.”

She sees the wall of text before her. It tells the tale of two men, one with the last name Moir and one with the last name Virtue, who lived a long time ago. Moir, described as dark, handsome, and charming but with an impulsive and passionate nature that was often the source of trouble. She raises her eyebrows and pinches his thigh causing him to laugh so loud a couple of the people in the library shush him. She continues to read about the man called Virtue, who is described as moral and straight-laced in their community, but whose unlikely friendship with Moir brought out his impassioned side. It’s said that Virtue often had to get Moir out of trouble, but that Moir’s loyalty and sense of adventure were clear draws for Virtue sticking by him.

She continues—only mildly distracted by the way Scott traces circles across her hip and reads that Moir fell into trouble with a notorious witch. And that wrapped up in her enchanting spell he was to be sacrificed by her to the Gods so that she could receive divine power through him. It was left to Virtue to do his best to save him, and he’d found a good witch to try and counteract the dark magic and save his best friend. They had succeeded, but it says that a curse had been placed upon Virtue by the dark witch for foiling her plans. No details of the curse were known, only that in thanks the motto of the Moirs’ had become...

"'Virtute, non aliter'” she recites.

“It means—”

“I know what it means, Scott. ‘By virtue, not otherwise.’”

“Yes,” he says excitedly, his leg bouncing underneath her making her jolt up and down until she chuckles.

She raises a judgemental eyebrow once the laughter fades. “And?”

He pulls her down towards him, planting an intense but brief kiss on her lips. “And I don’t think you were meant to be a demon. I think there’s a curse that we were meant to break by finding each other.”

“Like soulmates?” She smiles, disbelieving.

“Exactly like soulmates,” he tells her, full of wonder and belief and a million other sweet emotions that start to give her hope. Scott presses another kiss near her shoulder and wraps his arms tight around her. It would make sense that this is why she feels so connected to him and why she trusted
him so easily.

“So if I’m not meant to be a demon, in your eyes—”

He lifts a finger in protest. “In the magic’s eyes.”

“Right, in the magic’s eyes,” she corrects sarcastically. “Then you’re not meant to be an angel?”

He shakes his head. “Nope.” The ‘P’ sound pops cheerfully as it bursts from his lips. “I think I was given this… this extra dose of power, this light…for you.”

“You think you’re the cure to my curse?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And what if you’re wrong?” she questions, not quite ready for the hope to invade her heart. She stands from his knee, tugging his hand until he’s standing right there looking down at her like she’s everything he’s ever wanted.

“I can feel it, T. This is it.”

As she pulls him out of the library, finally walking alongside him instead of away from him and taking him back to her place unlike everyone else, she thinks she can feel it too.

- 

Letting him into her house, the one place that remains her sanctuary, no matter how quiet and cold and lonely it can feel, is the equivalent of letting him into her heart.

Although she’s pretty sure she’s been doing that, with or without her mind’s permission, for the past six days.

She thinks her nerves are obvious as she hangs up her coat, her hands shaking so much that Scott wraps his much larger ones around them to calm her down. “Don’t be nervous,” he tells her. She doesn’t know how he can be so sure.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” She watches him take off his jacket and seeing him remove clothing in front of her sets a simmering flame alight in her core. “I want you, so much. But I couldn’t bear hurting you.”

He takes her face in both hands but doesn’t kiss her right away, just leans their heads together and breathes with her. “I love you,” he whispers proudly.

She blinks the tears from her eyes. “You can’t love me,” Tessa’s laugh is watery in astonishment, “you’ve known me for less than a week.

Scott hums knowingly. “Do you love me?”

Tessa freezes, “…and she realizes how stupid she is. “Yes, I do. Everything that you are.”

“Six days,” he says. “Imagine what we can feel with a lifetime.”

Tessa dives in with everything she has, positively ravenous for the man before her in a way it’s never felt before. Not with James, not with anyone. She’s had more sex than most, in so many ways she wouldn’t be able to count, but this feels like a first time of a whole new kind.
She’s used to having control, but Scott’s passion is so strong, and she feels so cherished by him, that for once she feels safe letting somebody else lead. He runs his tongue along her bottom lip, seeking entrance, and she lets him in with a gasp when he runs his hands down to her ass to lift her into his arms.

Tessa giggles and directs him to her room in between placing a litany of kisses against his neck, his blood pumping away below the surface screaming alive alive alive, the way she hopes he’ll always be. The way she needs him to be.

He lowers her to the floor as they reach her room and she’s distracted by their reflection in the mirror for a moment before shaking her head, moving in to kiss him again. Scott accepts, briefly, before pulling away. “Tess,” he murmurs, eyes taking on a sad look.

“What?” she replies nervously. Scott sighs and turns her to face the mirror, pressing his front to her back as she looks at them both in the reflection again. “What...what do you see?”

“You.” He runs his fingers across her collarbone and then sweeps her hair to the side, placing a kiss to the back of her neck. “Dark brown hair, gorgeous green eyes, a smile that could make a whole room fall in love.” She shakes in his arms and Scott brings his other hand to intertwine with hers, grounding her. “I could spend hours, days, counting every freckle, kissing every scar, worshipping every inch of your skin.” She relaxes back into him with a smile feeling so warm and loved. “I see your heart, the light and the dark, the passion you have to live on your own terms. I see it all.”

She sinks her hand into his hair and looks at him in the mirror, mouthing ‘Love you.’

He smiles bright and wide and undoes her blouse carefully, button by button. “There is no one more beautiful to me. I’ve been searching for you my whole life.” He pulls her blouse down her arms and discards it to the floor. She can only chuckle at him already making a mess of her bedroom like he has her life— in the best way.

Tessa’s done letting him take the lead for now and turns towards him to remove his own shirt. Uncovering him is like unwrapping a present that’s just for her. Their before doesn’t matter, only the present and the future. Her conquests have been so transient, so fleeting, that she never gets a chance to take her time. She slides her own skirt down and he does the same with his pants before they fall to the bed.

Scott runs his hand down her skin so slowly Tessa feels like she’s going to combust. “You have to stop going slow. If your theory is correct, I’ve been waiting for you for a hundred years. That’s far too much foreplay,” she jokes, biting her lip between her teeth. He’s so handsome and he’s apparently hers.

“I was made for you.” His eyes sparkle in the low light of her bedroom. It’s not Paris, or Spain, or Tokyo. But it’s home. And he looks perfect in it.

Tessa sits up on her knees, watching his face fill with even more love and desire as she unhooks her bra and throws it on the ever-growing pile of clothes. She reaches forward and removes his boxer-briefs, followed by her own underwear until they’re as naked as the day they were born and as bare as only two souls who understand each other as wholly as theirs do can be.

She crawls on top of him and his hands nestle into the dip of her waist as if they were always meant to be there.

“If you feel...bad at any point-” she begins worriedly.
“I’ll stop you,” he assures her. “But I won’t need to, Tess.” He pulls her down into a slow, gentle kiss and lets his hands travel up and down her skin. She moves her body until she’s right over him, feeling the heat pouring off both of the bodies as she slowly, expertly, gracefully, sinks down on top of him. She gasps into his mouth and Scott moans, bringing one of his hands up to her face so he can kiss her more deeply.

Her whole body shudders on top of him, tensing and releasing in a perfect shadow of a climax. She doesn’t quite come, but she almost does. And it leaves her mind hazy and desperate. Scott sighs against her mouth and presses his hand to the base of her spine, keeping her in one place as he thrusts up into her beautifully. Tessa throws her head back in a soundless cry as Scott’s mouth latches onto her throat, the hint of teeth making her moan and shudder again before he soothes the soon-to-be mark with his tongue.

Their bodies move in perfect harmony, taking and receiving in tandem until Tessa’s body, wound so tight but so relaxed in the man she loves’ arms, comes harder than she ever has before. She leans down as is natural to her, and feels his bright white energy flow through her every molecule, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. Pure euphoria. It’s not addicting in a toxic way like it used to be, it just feels right.

It comes makes her come harder and longer until she’s a shivering wreck.

When she regains some of her senses, she finds Scott’s thrusts less rhythmic and his breathing a little laboured, but he still looks happy beneath her, as if her pleasure is all he wants in the world. “Sorry,” she whispers with a smile and he just shakes his head that she doesn’t need to be.

Tessa falls to the bed, pulling him on top of her, and kisses him long and intense, trying to push back as much of the pure energy into him as she can. His eyes are bright and adoring when he breaks the kiss, his movements increasing with intensity once again. Scott brings her leg up to his waist and stares at her with profound focus, trailing his fingertips carefully along the patterns of her scars. Tessa gasps, coming again as she feels his power actually healing her wounds, her bones no longer aching beneath the surface. “Oh god,” she breathes out. “I love you, I love you, thank you.”

He kisses the tears from her cheeks before she even knows they’re there. Scott sighs and brings her other leg up to do the same, Tessa, in turn, brings her hand to his ass to pull him down into the sweet abyss with her. His mouth moves lazily against hers as he climaxes too, and Tessa plants kisses against every surface of skin she can find as he finally falls against her.

“I waited a hundred years to feel like that,” she murmurs as she draws patterns against his chest over his heart.

“Worth the wait?” he asks with a smile.

“Yes, Scott. You were worth the wait.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!
hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have

Chapter by only_because3

Chapter Summary

She doesn’t consider those times when she has to go help her clients to be her best work but they praise her anyway, call her everything from a god and an angel and a witch.

Once, a man called her a demon. That was the last word he ever spoke.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Hope you've been enjoying Spooktober so far (I know I have)! This has been a joy to write and I want to thank all of the guild and my wife for helping me get this in working order, with a special shoutout to bucketofrice for helping me with quite a few key elements. Enjoy!

Rating: M
Additional tags: mentions of physical and emotional abuse, murder, Medusa AU, a dark romcom
Word Count: 10.8k

Tessa steps onto her back porch. A gust of wind sweeps through and the friends at her ears hiss and curl tighter in on one another in search of warmth. “It’s okay,” she consoles. She brings her hands up to stroke their silky bodies. Their tongues kiss her palm. “The cold means we’ll get to go out more. Won’t that be nice?” Some turn away and others wrap around her fingers.

She steps out onto her grass and over the remains of the statue that once used to be her father. She lives a quiet life.

She goes out only once the sun has set to go shopping. Winter time is her favorite, if only because there are more hours in the day where she feels comfortable enough to go out. Her family comes to her and on rare occasions she travels up to their cottage, extra large sunhat dwarfing her.

Her group of friends is small, tight knit. They remember what she was like before and they know that not much has changed in her, only that she is more weary than she used to be about large crowds. They know it’s more for the safety of others than her own.

She works from home, all the calls from the shelter she works for routing to her cell. For them, her clients, she’ll brave the daylight. Her little snakes happily suffer beneath a scarf or hat or coil together in such a way that it looks as though her hair is simply in a bun and that any movement is just a trick of the eye. They know it’s worth it, to help the women who call her crying, the kids who are unusually calm, the men who sound so ashamed.
She doesn’t consider those times when she has to go help her clients to be her best work but they praise her anyway, call her everything from a god and an angel and a witch.

Once, a man called her a demon. That was the last word he ever spoke.

—

She takes no real pleasure in using her powers.

It is only in the most extreme cases that she even leaves her home to help a victim who’s called her, and, where some might assume that anger would be the emotion that consumes her, Tessa is drowned in the hurt and sadness that radiates from the people she’s trying to help. It’s taxing—physically, emotionally—and what energy she does possess afterwards is spent caring for her client, making them feel safe and getting them exactly what they need for that to happen.

There is, however, a twist of something dark and satisfying in her stomach when, while out grocery shopping one night, she happens upon a couple encouraging a young girl to get into their car.

She can’t be much older than fourteen—a generous estimation, Tessa thinks—and she’s doing everything right. She’s staying far away from the car, doing her best to pay no attention to those harassing her. But then Tessa sees the woman in the passenger seat waving a stack of colorful bills and the girl’s resolve wavers, her feet stopping.

A few of her snakes make their way to the side of her face, their little heads poking out from underneath the scarf she’s wrapped around them. Together, they watch the car slow to a stop and the woman get out while the man behind the wheel leers on. Tessa’s own feet move faster until she finds herself knocking demurely on the window of the car. Her sunglasses have already slipped down the bridge of her nose and she grins when the man looks at her briefly just before she hides her eyes. Naturally, he looks down to his feet and, through the glass, she hears his muffled yelling.

The back door is unlocked and Tessa slips into the backseat, her disgust echoed by the way her snakes curl up. “What the fuck have you done?” the man yells at her. He tries to turn to look at her but settles on looking at her through the rear view mirror. “How did—”

Tessa holds up her hand and though it doesn’t stop him from finishing his question, she simply talks over him. “I would prefer not to hear you speak.” When he continues, she pulls her scarf down to rest on her shoulders and her snakes raise from her head to lunge towards the man who, to her surprise, doesn’t scream but does shut up.

The girl from before is being shoved into the backseat beside Tessa; the man’s accomplice still not noticing that something is amiss. The girl is shaking and Tessa thinks she’s torn between just lying still or screaming and kicking.

Tessa remembers that indecision well.

She doesn’t want to scare the girl but she does help her sit up gently, hope that she’s not frightened by her snakes swelling in her chest. There is no taking the fear from the girl’s eyes though; she simply gapes up at Tessa as the tears start coming in earnest. One of her snakes comes down to comfort the girl but it doesn’t help.

The passenger door slams shut, the other woman confused, and Tessa waits patiently for her to turn around. As usual, there is cursing when Tessa is looked at, fear and confusion bursting through all at once before the pain of their legs turning to stone outweighs everything else. “I take it this isn’t the first time you’ve abducted someone,” Tessa says simply to the pair in front of her before she
turns to the girl. “What did she say to you?”

Still unable to talk, Tessa smiles reassuringly, a timid pat to the back of the girl’s hand. “That’s alright. It’s not important.” Her snakes move to the other side of her head, still poised to attack the pair in the front seat. “Will you promise to keep quiet about my hair?” A nod. “Then go on home. Be careful.”

The girl looks between Tessa and the front seat. “You’re… you’re not with them?”

Tessa shakes her head. “I make sure people like them don’t hurt anyone.” She leans around the girl to open the door only to find the handle has been broken off. Of course. The button for the window is similarly unusable and all it takes is a glance to the man in the front seat for the window to roll down.

The girl hesitates. “What will you do to them?”

“You don’t need to think about them anymore,” Tessa says as she reaches into her pocket, pulling out all the change she got from her groceries. “For a cab,” she explains. “If that’ll make you feel safer.”

Once the girl is out of sight, Tessa listens to the pleas of the couple in the front seats. They beg for their lives, they beg for her to fix them. These pleas are common, when she’s not being cursed, that is. Tessa takes off her sunglasses and takes the man’s face in her hands so that he’s forced to look at her and she watches the fear and life drain from his eyes as his flesh turns to stone beneath her touch. The woman is smarter, closes her eyes when Tessa forces her face in her direction, but her snakes bite the apple of her cheeks. In the end, her face turns out to be more grotesque than the man’s, the terror of seeing her partner turned into stone and the pain of being bit contorting her face, her hands.

Sighing, Tessa digs around in the glovebox, finds the car registration. On her way home, she tips off the police and they find five kids in the couple’s house.

Tessa doesn’t take pleasure in killing people, not usually.

This is an exception to the rule.

—

Tessa is just sitting down for a late dinner when her phone rings.

She’s spoken to this woman before, has helped her leave her boyfriend twice already, only for Alice to go back each time. Tessa doesn’t fault her, knows how hard it is to get out of the cycle of abuse when your partner doesn’t lay a hand on you, even when you have all the tools at your disposal to do so.

Except Tessa can tell as soon as she picks up the phone that this is worse than any other time Alice has called. Her crying is hysterical and her words slurred and she keeps talking about her stomach, her belly, her baby.

She’s out the door in a flash. The snakes go dormant beneath her hat and she pushes her sunglasses high on the bridge of her nose as she tells Alice to just stay on the phone, that she’ll be there soon. By the time Tessa gets to her car, the line has gone dead.

It takes her ten minutes to get to Alice’s. The door to her apartment is kicked open, wood splintered and hanging on the hinges. Crying comes from the kitchen and she finds Alice cowering
in the corner. What Tessa can see of her face once she takes off her sunglasses is bruised and bloody and wet. Her boyfriend is crouched down in front of her, hands reaching out for her again. “Hey,” Tessa barks, her snakes hissing sharply, each one coming to stand at attention, her hat falling to the dirty floor.

The boyfriend turns around and…

Nothing happens.

His eyes don’t quite reach her face and there is absolutely no reaction to the fact that her hair is comprised of snakes.

“Are you with the police?” he asks, just as Alice seems to finally notice her.

“Oh, Tessa,” she cries. Her hands go to cover her face and Tessa can feel the shame rolling off Alice in waves.

The man in front of her turns back around. “You know her?” His voice is so soft.

This isn’t right.

Groaning comes from the living room. There, on the floor, is another man, this one beaten and bloody worse than Alice.

That must be the boyfriend. But then—“Who are you?” Tessa implores, voice still sharp but less gruff. The hissing at her ears is softer now, curious and not as furious, just like her.

He doesn’t speak until Alice murmurs an okay. “Next door neighbor.” He sits, right in a lump of spaghetti, a grimace crossing his features though he makes no effort to move away. He holds out a hand, one with split knuckles. “Scott.”

Tessa learns a lot once they get rid of Alice’s boyfriend (she gives Alice the choice: cops or stone. They push him out the window with the help of Scott who questions nothing). Alice is perched on the toilet as Tessa cleans her up. It’d been getting worse since the last time she came back to him, worse still when Scott moved in next door. “I’d only said hello to him once or twice,” Alice defends. “But Don must’ve seen…” The tears start up again and her snakes are on them in an instant, tongues quick to dry Alice’s cheeks, making her nearly smile with the whisper of their touch.

Scott had kicked in the door shortly after Don took Alice’s phone, ended things faster than Tessa could get there. “He said he heard the yelling… my screaming.” A whole apartment building full of people and only one person came… it’s been at least fifteen minutes. No one even called the cops.

“Thank goodness for that,” Tessa murmurs.

There’s no way Tessa is going to allow Alice to stay here with a broken door and the echoes of the abuse all around her, even if Don is no longer a threat. As kind as Scott seems to be, Tessa doesn’t trust that he couldn’t easily be a threat too.

She walks Alice into the living room, sets her down on the couch with a blanket. The front door has been crudely shut, a heavy book being used to keep it closed, and Scott is moving around the kitchen with a wet rag in his hands. Tessa isn’t sure if it’s stained with blood or with the sauce of the spaghetti. “I’ve been trying to clean up.” His back is to her and she watches as he scrubs at the cabinet above the sink. “It’s slow going,” he says, as if she can’t see the fact that there’s still sauce
Tessa’s head cocks to the side, her snakes following suit.

Blind.

Well, that certainly explains it.

Tessa’s sure she would have realized that Scott couldn’t see much faster if she hadn’t been so focused on Alice.

She must take too long to respond because Scott turns, something like a smile tucked in the corner of his mouth. “That was supposed to be funny.”

Tessa prickles but her snakes turn to one another, just out of her eyesight, then stretch just so towards Scott. “It’s hard to find anything funny at the moment,” she says, voice even. Moving around the small kitchen, Tessa ignores the way her snakes try to get closer to Scott, shushes them as best she can when they start hissing a little too loud. She manages to find some tea and a mug but when she turns to the kettle, it’s already sitting on top of a flame.

She looks over her shoulder at him, her snakes more than interested in what he’s doing now. “There’s somewhere safe for her to go tonight?”

Tessa nods before realizing her faux pas and says, “Yes. We’ll get the door fixed in the morning.”

Scott nods next. “I’ll hassle the super about it first thing.” He opens the cabinet he’s been cleaning, holds out a travel mug. “Here, so she doesn’t have to stay here any longer than she needs to.” Zora slithers down to get a better sense of Scott but Tessa is quick to pull the snake back before it can touch him.

“Thank you,” she says and takes the mug. The kettle starts to whistle and she cuts the flame before it can grow too loud. “And thank you, for not doing nothing.”

Scott is quiet for as long as it takes Tessa to fill the mug with boiling water, to steep the bag of chamomile. When he does speak again, his voice is barely above a whisper. “I’d heard them arguing before,” he admits. “Maybe I should’ve said something earlier.”

There’s no way she can convey just how much worse it could’ve been if he had tried to help earlier, not when she needs to get back to Alice’s side. “I know it doesn’t seem like it, but you did the right thing.” She knows her words don’t provide much comfort, not when Scott’s knuckles are bloody and Alice is bruised and the kitchen is in shambles, so she touches his elbow, a barely there press of her fingertips against his skin.

She ignores how her snakes turn to each other, a conversation passing between them she’s not privy to.

—

Apollo, the doctor who works with her, takes care of the things Tessa cannot and it seems as though all Alice needed to give into exhaustion was the confirmation that her baby was still there, its heart still beating strong. As soon as Tessa gets her settled in her temporary home, Alice falls asleep and Tessa is free to return home.

Except she doesn’t. She goes to Alice’s apartment instead. The sun is just starting to come up over

all over, a lone noodle stuck to the window, the dust of the broken plate on the floor. “It’s what you get for letting a blind guy play busser.”
the horizon but she wants to clean the place up the best she can, box up anything that obviously
belonged to the boyfriend too.

She hasn’t even reached the top of the stairs yet when she sees Scott slumped next to Alice’s front
door, a bat stuck between his crossed arms. Closer inspection proves that he’s asleep, or was,
anyway. “You know,” he yawns, “I didn’t think it was in your job description to come back once
you’ve gotten someone out.”

She pauses. “How did you know who I am?”

“Your perfume.” His brow wrinkles before he opens his eyes. She’s not sure if it’s the way the
light is hitting him but his eyes are the most brilliant shade of brown, like a glass of whiskey.

Her snakes start moving excitedly, the brim of the straw hat waving in front of her sunglassed eyes.
“Why are you out here?” she asks once she’s standing in front of his feet.

“Didn’t want anyone to steal anything.” He uses the bat to help him get up. His knuckles don’t
look like they were cleaned properly. The offer to fix him up is on the tip of her tongue. “Now that
you’re here, I’ll go get some proper sleep.” He gives her a salute and she swallows anything she
was going to say as she watches him walk into his apartment.

—

Her snakes won’t shut up about him.

It’s been a week since she helped Alice, since she met Scott, and at every waking moment, one of
them is talking about him.

So helpful, whispers Lilah as Tessa puts a pot of coffee on Monday morning. His eyes were so
beautiful, Milo says while Tessa applies lipstick on Tuesday before going to her sister’s for dinner.
Very caring, adds Thea on Wednesday when she slips into the bath. I thought he was funny, Kara
says on Thursday while she watches a TV show that doesn’t make her laugh. Friday comes and
Zora doesn’t beat around the bush. See him again. He’s perfect.

She rolls her eyes. “Just because he can’t see doesn’t mean he’s perfect for me.” In fact, that makes
him feel all the more dangerous. Things didn’t go so well the last time she was left with only her
fists to defend herself.

You deserve more than just us, Zora counters, slinking down to look at Tessa head on. See him
again. We’ll protect you if something bad happens.

Nothing bad will happen, Milo says, full of confidence, nuzzling at Tessa’s cheek. He felt different.

Tessa tries to roll her eyes but then Kara is wrapping herself around Zora, smiling. We know you
felt it too.

“You guys are insufferable,” Tessa huffs. She pushes them back, her hands smoothing her snakes
down and around her shoulders where they mercifully stay.

There’s no more time for arguing anyway. Her phone rings, and it’s a little boy.

—

She ends up at Leto’s more often than she’d like, bringing kids to stay in his facility while the legal
side of things are squared away.
Leto’s steps are usually shaded by large trees but with fall swooping in, most leaves are already on the ground in a variety of colors. She asked her little companion if he knew the colors yet, unexplainably proud when he nodded and pointed to the red, yellow, and brown leaves. Kara has left her place in the bun they’ve constructed on top of her head to play with their friend who hasn’t managed to tell them his name.

Usually they’re more careful, her and her snakes, but this little boy needs them more than she cares about being stared at or found out.

Kara is playing what Tessa thinks is some variation of hide and seek and the boy laughs, tucked under Tessa’s arm as they wait for Leto to get back from helping another set of kids. “You’re nice,” he says. She’s not sure who he’s talking to, so she and Kara preen at the same time.

There’s some yelling coming from across the street, the boy instantly curling into Tessa closer and Tessa’s eyes instantly going to the commotion. Someone is running from the tiny store on the corner, Mr. Kim calling after the shoplifter. “It’s okay,” Tessa murmurs. She runs her hand up and down the little boy’s arm. Kara settles around the boy’s ear. “No one is going to hurt you while I’m here.”

Behind her sunglasses, her eyes still track the shoplifter who looks almost like he’s gloating as he keeps looking over his shoulder with a grin.

He doesn’t notice, and neither does she, the man he’s about to run directly into.

With a start, she realizes it’s Scott.

Scott, who must sense the man and puts his hands out to slow the other man down, his cane hanging from his wrist. Scott, who doesn’t fight back when the man pushes him away to run, this time more earnestly than before. Scott, who, upon reaching the corner store, stops to talk with Mr. Kim. Scott, who pulls out his wallet and tries, valiantly, to give the other man some money.

Tessa looks away before seeing if Mr. Kim gives in and takes it.

Zora is already down at her ear. I told you he was good.

She turns a glare to her snake but says nothing.

—

After that, she seems to see him everywhere.

She was taking the train to visit her mother in London and there he was, in the second carriage she walked through, his face pressed up against the window and headphones in his ears. (She went another carriage down even though her snakes begged her to stay.) At the library, she saw him, carrying a big stack of books and walking with her favorite librarian. The time she ventures out in the middle of the day, determined to treat herself to a pastry from her favorite place after a particularly draining client, she sees him getting on the bus right in front of the building.

When she sees him at the grocery store, at the end of the cereal aisle with a little girl by his side, she nearly loses it. The only reason she doesn’t march up to him and demand to know if he’s stalking her is because of the company he’s keeping. She doesn’t want to scare the girl.

She does her best to keep her eyes on the rows of cereals in front of her but she’s helpless to control her snakes who all do their best to get a good look at him from underneath her hat while still barely moving.
She fails to remain completely off his radar when the girl beside him announces, very loud and very catty, “Uncle Scott, that woman keeps looking at you.”

Tessa’s sure she’s as red as the box of Lucky Charms she’s standing in front of. “Well I am very pretty,” Scott quips.

The little girl, his niece, laughs but her smile gives way to something more broody when she looks back at Tessa. “It’s rude to stare.”

Tessa clears her throat as Scott starts to explain that it’s rude to call out an adult. “I was being rude,” Tessa admits. “I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable.”

She watches as a grin starts to grow in the corner of Scott’s mouth. “Tessa?”

The fact that he remembers her name surprises her. It also further cements the belief that he is stalking her.

“You remember me?”

“I never forget a face.” Another joke, she thinks, based on how proud he looks of himself, and while a shadow of a laugh escapes her lips despite herself, she’s still very much cautious of this stranger whose name she knows.

Her understated reaction causes his face to dim a little, his expression falling more when his niece chimes in. “Uncle Scott, I told you, those jokes aren’t funny.”

“They are hilarious.”

Her hands tighten around the handles of her basket. “I keep seeing you around,” Tessa says carefully.

“Really?” He leans down on his shopping cart, chin in hand. “I haven’t seen you at all.” His niece groans loudly which gets Scott laughing and ruffling her hair. “Okay, okay, that was the last one.” He lifts his head back in Tessa’s direction and casually asks, “So, are you stalking me?”

Tessa sputters, a scoff and some sort of huff coming out at the same time. “I thought you were stalking me!”

Scott laughs, head tipping back and his whole face scrunching up, eyes nearly closed. “Can a blind person be a stalker?”

Perhaps Tessa hasn’t properly thought out this theory but she’s saved by Scott’s shopping partner. “You always say blind people can do whatever people who see can.”

“You’re right,” Scott concedes. “I could be a stalker if I wanted. Doesn’t sound like I’m a very good one though.”

Her snakes are snickering and her face feels hot. “I’m sorry,” she apologizes but Scott just waves her off.

“We must’ve crossed paths before, but you’ve only noticed now since we’ve met.” Tessa hadn’t considered that at all, despite being a logical answer. He offers her a smile and a small shrug. “With your work, it doesn’t surprise me that you’d be extra vigilant.”

“Eh! Are you making the cereal?” Their heads move to the end of the aisle and there stands a man
who looks an awful lot like Scott. “We’re going to miss the game!”

Scott rolls his eyes and leans down to his niece. “Your dad is being rude.” The little girl nods. “Thanks for saying hi, finally,” he says to Tessa as he turns the cart around. “And, if you’re going to keep stalking me, at least buy me a coffee or something.”

Tessa does laugh then, an awkward, embarrassing laugh that feels too loud to her own ears. “Goodbye, Scott.”

“Bye, Tessa.”

—

*He was so funny,* Milo says. *And you laughed so weird!*

*When are you going to admit you like him?* Zora asks.

*She should get to know him first,* Kara interjects and Lilah adds: *She doesn’t know much of anything about him yet.*

*But he is someone she should try to get to know,* Thea says to the agreement of everyone else.

After a particularly slow night, they convince her to go and apologize for calling him a stalker in front of his niece. Tessa admits that it was in poor taste to do so, even though he’d been very understanding. She doesn’t stop to consider that perhaps it’s creepy of her to go over to his home uninvited, but it’s not as if she can pretend she doesn’t know where he lives. Besides, it would be good to check on Alice too.

She waits until the sun has set and then heads towards Scott’s, taking her time and, as such, worrying the entire time. *Don’t you dare turn this car around,* Zora warns just as Tessa hesitates at a light. *He’ll be elated to see you,* Thea says, though she trips over herself afterwards, intertwining with Milo as she reflects on her gaff. *He would’ve found that funny,* Kara chirps. *Should we have brought a gift?* Lilah asks. Her snakes descend into the merits of their suggested gifts—ranging from flowers to beer to candy—until Tessa hits her hands on the steering wheel and demands, “Enough!”

She’s nervous enough without their incessant talking and she could do without the urge to stop at the store to buy every suggestion they have.

It’s not until she’s climbing the stairs of his apartment building that she considers that he may not even be home.

How daft that’ll make her look.

There’s no need to worry, it seems, because Alice is just leaving Scott’s apartment, looking healthy and happy. “Oh, hello,” Alice greets. “I hear you’ve taken to stalking Scott.”

Tessa groans which makes Alice laugh, her shirt bunching up around where her waist has started to thicken. “You’ll need new clothes soon,” Tessa says with a smile that Alice returns. “How have you been feeling? Has Apollo been taking good care of you?”

She nods. “You all have.” Alice reaches out and gives Tessa’s shoulder a squeeze. Zora slithers down to slide along the back of Alice’s hand, content when the woman caresses her. “I don’t want to think about where I’d be without you all.” She holds up the foil covered plate in her other hand. “I made plenty of dinner. If you don’t get any to eat at Scott’s, stop by, will you?”
“And how do you know I wasn’t here to check on you?”

Alice smirks as she goes back to her front door. Tessa’s never seen her look so at ease. “Because Scott mentioned that you ran into each other…” There’s no concealing the laugh that coats her next sentence. “And your friends won’t stop looking at his door.”

Tessa sighs, pulling down the brim of her sunhat over her snakes.

She waits until Alice is inside her apartment, waits for the slide and the click of the locks, before she raps her knuckles three times against Scott’s door, right below the number 14. A silent moment and then his voice booms through the wood. “Who is it?”

She clears her throat. “Tessa.” Kara whispers in her ear and she adds, after another soft sigh, “your stalker.”

Scott’s still laughing when he opens the door. Kara preens. I told you he’d find it funny. “So, did you bring me a coffee then?”

“It’s already nightfall,” she admonishes. “You can’t have coffee now. You’ll be up all night.”

He waves her in, stepping back to give her a generous amount of room. “You could’ve brought me decaf.”

Tessa wrinkles her nose. “Decaf isn’t coffee.” It’s really dark in his apartment, not a single light turned on. She hesitates in the doorway and he must sense it because he lets out a soft ah and turns toward the wall behind him.

“I forget other people need light.” He flips a switch, his living room illuminating, looking normal and inviting instead of weird and scary. “Are you hungry? Alice just dropped off some meatloaf she made. Smells amazing. I think there’s some mash and veggies too.”

He’s already off towards what Tessa assumes is his kitchen, not waiting for an answer and not remembering to close the door either. “I really just came to apologize again,” she calls out as she finally steps inside the apartment. She leans against the door once she closes it. You’re being weird, Thea comments.

Tessa stands up, carefully looking around the apartment. Overall, it is quite nice. The layout mirrors Alice’s and the walls are the same shade of white too. Scott has an accent wall though, a rich, navy blue behind his couch. There’s two pillows that don’t really compliment the dark grey fabric of the couch or each other—one is a hideous lime green with ruffles, the other a silky, pastel purple. A desk sits in front of the windows, looking out to the alley, paper stacked high and comb binding poking out of drawers, headphones draped over the back of the chair. What sticks out most is the curious looking typewriter right in the middle of the wood and Tessa steps forward, wanting a closer look.

“I hope you didn’t take time out of your day just for that.” Tessa jumps, feeling a bit like a child that’s been caught with her hand in the cookie jar even though Scott can’t see what she’s doing at all. “Are you trying to figure out what I’m doing?”

Tessa and her snakes cock their heads. “How do you know where I am?”

He smiles, his head lifting to look exactly in her direction. “Well, now I know because you spoke. But before, there’s a board that creaks right by my desk. You stepped on it.” She shifts her weight from foot to foot and is rewarded with a squeaky creak that she missed the first time around. He’s smiling a little wider when she looks back at him. “I transcribe books into Braille,” he says, chin
jutting in the direction of his desk. “I’m in the middle of the great literary classic *Green Eggs and Ham*.”

Two plates are placed on the small table between them, hers not quite in front of the chair to the left of his own. “Is it for fun?” she asks as he retreats back to the kitchen.

He reappears with two glasses of water and nudges one in the direction of her plate when he takes a seat in front of his own. “No, it’s what I do.” He waves to the space beside him. “Come, eat.”

By the end of the night, Tessa refuses to look at her snakes. One by one they all enter her line of sight, each one more smug than the last. The worst is Zora who stays following Tessa’s eyes until she has no choice but to look at her snake. *We told you*. “Yes, yes, so you did,” Tessa says, batting her snake back so she can wash her face.

She ignores just how giddy her reflection looks.

Scott is frustratingly wonderful. He works for the library, runs workshops and storytimes for the blind community at a few branches around town. When he’d discovered that there wasn’t enough funding for multiple Braille books, he’d taken it upon himself to make more. He goes home to Ilderton at least once a month to visit his parents and one of his brother’s families. He’s been checking in on Alice, worried that Don will come back.

He let her look at his knuckles which healed rougher than they should’ve and he took her light scolding with regretful eyes and a promise to let her tend to them the next time he had to help someone.

(“Do you put yourself in dangerous situations often?” Tessa asked around a stalk of asparagus.

He shrugged. “I’d rather lessen the damage someone else gets, even if it means taking some for myself.”)

He asked so much about herself too, seemed so genuinely curious to get to know her. While her snakes practically sighed with their own swooning, Tessa couldn’t stop herself from seizing up when the questions strayed from her job. It was amazing, the way he seemed to sense how uncomfortable she was then, how he took it in stride and worked instead on getting her to laugh. He could tell she was still being polite and his grin was captivating as he quipped, “Oh, I’ll get a belly laugh out of you someday.”

It’d been a holy pain keeping the snakes in line, all of them trying to creep closer and closer to Scott. He had tried to hug her when he walked her to the door and she very nearly let him before thinking better of it. What if he felt them?

Kara slips down and curls in the hollow of Tessa’s throat. *Why didn’t you share with him?* Her tongue comes out, tickling Tessa even though she knows Kara is trying to comfort. *He made you so happy. You haven’t smiled that much in so long.*

Tessa sighs, stroking her friend. “And just how am I supposed to tell him about you all?”

*Do you have to?* Milo asks, only to be hissed at by Thea. *Of course she does.*

*I think he’d understand,* Lilah adds. *Give him a chance to.*

*Zora curls around her ear. And if he doesn’t, we can just kill him.*

Tessa laughs and lifts Zora so that she sits atop her head. “No, no murder! He doesn’t deserve
Sliding down her forehead, Zora looks down over Tessa’s brow. Tessa could swear the snake is smiling, impish and proud all at once. *No, no he doesn’t.*

“It’s not just you,” Tessa murmurs. She sinks into the chair in the corner of her room. If anything, her snakes are responsible for only a shadow of her hesitancy. How is she to explain that when law and justice fail, she takes matters into her own hands? That, at times, she doesn’t even wait to go through the proper channels and instead acts as judge, jury, and executioner? And, what’s more, she feels fully right in her decision to eliminate her victims from earth. “I also murder people.” A murderer with no remorse, she thinks confidently, until she realizes that she made Scott an accomplice to Don’s demise.

Lilah comes up to the apple of her cheek. *You don’t murder people. You protect.*

_Really, it’s a form of art, what you do, Milo reasons. You’re an avenger,* comes Kara’s exuberant addition. _Perhaps you don’t have to tell him that part,* Thea decides after a moment.

Zora pricks Thea with her fangs. *Tell him everything. You’ll only drive yourself crazy knowing you’ve a secret if you end up happy with him.*

Once again, her snakes are annoyingly correct.

—

She invited herself over again.

Her mom’s voice keeps playing over in the back of her mind just how rude it is to keep dropping in on him but Tessa is equally appalled at the idea of calling Scott to *ask* if she can stop by, especially when he could very well throw her out at the end of this particular conversation.

This time she does come armed with coffee and a bag of day old scones she picked up from her favorite bakery as they closed up on her way over. Her snakes keep whispering words of encouragement which is more annoying than anything. She wishes they would just be silent; their constant assurances alight a nervousness inside her, make her fingers clutch the hot coffee tighter. When Scott asks who is there through the door again, she lets out a sigh of relief. He’s home.

“Tessa, again.” The lock slides quicker this time, she thinks. (Her snakes agree.) “I brought decaf.”

Scott is grinning. She starts to wonder if he ever doesn’t before remembering how serious, how upset he looked the first time they met. “You’re learning,” he quips. She puts the cup in his outstretched hand and he doesn’t speak again until he’s taken a healthy sip. “Black! Is this how you drink yours?”

He’s waving her in again, muttering something about the lights. “Black, with two sugars, but only if the mood strikes.”

“Strong enough to put hair on your chest.” Scott laughs at his own joke as she closes the door behind herself and fiddles with the light switch she saw him use last time she was here.

“Exactly why I drink it,” comes her deadpan response.

It’s silent for only a second before Scott bursts into laughter, this bout harder than the one before. It’s silly, Tessa thinks, how much it makes her smile. She feels almost proud, a ridiculous notion, but there’s no stamping it down. “Maybe that’s why I’m woefully lacking,” Scott says once he’s
calmed down. “Willing to share with me?” An awkward mix of a huff and a laugh comes out but Scott doesn’t comment on it, asking instead to what he owes the pleasure of her company.

She stands in the entry even as he makes himself comfortable on the couch. She should join him, or, at the very least, stop lurking. “You weren’t busy, were you?”

“Not at all. I was just going to catch up on some sports highlights.” He scoots himself over to make room for her. “Please, make yourself comfy. Did you want anything to drink?”

“No, no, I’m okay, thanks.” Tessa decides to sit as far away from him as possible on the couch, her hand still clutching the strap of her purse. “I brought some pastries,” she announces, voice pitched a little higher than normal. Scott’s eyebrows knit together but his lips stay in a fond stretch. She takes a deep breath, and then another.

It’s not until Scott gently takes her hand on her third breath that she realizes she hasn’t pulled out the scones.

“Are you trying to turn me down,” Scott asks, voice light. “Because, I gotta tell ya, coming over to do it in person actually hurts more than you doing it over the phone. Especially since you didn’t even bring a croissant.”

Her cheeks warm, her snakes having a laugh by her ears which only makes her blush harder. “I’m not turning you down.”

Scott’s smile turns into a shit eating grin. “So you do like me?” He gives her hand a squeeze.

She sighs. “I wouldn’t have rudely stopped by twice if I didn’t,” she admits. “But I have to tell you something… You might not like me too much afterwards either.”

“What, are you a murderer or something?” he jokes.

Tessa finds herself infinitely glad that he can’t see the way her face pinches and falls. She scratches at the back of her neck as she swallows hard. “You know what I do for work,” she says once he falls silent. “And sometimes… Sometimes traditional help doesn’t arrive in time. Sometimes they don’t help at all.” Tessa looks down at their joined hands, surprised that he hasn’t let go yet but savoring the sight all the same. “Sometimes, not very often, but sometimes, I do what I think is best.” She puts his hand in his lap and lets go before he can do it himself. “So, I guess the answer to your question is yes.” She swallows hard and audible in the silent apartment.

She expected to start hyperventilating. It’s not every day that she tells people what she does and she’s only ever shared this with people she trusts implicitly, with people she knows, deep in her bones, love her no matter what. Tessa has never had to tell someone in hopes that they’ll still want to be around her and it’s horrible to sit here with her breath held in her throat and simply wait .

Kara curls under Tessa’s chin while the rest of her snakes stare at Scott. She wonders, briefly, if they will strike him if he says something they don’t like. She hopes they don’t.

Scott takes a deep breath.

And then he reaches out for her hand, taking it in his on the very first try. “Okay.”

Tessa blinks. She can feel her snakes look at each other before looking back at Scott. “Okay? That’s all you have to say?”

He nods. “I’m sure you’ve seen some truly horrible things, Tessa. I can’t say I wouldn’t have done
the same thing in your shoes... Hell, I think if Alice hadn’t screamed for me to stop, I would’ve done the same with—” He nods again. “You killed him?”

“I did.”

A grimace overtakes his beautiful features. She tries to steel herself for the disgust. No, not disgust. Scott will probably be kinder. She thinks he’ll try to be gentle as he tells her he never wants to see her again. “Was I cleaning up guts? Because, I gotta say, happy to have helped but my stomach is churning a little.”

“Are you trying to make jokes right now?!”

Scott is quick to shake his head. “No! It’s a genuine question!”

Tessa reaches up and hooks a finger around Zora, pulling the snake down so she can see Tessa’s wide eyes. What is she supposed to make of all this?!

Zora just smiles.

“No, you did not clean up guts. I don’t...” she sighs. “I have to tell you something else.”

“There’s more,” he asks, somehow not sounding as surprised as he must be. “Should you be telling me this?”

His palm starts sweating against hers. “I like you, Scott. I hate that I do but—”

“Oh, come on, I’m not that bad.”

She pinches the back of his hand. “Will you just let me get this out?!” The bastard grins, full of all charm that she wishes she could ignore, and stays silent. “I like you, but I cannot in good conscience even be your friend without telling you all this.” He holds her hand a little tighter. “When I look at people, I turn them to stone. That’s how I kill people.”

“The statue I helped you guys hoist up?”

Tessa nods regretfully. “That was Don.”

A heavy sigh pulls from him, Scott sits pensively beside her. Surely, this will be it, Tessa thinks. “Glad to have helped,” he says finally.

“You’re very strange,” she blurts out before she can stop it.

Scott lets out a short laugh. “Says the woman who just told me she kills people by turning them into statues.” Her cheeks heat at his teasing but it’s a liberating feeling to know it is in jest and not in anger. “So you're kind of like Medusa.”

She bites her lip. “Yes.”

“Just without the snakes!”

Each of her snakes lift and preen and Tessa rubs at her brow as she sighs. “No, with the snakes.”

Scott sits up straighter. “With the snakes?” He somehow sounds more shocked by this than by anything else. No wonder she and her snakes are so intrigued by him. He’s like nothing they’ve ever encountered.
For once, that’s a good thing.

He lifts his hand from hers but pauses. “Can I… can I feel?”

All her snakes eagerly fill her eye line, heads bobbing rapidly. Incorrigible. “You may.”

They meet his hand half way, the lot of them swirling around his fingers, his wrist. Scott jumps a little but laughs out a quiet, “Hello there.” Kara is quick to leave the rest, eager to get a closer look at the man Tessa’s kept her from. She darts out to touch his face before Tessa tugs her back. She mouths for the snake to be polite. “Sorry I didn’t introduce myself before,” he says, addressing them.

_I told you he was a good one_, Zora says haughtily from where she sits perched on Scott’s thumb.

“Is it okay if one touches your face?” Tessa asks in an effort to ignore Zora.

“Yeah, of course.” He lifts his other hand. “Can I touch yours?” Scott sputters and quickly adds, “Just your hairline! Or, er, snakeline?” Tessa thinks she likes him flustered. It’s nice to know he isn’t all smooth and jokey at every turn. “I promise I won’t completely feel up your face. I don’t do that.”

She supposes there is no harm in that. Taking his hand that isn’t full of her snakes, Tessa brings it up to her forehead and wills herself not to tense when his fingertips brush against her skin. It’s not that it’s unwelcome, just jarring.

It’s been so long since she’s ever let someone new get this close.

His fingertips are calloused but gentle as he feels along her forehead, dips into where her snakes emerge from her skull and overlap on top of themselves and each other. “Wow,” he murmurs and Tessa finds she feels the word more than she hears it. “This is so cool!” Kara’s tongue darts out to touch the tip of Scott’s nose which only serves to make Scott start laughing again.

Tessa watches him play with all of her snakes, finds herself unwittingly moving closer as the snakes move to inspect more of this man who isn’t scared of them. She realizes that she can hug him when she leaves now. There’s no reason to keep herself away anymore. He knows about her snakes so it’s not as if there is anything left to surprise him. She swallows hard around the ache that starts to grow under her skin. “You’re taking this much better than I expected.”

Scott’s hand, warm and comforting, finds her knee. “Sorry, I guess I haven’t been as clear as you have.” He clears his throat and holds both of his hands up between them for her to take, not continuing until he’s holding on to her. “I really like you. I’m excited to get to know more about you and I’m really fucking glad that you’re letting me.”

There’s a tiny voice in the back of her head that’s telling her this isn’t normal; that he should be having a harder time accepting this, he should be upset, he should want her to leave.

The weightlessness in her heart drowns it out and Tessa holds his hands tighter.

—

“How did it happen?” he asks one night after dinner. Kara is currently wrapping herself around his hand that’d been lying on the back of the couch. Scott, as she’s come to learn over the past few weeks, is always willing to indulge her snakes but Tessa thinks he might have a soft spot for her social butterfly.
"How’d you go blind?" Tessa counters. Zora nudges at the back of her neck only for Tessa to bat her away. Sharing isn’t easy, especially not about this.

Scott drops his cheek to his arm and laughs a little when Kara slithers her way up to let her tongue tickle the tip of his nose. "I was born blind," comes his simple answer.

“That must’ve been hard.” She wonders if it would’ve been harder to become blind at some point rather than only knowing darkness.

She thinks Scott shrugs, the action a little messy from how he’s slouched. “It’s all I know.” He pauses and then: “After you left, the night you told me, I had to call my mom to see if having snakes for hair was just something that could happen.” Tessa finds herself giggling which makes Scott smile. “It’s true! I just thought maybe someone forgot to tell me. Or it was super rare that no one thought I needed to know.”

She laughs a little harder. “Did you not believe me?”

“I did,” he insists. “But I didn’t know if you were special and it went hand in hand with your power or if I was just dumb.” Tessa clicks her tongue, a soft chastising which makes his cheeks blush. “You know what I mean.”

Tessa puts her hands between her legs when the urge to touch him grows too strong. “So you’ve told your mother about me?”

He shakes his head before amending it, tilting his head from side to side. “She knows about this woman I’ve met who has the most amazing voice and makes me work for her laughs, yes,” he answers with a smile that borders on dopey. She can feel her own lips stretching into something just as cheesy. “But no, I didn’t tell her about your little buddies. I figure that’s not my place.”

Tessa breathes in deep, holds on to it until her chest feels like it’ll burst from lack of oxygen instead of the way her heart thumps harder at how considerate he is. “Have you told your mother about me?”

She has not. Frankly, she’s still waiting for the other shoe to drop, for something terrible to happen. “Would you hold it against me if I told you no?”

“Not at all,” he says quickly. His free hand comes to rest in the sliver of space between them, his palm up for her to grab when she feels comfortable. She only lets a second pass before she takes it. “So you weren’t born with snakes?”

She shakes her head as she looks down at their intertwined fingers. “No. I didn’t get them until I was twenty.”

She wills herself for more questions, practices the way she will politely, firmly tell him she’s not ready to share. Her snakes will give her shit (maybe not Kara or Lilah, but Zora definitely will) but this is where she digs her heels in. Not even Jordan knows this part of her completely.

Scott, however, continues his quest in being the most surprising person Tessa has ever met. He simply says, “Cool,” and asks if she’d like to stay for dinner.

—

Watching Scott move is perhaps one of the most fascinating things Tessa has ever seen.

(Sheworries, briefly, if that could be considered rude. Saying that she enjoys watching a blind man move about sounds like it could be taken quite negatively.)
In his kitchen, he moves with more grace than she will ever have in the same room at her own house. He chops vegetables and potatoes, seasons steak and chicken, carefully fries eggs and French toast, bakes bread to perfection. Where Tessa is prone to put a burner too high, Scott manages to get the setting just right. Where Tessa will bake things that end up raw in the middle, Scott’s bakes are perfect the whole way through. Where Tessa will over salt or pepper something, Scott finds the proper balance. Tessa is proud to say, however, that she can poach eggs better than he can. That seems to be the only thing, though.

He laughs when she tells him all these things. “It’s easy, really!” Over the course of a week, he tries to teach her things but the only trick that seems to stick is putting a wooden spoon over the top of a pot so that it won’t boil over, something Scott learned from his mom and does always, even though he has little gadgets that beep at him when the water gets too high.

Watching him work at his desk is hypnotizing. The way his hands flit across the keys, the way he pauses and plays the audiobook on his phone, the way he pulls out a completed page and adds it to the stack before feeding in a new one. Scott, so often, seems loose and easy and malleable, a true go-with-the-flow personality that intrigues and irritates her. But when he’s working, he is methodical and rigid and careful.

(One afternoon, she goes to the main branch he works at and manages to see him give a little girl his most recent finished book. The little girl hugs him before dropping down, right in front of the help desk, to start reading. Tessa swells with pride when she sees the girl’s bright smile as her finger drags over the pages Scott took the time to type up. Scott goes back to what he was doing, as if he hasn’t just made that girl’s day, and Tessa can’t stop herself from going over to wrap him up in a hug.)

He convinces her, one night in the middle of winter, to go to the movies with him. Her snakes stay in her beanie until the lights dim and then he tugs it off for her and the entire gang go to rest on her shoulders, staring entranced at the screen. He puts on a pair of sunglasses too, so she doesn’t feel like the only one out of place.

Tessa looks over when the previews end, enjoys the way the light from the screen plays across Scott’s features. His strong jaw works as he chews on the top of the straw sticking out of his drink. She has to suppress the urge to trace down the slope of his nose, the ridge of his brow, the curve of his lips. His eyes are closed behind his sunglasses and Tessa follows his lead, letting herself experience the film without sight. She finds it doesn’t make much of a difference, finds that she enjoys the movie just as much as if she had kept her eyes open.

She imagines there are things she misses, perhaps longing looks sent between the two leads, or maybe secret smiles, but not seeing those things don’t feel like a loss.

Tessa lifts the arm rest between them, hesitating when Scott jumps a little at her hand on his. She waits until he relaxes before resting her head on his shoulder, her hand tight in his.

—

She kisses him first.

Rarely does he come over to her house, partly because she likes having a space untouched by anything other than her and partly because she worries he won’t feel comfortable. It takes some learning, of course, for him to get used to the layout of her place.

He knows it well enough now but still moves carefully. It’s why she gets nervous when she comes out of the bathroom and can’t hear him. He’s not in the living room where she left him, not in the
kitchen either. But then the back door opens and there he is, bundle of flowers snipped from her bushes in his hand, his walking stick already folded up and in his pocket. “Hey,” he says simply.

His head doesn’t find her exactly until she answers, “Hi.”

He clears his throat and holds the flowers up. “I know it’s kind of cheating since they’re from your own garden,” he starts as he rounds the couch. “I realized we’ve known each other for a few months now and I haven’t brought you anything.” She meets him in the middle, her snakes going to inspect the carnations he’s brought her while she wraps her arms around his waist. “I have no idea if they look nice but they felt and smelled nice.” It’s cheesy and endearing the way he quips, “like you,” so earnestly as he presses closer to her.

She’s kissing him before she really registers it. It’s been so long since she’s felt the urge to kiss someone, years, really, and she finds that there is no worry in the back of her mind. She’s not catastrophizing how this could all blow up, not thinking of what her snakes are doing (if they’re watching them or getting too close). All she does is feel: his hand slide between her shoulder blades, the other curling at the back of her neck, his lips chapped against her own, his tongue slipping between their parted lips.

He hums, deep in his chest when they part and she feels that too.

“These flowers must really be great,” he says, the joke landing flat with how breathless he is.

Tessa runs her nose along his. “Not as great as the man holding them.”

He cracks a grin. “So cheesy.”

“You’d know, wouldn’t you?”

She cuts off his laugh with another kiss.

—

She loves hearing about his days. His work amazes her, has her a little jealous too. How wonderful it seems to her, to be surrounded by books, to create them, too, with his hands. Even the workplace gossip is interesting (The Stolen Leftovers Saga was a vicious battle that went on for months, each update from Scott thrilling and shocking her as much as any television show she’s ever watched).

Rarely does Tessa offer any stories about her own work.

Scott seems to understand without ever asking for confirmation that it’s necessary for her to close herself off, to leave it all behind when she’s not on the clock. He checks in, every day, quiet and careful. No pushing, no probing, just a simple, “Decent day?” He asks at the dinner table, ankle hooked around hers. He asks at the door, when she can still feel the imprint of his lips against her own. He asks on the couch, his fingers tracing the lines of her palm.

Sometimes, she’ll have a good day, and her very first thought is how she can’t wait to tell Scott, eager to finally have a story to share with him. When a client gets on their feet and absolutely soars. When, at complete random, she runs into someone she’s saved and they hug her, thank her with a force she’s never prepared for. When she stops by Leto’s to check on the kids there and she’s given a stack of pictures, colored just for her.

Other days, she feels so heavy, unable to escape the weight of what she’s seen, and for a while, she tried to stay away. She didn’t want to burden him, still doesn’t.
He caught on after the third time and he came all the way over to her house just to hug her.

Now, when the bad days come, he’s there to hold her, to feed her, to do whatever she needs. It makes getting through the moment easier, knowing he’ll be there at the end of it.

He’s there to share the load, she realizes quietly, slowly. It takes root inside her, fills up all the nooks and crannies that she’d ignored for years because it’d been easier to pretend those parts didn’t exist. She loves him, she’s sure, even if she hasn’t said it, but more than that she trusts him, and that is incomparable to anything else. Trusting him is sweeter than any I love you.

“I hate cherries,” she murmurs into the dark of Scott’s bedroom on a night of no importance. Her snakes lie asleep in a pile on top of her head. There’s a slight worry they’ll stir, sense the nerves pulsing beneath her skin, clamor up one by one to check on her. Each breath she takes is slow and measured, Scott’s head rising and falling with every one. Tessa licks her lips and catalogs the feeling of Scott’s hair along her collarbone, the slack muscles of his shoulders beneath her hand, his leg, heavy, and wrapped around one of hers, his arm across her torso, just under her breasts, the well worn flannel sheets that adorn his mattress, the heavy comforter that shields them from the outside world. “The night I got my snakes…” The hand at her waist stills, and she can feel the way he debates removing it completely or holding her tighter. She covers it with her own and presses it so tight against her his fingers sink into the space between her ribs. “That’s what his breath smelled like.”

No one else knows that.


Tessa swallows hard and closes her eyes so the tears that gather there won’t fall.

Scott presses his lips over her heart. He doesn’t hold back the way she does, the dip of her neck filling with tears for her. “I’m sorry.” He sounds wrecked, like she’s torn him up inside.

She threads her fingers through the hair at the sides of his head, brings his lips to her own. “It’s better now,” she sighs. “I have you.”

He asks to kiss her again and her smile is small as she fits her lips to his. His touch is reverent, his mouth at once gentle and firm, feeling every bit like a thousand thank yous. She rolls him to his back, her thighs fitted around his hips, and she brings one of his hands up to rest over her thundering heart.

She hopes he feels the thousands of I love yous that she feels with every beat.

—

Scott shifts his weight from foot to foot, his hand a little clammy in hers. “I can’t believe you wouldn’t let us stop for flowers,” he murmurs. He tugs at his shirt that she’s had to reassure him multiple times is a wonderful shirt to meet her mother in.

“You don’t need anything but yourself to impress her.”

He clears his throat for what seems like the tenth time in two minutes. “And you told her I’m blind, right? I don’t want her to think I’m rude.”

Tessa rolls her eyes, so fond of this man next to her. “Believe it or not, my mother is quite concerned about my ability to kill people. It came up rather fast that I cannot turn you to stone.”
He rocks back on his heels now. “You do get me pretty hard though,” he says with a wink in her direction.

“God, you must’ve been sitting on that one for a while now,” Tessa laughs.

“It took everything I had not to say it the first time we had sex.”

Kate clears her throat on the other side of the weatherproof screen door. “Good to meet you, Scott.”

She’s never seen Scott turn so red and Tessa laughs even harder.

(Her mom loves him, even without the flowers.)

—

She used to live a quiet life.

She liked her life, there wasn’t anything to complain about, not really.

Now her life is loud and bursting with the beat of another heart, one that carries her when she needs it, proudly watches when she can walk on her own. There’s a hand tucked in hers now, an apartment that feels like home. She has her family and she has Scott and she even has his family too.

It’s better than anything she could have ever imagined.

She stands on her back porch and a wind whips through but she doesn’t shiver, Scott pulling the blanket around their bodies tighter. “Trick or Treaters will be coming soon.” Her snakes are so excited to go free for the night, all of them moving like crazy today. Tessa’s pretty certain a few of them are tangled up in Scott’s hair right now too, if his laugh is anything to go by.

They move to the front steps, big bowl of candy between them that she steals from every so often. There’s chocolate and hard candies, even some sour gummies.

She doesn’t know how he did it, but there isn’t a single cherry flavored candy.
In exactly seven weeks, Samantha Jordan Carpenter will disappear from the world forever.

She will no longer wake up every morning in a sunny, small apartment in Toronto, will no longer get ready for the day with a cup of coffee, a slice of toast with strawberry jam, and, if she’s got some time to spare, a small omelette. She will no longer say goodbye to Adaline, her black cat, before she steps outside to catch a train to the Royal Ontario Museum’s archives, whereupon she will not scale the building’s imposing flight of steps and slip inside with familiar ease.

Sam will not greet her colleagues — Harry, Rosa and Lee — with a smile and a nod, will no longer settle into her desk and log into her email, giving her inbox one quick check before she tackles her first task for the day. She will never finish her most ambitious project: the digitization of Toronto’s newsreel archives, but she will rest assured that a qualified colleague of hers will be able to finish the job once she leaves. So far, they all have.

After work, she won’t walk down the streets of the city, gazing wistfully at buildings she’s passed her whole life, see memories on every street corner and down every alleyway. There will not be a pang in her heart as she passes the National Ballet, no fond smiles as she sees her favourite...
patisserie on the corner, the bar where she had her first cocktail. She won’t ever again eat extra-spicy Singapore noodles from the hole in the wall down the street, where Mr. Chen knows she’s a regular and always slips a free spring roll or two in the bag when she picks up her food.

In precisely seven weeks, on May 18, 2020 — which happens to be the day after her birthday, no less — Samantha Jordan Carpenter will cease to exist.

Two weeks later (if everything goes to plan) Lucy Kate Fowler will start her first day of work at the city archives in Victoria, British Columbia, following a cross-country flight with two suitcases, one black cat and a purse containing yet another passport and driver's license that don’t bear her name.

* * *

She walks up the steps toward her apartment building, pulling her peacoat just a little bit tighter around her small frame. It’s just turned March but spring feels like it’s ages away from actually approaching, and Toronto is still freezing cold. She curses herself for not having worn a thicker scarf that morning as she lets out a huff and watches her breath puff out in the frigid air.

At least there hasn’t been recent snowfall, so she makes it down the sidewalk with relative ease, her flat ankle boots with reinforced soles proving the right choice in footwear for the occasion. Of course, there was a time where a woman wouldn’t have so much as dreamed of going outside in anything but a heel, but, she thinks with a small smile, some things have changed for the better over the years.

On her way up the staircase to her third-floor walkup, she greets Mrs. Alvarez with a smile and asks if her son is having a good first year at university. He is, which pleases her, and she continues up the stairs, mentally making notes of all the things she still needs to prepare before she can begin the process of sorting through and packing up all her things. She’s moved a good number of times in her life, and there’s a sense of familiarity to the process that washes over her, a routine. Still, saying goodbye to a piece of her life is always hard, and over the years, she’s not found the act of transitioning from place to place becoming any easier.

She unlocks the front door of her flat, all three locks clicking in quick succession, and then steps inside, hanging up her coat on the hook by the door and slipping off her shoes. Adaline pokes her head around the corner and she crouches down to pet her between the ears, smiling as the cat moves closer and begins to purr softly.

She wonders how Adaline, who’s only ever known city life, will fare out in Victoria, but she’s fairly confident that as long as she brings her favourite toys and perch, the cat will manage just fine. Adaline will probably have an easier transition than she herself will. She shakes her head and makes her way to the living room, determined to banish any negative thoughts. There’s plenty of time for that — on the plane ride, to be exact — but for now, preparations are in order.

Her small bureau in the corner has a recessed drawer with a secret compartment, secured by two latches on either side. With a flick of the wrist, she opens up the lid, pulls a brown envelope out of her purse and stashes it in the small space, before shutting it again and rearranging everything just so.

Inside the drawer, there is now a passport, birth certificate and driver's license, all under a name that isn’t hers. She still has seven weeks to learn to react to it, to respond to the name like she’s had it all her life, to slip into the guise of a woman she’s created as much out of necessity as her own imagination.
If she were more sentimental, she’d say her new self is made of stardust, of the stuff of dreams, that she’s a life not yet lived and ready to be discovered.

But, she thinks ruefully as she closes the lid of the bureau and it snaps shut with a click, life doesn’t often resemble a fairytale. And new beginnings tend to get old after a while.

She’s startled out of her thoughts by the sound of her phone ringing, and she quickly glances at the screen and smiles before picking up.

“Hello,” she says, cradling the phone in the crook of her shoulder as she heads back to the kitchen to make Adaline her dinner.

“Sam! I’m so glad I’ve finally caught you,” the voice on the other end replies. “François asked me to move in with him.”

She lights up at the sound of her friend’s voice; she hasn’t heard from her in a long time. Abby lives in Montreal now, which is where she herself lived before she moved to Toronto a decade ago. She was sad to see her friend go, but glad she could at least provide her with a list of recommendations for things to do and places to eat. She hears from Abby every few weeks now, and it’s nice to know she’s doing well.

Her friend’s boyfriend, whom she met mere weeks after moving, is turning out to be serious, and she’s happy for Abby, who so far didn’t have the most luck when it came to men. François is a kind man, from what she hears, and gentle and generous, and all one could wish for in a partner. Abby is blissfully happy, and she’s happy for her, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t a twinge in her stomach when she thinks about the fact that she’ll likely never find a love like that herself again. Some things just aren’t meant to be.

For now, at least, it’s just her and Adaline (and then, when Adaline’s days inevitably become numbered, she’ll sadly be replaced by a little sister or brother) and it’s better that way, for everyone. She gives her cat one last scratch behind the ears and sets her phone down on the counter, before starting on her own dinner.

That night, as she gets ready for bed — applying a tried-and-true set of serums and lotions and potions to keep her skin looking pristine — she feels another wave of nostalgia wash over her. She chides herself for it; it’s foolish to live in the past, after all.

But a little trip down memory lane can’t hurt sometimes, she thinks, as she stops by her bookcase on her way to bed. She pulls out a weathered copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, her favourite as a girl, and smiles as she fingers the gold leaf of the title, which has begun to fade over the years. She sits down on her bed and opens up the cover, stopping to run her finger along the inscription on the inside.

*To my darling Tessa...*

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Tessa Jane McCormick Virtue was born at 11:54 a.m. on May 17, 1909, at Victoria Hospital in London, Ontario, the second daughter and fourth child to James and Kate Virtue, a well-esteemed barrister and his wife.

The family had moved to the city before the birth of their first daughter, and were well-known around London. James was a partner in the city’s most prominent law offices, and Kate was renowned for her grace and considerable skill in arranging social functions of all kinds. Their sons,
Kevin and Casey, had taken after their father and trained as lawyers as well, before moving out west in hopes of building a life for themselves.

Both Jordan, their eldest daughter, and Tessa, looked up to their mother and sought to emulate her in every way possible. Kate was gentle, and kind, but sharp-witted when called for. She managed life with a grace others could only aspire to. Tessa’s was a happy childhood, a sheltered one, lived in the comforts of her family, and her future looked bright.

On August 23, 1929, just as Tessa Virtue and her mother stopped to admire the expanse where three years hence construction would be finished on Blackfriars Bridge, a young railway engineer displayed uncommon gallantry, catching her hat that had blown off in the breeze. Ninety-two days after that, Tessa married Theodore Henry MacMillan, at St. Peter’s Cathedral in London.

They were blissfully happy, young and in love. As a railway engineer, Theodore got them tickets to ride the trains coast-to-coast, and he fostered Tessa’s love for travel. When they settled back down in Ontario, close to her parents, they tried to start a family. After years of hoping, the doctors confirmed what she feared to hear: there would never be a child. Still, Tessa and Theodore were as happy as they could be, and soon took in a black cat named Primrose, who loved basking in the sunshine of their sitting room’s vast bay windows.

Three years later, on November 17th, 1936, seven workers and three engineers lost their lives when a section of overpass scaffolding fell through a safety net during construction of a local bridge. Among the deceased was Tessa’s husband.

Ten months after her husband’s death, Tessa was driving north to her parents’ beach cottage on Lake Huron when something highly unusual occurred, something almost magical… snow fell in Ontario, in the middle of autumn.

Tessa lost control of her vehicle, causing it to slip across the road and topple over the shoulder, rolling into a nearby lake. The immersion in the frigid water caused Tessa’s body to go into an anoxic reflex, instantly stopping her breathing and slowing her heartbeat. Within two minutes, Tessa Virtue’s core temperature had dropped to 30.5 degrees… her heart stopped beating. At 8:55, a bolt of lightning struck the vehicle, discharging half a billion volts of electricity and producing 60,000 amperes of current. Its effect was threefold.

First, the charge defibrillated Tessa Virtue’s heart. Second, she was jolted out of her anoxic state, causing her to draw her first breath in two minutes. Third, based on Bezic-Seibert’s principle of electron compression in deoxyribonucleic acid, which will be discovered in the year 2035, Tessa Virtue will henceforth be immune to the ravages of time.

She will never age another day.

* * *

The Royal Ontario Museum is even more impressive at night than during the daytime, Tessa thinks wistfully as she stands in a corner of the main gallery, half-hidden by the shadows being cast by the chandeliers that illuminate the space. She’s clutching her glass of champagne like a vice, twirling the stem between her fingers clockwise and then back again.

She glances from the high, arched ceilings of the main hall over to the staircases and balconies that line it, down to the centre and the massive dinosaur skeleton that stands there, regal and unmoving. It’s a futalognkosaurus (at least that’s what she’s been told) and she’s been in awe of its sheer size and scale ever since it was installed. It would dwarf any other room in the whole building, she thinks, but here, it’s a speck in a vast space, now crowded by donors and patrons and museum
workers dressed to the nines.

There’s a fundraiser at the ROM tonight, one she’s required to attend — she checked with her boss to be one hundred percent sure that she has to be here — so the lobby and entrance hall are packed with men in tuxedos and women in gowns and waiters in starched jackets, all mingling and chatting without a care in the world. (Well, money aside, they don’t care about anything. It’s always about the money at these things.)

It’s about seeing and being seen, about wooing the donors and enticing them for their support and convincing them the ROM is doing valuable things with their money… and Tessa hates it so much she wishes she could just hide away all night.

It’s not like she doesn’t know these kinds of events are necessary for the museum, helpful for her colleagues who get to show off their research, even fun for some, it’s just that she thinks her work should speak for itself and her face doesn’t need to be attached to it.

She prefers to tell stories through the lives of others, let their experiences paint a picture that she helps bring to light. She herself doesn’t need to have a part in any it.

And then, there’s the photographers.

They’re equipped with long lenses and bright flashes and constantly going up to groups and forcing them to pose and smile, all to capture the dazzling dresses and decor. She thinks she might hate them most of all.

Tessa doesn’t like to get her picture taken. Refuses to get it taken, more like. She keeps a watchful eye on the photographers at all times, ready to duck behind a pillar or slip inside an alcove. It’s one of the things she’s learned to account for over the years, the possibility of her face ringing a bell to someone — someone who might start connecting dots. It’s something she simply cannot afford.

She takes one last sip of champagne before depositing the flute on a tray in the hands of an ever-helpful waiter, whom she flashes a small smile. “Thank you,” she says, and the waiter nods, disappearing down a hallway with a load of glasses.

Suddenly realizing she’s lost the one thing she was holding onto, that made her seem like her standing in a corner could be purposeful. Now, as she’s twisting the ring on her middle finger for a lack of anything better to do, she knows she will probably be approached soon.

It seems as though a woman can never be allowed to stand alone in a corner at events like this, regardless of the decade, lest someone — usually a man — assume her in dire need of company. She sighs, casting her gaze across the space again.

She’s mastered the art of scoping out a room without making eye contact with anyone, but today, it seems her luck has run out. Tessa’s eyes meet a pair across the room, soft and hazel, flecked with gold, and she stills.

They belong to a young man who looks to be somewhere approaching thirty, with tousled dark hair and a strong jawline. They’re kind eyes, this she sees even from afar, twinkling in the low light of the room.

He cracks a smile and she blushes, averting her gaze.

She chides herself for acting like a schoolgirl — those days are much too far in the past — and pointedly turns so she can walk behind the column, out of the stranger’s line of sight.
Tessa manages to avoid him for the rest of the evening, dipping in and out of polite conversation with colleagues, even charming a donor or two so she won’t disappoint her boss when he asks about her successes.

As the metaphorical clock inches toward midnight, she decides she’s stayed long enough to maintain social acceptability, and begins to search for an exit. After retrieving her trench from the coat check, she smooths down the velvet of her bottle-green dress and heads to the elevators.

Just as the lift doors are about to close, a hand pushes through and forces them back open again. With a start, Tessa realizes it’s the man from earlier, the kind-eyed one with whom she shared a gaze.

He looks like he’s out of breath; his face is ever-so-slightly flushed and there’s a bashful blush colouring his cheeks. He bounds into the elevator and settles himself next to her.

“That’ll teach me not to put my hand where it doesn't belong,” he says, grinning.

She smirks. “Something tells me it won’t.”

He shrugs, letting out a half-laugh.

“Floor?” she asks politely, gesturing to the display, already lit up for the lobby.

“Oh, same as you,” he says.

It’s quiet for a few seconds as he catches his breath and she idly wonders when elevator music went out of style, but then he turns to her and cocks an eyebrow. “You know, that was a risky move.”

“What was?”

He grins, easy as you please. “Not introducing yourself before you leave.”

She’s confused; they’ve never met.

Tessa turns her head and shrugs. “I guess I’m a daredevil.”

The stranger laughs, a full-bellied thing that makes her feel oddly warm, and then holds out his hand for her to shake. “I’m Scott.”

Tessa takes it after reluctantly extracting her own hand from the deep pockets of her coat. “Sam.”

“So, Sam, where are you off to?” asks the stranger — no, Scott — as the elevator descends.

Her reply is a quip. “Someplace with better food… my apartment.” It’s not a lie; when she gets home, she’s planning on having some leftover tiramisu. He barks out a laugh. “And yourself?”

“Back to the party… I just wanted to spend a couple of floors with you.”

Tessa scoffs at his boldness. “Well, that was a risky move.”

“What?”

She’s amazed how easily they’ve fallen into an odd kind of banter. “Assuming I’d want to spend those floors with you.”
The elevator dings and she slips out the door, Scott tight on her heels. She’d admire his persistent nature if it weren’t so annoying and she weren’t about to leave.

The street is chilly and she tugs her coat tighter around her slim frame with one hand whilst hailing a cab with another. She turns to Scott. “Good night.”

“I’ll just wait with you,” he says, an easy smile playing around his lips.

She scoffs. “So you can find out where I live?”

He chuckles. “It does make it a lot easier to send flowers.”

Now it’s her turn to laugh, more at his cheek than the implication of his words. “Thank you, but I’ll manage,” she says, the sarcasm not lost on either of them. “Goodbye, Scott, it’s been an adventure meeting you.”

She opens the door of the taxi that’s since arrived, slipping easily into the backseat, ready to tell the driver where to go. She’s pulling the door shut when once again, a hand pushes through.

“There you go again, putting your hand in places it doesn't belong.” She shakes her head at his antics, tries to fight a smile at how persistent he’s being.

Scott looks nearly breathless with adrenaline. “How do we get in touch?” he asks, almost desperately.

Tessa shakes her head. Seven weeks; it’s all she’s got. “Goodnight, Scott,” she says, closing the taxi door. She looks out the window as the driver takes off, watching Scott’s figure get smaller and smaller until he blends into the bright lights of Toronto at night time.

* * *

Tessa Virtue has always received compliments for her looks, her physique, the smoothness of her skin. She has accepted them all with grace, a blush and an “Oh, this? It’s just an eye cream from Paris, and besides, you’re far too kind.”

Even though the signs of ageing would never become apparent, no matter how long she lived, it was possible, for a few years, to claim a balanced diet, exercise and sunscreen kept her youthful.

Action was required when, living a quiet suburban existence, Tessa was pulled over for a minor traffic infraction. Upon checking her papers, the officer took one look at her birth date, then glanced up at her face, then back at her license again. Despite not looking a day over twenty-eight, according to her paperwork, Tessa Virtue was, in fact, forty-five years old.

The police officer studied her with interest, and, after letting her go with a warning, she soon found federal investigators knocking at her door. She politely let them inside her house, offered cups of tea and coffee, and answered a series of increasingly more personal and invasive questions with a smile and a nod. When one of the investigators left his card on her kitchen table, along with the notice that they would be calling on her again soon, Tessa knew that something had to be done.

Soon thereafter, she packed up all her things in the dead of night and moved back to London to take a clerical job at Western University’s School of Medicine. There, she availed herself of every opportunity to research her condition. After a year of intense study, Tessa Virtue was forced to confront the fact that there was absolutely no scientific explanation for what was happening — or in her case, not happening — to her body.
To ensure her own freedom and safety, Tessa vowed to keep moving, changing her name, residence and appearance every decade, and never to speak a word of her fate to another living soul.

In seven weeks, when Samantha Jordan Carpenter disappears forever, and Lucy Kate Fowler takes up residence in a small townhouse in Victoria, British Columbia, Tessa Jane McCormick Virtue, beside one moment of weakness, will have kept her vow for the past 60 years.

* * *

Her office is really more of a desk in the corner of one of the large, sprawling rooms of the ROM’s basement archives. It’s small and tucked away, littered with books and documents and more than one mug of tea she should really take the time to wash out in the staff kitchen.

But it’s seven weeks until moving day and there’s so much to be done, and today she just can’t be bothered. She shoves a pencil behind her ear and sighs as she realizes she’s missing a certain piece of paperwork — again.

It’s a recurring issue, she knows, but it doesn’t bother her any less the more it happens. Somewhere in the chain of getting artifacts approved, there’s one person (She won’t name names, but well… Ryan, it’s Ryan. There, she’s said it.) who consistently bungles the paper trail. She takes a deep breath and prepares herself for the walk through the museum to retrieve it, because of course his office is in a completely different wing of the building.

Her heels click on the stone floor as she heads out of the office wing and toward the public galleries. The staff offices and curation spaces are in the museum’s lower and basement levels, neatly tucked away and just how Tessa likes it. It’s very unlike the event the week before, all out in the open and glitzy and public and everything she seeks to avoid.

The one good thing about that night had been the stranger at the elevator. He’d been kind, if not a bit forward, and he’d made her laugh and smile. It’s a shame, she thinks, that she’ll never be able to see her again.

To reach Ryan’s office, she has to pass the school group entrance and reception area, and a smile ghosts across her features as she looks at the assembled group of high schoolers, standing together, talking and trying not to look too bored.

She’s quite familiar with the type after years working at museums, and she chuckles as she sees one girl elbow another to get her to look up from her phone. Tessa is so caught up in observing the kids that she nearly collides with one of the adults who’s there to mind them.

She’s trying not to drop all her files and pens on the ground so it takes her a second to register whom she’s run into. It’s Scott, from the event and the elevator. Scott, who tried to get her number and send her flowers. Scott, whom she was trying her best to avoid for the next seven weeks.

His face brightens when he registers that it’s her. “Sam! I didn't expect to see you here.”

“Well, I do work here,” she says, for lack of a better opening. Immediately she regrets it, kicks herself for not coming up with anything more eloquent. Then, as she takes in their surroundings: “You’re a teacher?”

He looks taken aback by her question, his eyes flitting around the room as if he’s trying to explain why exactly he’s here in the first place.

“Oh no… well…” He glances over his shoulder at the thirty-odd high schoolers, half on their
phones, half looking at the both of them with interest. “I can see how you’d get that impression.”

She scoffs. “Well, yeah.”

“It’s my friend’s class, actually—” Scott gestures over at another man, who’s talking to a museum guide about tickets. “—Chid and I went to grad school together; he needed a second chaperone today, and since I owe him one, well…”

“You’re herding cats for the day,” Tessa fills in helpfully.

Scott laughs. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“Well, I should let you get back to that then…”

Scott starts nodding and Tessa thinks she’s safe to leave but then he seems to catch himself. “Do you believe in fate?” he asks, out of the blue.

“What?”

He seems to have gained a modicum of confidence because the grin from the elevator is back in full force and Tessa chides herself for finding it even a little bit attractive. “Fate? You know, the whole ‘universe is out to make stuff happen’ thing?”

She scoffs. “What if I told you I didn’t?”

“Well, then I’d have to tell you you’re wrong.” He smirks, and there’s a self-assured confidence about him that on any other guy would immediately label him a douche but on Scott, it just … works. Damn.

“And why would that be?” She can’t believe she’s playing his game now.

“Because we’ve run into each other twice now, in the span of a week, and I really think that’s a sign that we should see more of one another.”

Tessa raises an eyebrow, challenging. “Uh-huh?”

“Oh, absolutely. It’s like, a physical law of the universe or something. If you unexpectedly see a beautiful woman twice in one week… it’s fate. It’s in all the books, really.”

She hates the fact that she can feel a blush spreading across her cheeks, and the fact that Scott has a triumphant grin on his face, and that the teenagers are looking at them with increasing interest. She hates that this man is charming her more and more with every passing word.

“Oh shush,” she says, and suddenly she feels very old and he looks so very young and eager and she doesn’t want to break his still-whole heart.

He has eyes like a puppy and eyebrows that do frankly inexplicable things when he talks and she feels herself slipping with every second he stands there, away from the kids he’s meant to be minding, talking to her in this museum lobby that she’s found herself in.

“I have an idea,” he says, before she can turn him down further. “I’ll tell you a joke, and if you laugh, you have to go out with me — just once. And if you don’t laugh, I’ll know we’re incompatible and I’ll gladly give up.”

Again, with the cockiness, she thinks. But somehow, it’s sincere too, and she can’t help but find his eagerness endearing. She shakes her head and lets out a disbelieving chuckle.
“That must be one hell of a joke.”

“It’s the funniest in human history. But it’s subtle, sophisticated, so you probably won’t even get it.”

“Yeah, probably not.” She hopes she doesn’t, hopes she can school her features into something resembling a poker face, both for his sake and hers.

Scott claps his hands together. “Okay, here goes nothing. Did you hear about the guy who invented the knock-knock joke?”

Tessa shakes her head. Scott grins.

“He won the ‘no-bell’ prize.”

She can feel a smile creep up on her features as soon as he delivers the punchline, and it’s not fair, really, that this man with his boyish smile and hair that falls in a perfect curl over his forehead is the one telling this joke because she’s pretty sure she could laugh at his rendition of a toaster instruction manual.

When she can’t keep in a chuckle, he literally whoops.

(The kids, who are still only metres away, look on in confusion, while the man who’s most likely their teacher just shakes his head and rolls his eyes.)

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Scott announces in a faux-booming voice he’s thankfully made quiet to save her at least a smidgen of embarrassment, “the Lady hath been wooed.”

Tessa shakes her head, still smiling, and tries to hide her grin behind a folder.

“That’s the worst joke I’ve ever heard in my entire life.”

“Thank you,” Scott says, with an over-exaggerated bow in her direction. He tips an imaginary hat and grins.

She shakes her head and then says, deadpan: “It wasn't a compliment.”

Scott laughs, a deep, full-bodied thing that makes his eyes crinkle and his shoulders shake and she can’t help but smile at the sight.

He sobers quickly, and his grin is replaced by that sly smile that does funny things to her insides.

“Now, about that date…”

* * *

It’s a week later and she’s outside a nondescript apartment building. An unfamiliar set of butterflies has taken up residence in her stomach and she scolds herself for letting such childish emotions overtake her. Surely her considerable number of decades on earth should have prepared her for pre-date jitters. Evidently they haven’t.

She presses the buzzer for his apartment and waits for the door to click open. During the elevator ride, she grips the bottle of wine she brought so tight she fears it might shatter.

Tessa doesn’t really know why she said yes to this.

(Sure, there was the joke and the bet and Scott’s smile and his overeager personality and undeniable charm, but she likes to think herself as strong enough to resist a man and him respectful
enough not to pressure her into something she truly doesn’t want.)

It goes against just about every rule she’s set for herself since god-knows-when (Don’t get involved. Never tell the truth. Slide under the radar. Guard your heart.) and it’s unnerving that one man’s persistence and charm have managed to make her forget. But her traitorous heart had leapt at his sight and the temporary stutter had been just enough to let him slip through a crack in her carefully constructed façade.

And now, as the elevator dings and she steps out into the hallway, she reminds herself to not let this become more than a one-night thing, not to open up her safely guarded heart.

Scott greets her with an infectious smile and an unexpected kiss to the cheek and then he immediately dashes back to his kitchen because *Shit, the sauce!* and she’s already laughing as she takes off her coat and smooths down her skirt. Damn that man.

It turns out Scott is a better cook than his initial outburst suggests, and after some well-meaning offers for help that he all declines (he does let her uncork the wine and find glasses and plates in his haphazardly organized cupboards), they’re sat at his kitchen table, pasta between them.

“So, Sam,” he says, in between bites of fusilli, “how does someone as lovely as you end up working in the basement floors of a museum?”

She snorts around a sipful of wine. “Smooth.”

He laughs. “Always.”

“Well,” she says, beginning to tell the story of Samantha Carpenter, one she’s become so familiar with over the last ten years. “A history degree and library sciences postgrad will do that for you…”

It’s rehearsed, natural at this point, to list off this woman’s accomplishments and present them as her own. They *are* her own, really, but also not, and she finds herself wishing she could tell Scott the real story of how she ended up here, in this time and place that is so familiar and yet so foreign at the same time. She doesn’t know why but she feels like it’s important that he knows the truth about her. The real her.

Tessa Jane McCormick Virtue, in her full, hundred-year glory. Tessa Virtue, forever stuck at age twenty-nine. Tessa, who no one knows anymore.

Just Tessa, who loves Jane Austen and her cat and tweed skirts and going to the ballet and staying in on Friday nights. Perfectly ordinary, perfectly mortal.

But she can’t, and so, with a sad smile and another sip of liquid courage, she turns the conversation back to him. “And you? How’d you end up a cat herder for your friend? Must’ve been some bet that you lost.”

He takes the bait, as she knows he would, and pretty soon he’s wrapped up in a story and she’s giggling right alongside him and maybe, just maybe, this night — however untruthful and fleeting it may be — could be just a little bit perfect after all.

Later, when the first bottle of wine is gone and the chocolate mousse he produced from the fridge is too, Scott suavely moves them over to the sofa that faces a large set of windows.

She turns to Scott, whose lips are quirking up into a smile. His eyes are soft and she can’t help but smile shyly back. Damn, the things this man does to her.
Across the alleyway, Tessa can see into the neighbouring building. It’s a dance studio, she notices, and there are couples dancing the waltz in the soft lighting.

(Later that night, she mentions it.

“I like your view.”

“I do too.”

He’s not looking at the window at all.)

Now, Scott registers the smile that’s spread across her face, because he nudges her shoulder with his and holds out a hand. “Dance with me?”

She lets out a breathless chuckle, a half-hearted protest that there’s no music but that’s solved quickly with the help of his phone and a strategically placed Bluetooth speaker. Before she really knows what’s happening, she’s let him pull her to her feet. He slides an arm around her back, shifting them so she’s closer, into what she realizes is a real dance hold.

(She really should ask herself how he knows how to do this, but their current closeness has made her brain go conveniently foggy.)

He starts swaying side to side, in tune with the music, and she rests her head on his chest, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world. So she succumbs — lets all her worries fall to the wayside for a few precious moments, reducing her existence to the singularity of her and Scott, swaying in his apartment, a mirror of all the happy couples dancing just a building away.

She wonders if they can see them too, if they’re smiling at the two people recreating their lesson with a little less skill and a lot more closeness. She wonders what kind of picture they paint right now, how she could capture this memory, this fleeting moment, and keep it with her forever.

As the last notes of the song begin to ring out, Scott pulls back, just a little. She feels herself missing the contact immediately, yearning for his touch. Instead of separating from her, though, he cups one of her cheeks with a hand, the calloused pad of his thumb gently stroking over it.

He pushes a stray lock of hair behind her ear. She looks down at the ground, a flush creeping up her cheeks. Scott tips her chin up with his thumb, and their eyes meet. She thinks absentmindedly that she could get lost in them forever, deep brown with flecks of hazel, before his gaze flicks to her lips and back again and she has to gulp.

He’s even closer now, if that’s possible, his lips a hair’s breadth from hers, his breath hot on her skin, and she has to close her eyes, it’s all too much.

She knows, instinctively, that she’s going to let this happen, despite her better judgment telling her this is one huge mistake. But she’s moving in seven weeks and she’s never going to see him again — this she has promised herself — so one night can’t possibly hurt, right?

But still, there’s hesitation. Their lips are so, so close but she has to make sure. “Tell me something I can hold onto forever and never let go,” she whispers, feeling her breath mingling with his. She wants something tangible from this moment that can never last, even though she knows it’s as impossible as asking to age again.

Scott tips her chin up and looks at her with an intensity she will never be able to forget, before pressing his lips to hers for the briefest of seconds. Pulling back, face flushed, he rasps out, “Let go,” and it’s her undoing.
It's late that night, in those hours past midnight but before twilight starts to creep in unbidden. Tessa lies awake next to Scott, relishing in the quiet rhythm of his breathing, in the even rise and fall of his chest.

In a few hours, she’ll bid her farewell, slip out of his apartment with a final glance and a kiss and a whispered apology. She can’t stay and she knows it, but now, shrouded by comforting darkness, she can feel time slow down and turn into sticky molasses that doesn’t quite want to move.

She loves these hours; sometimes, every few weeks, she deliberately doesn’t sleep for a night just to be awake when almost no one else is. The hours and minutes don’t feel real during this part of the night and for once, it feels like maybe, just maybe, the rest of the world is experiencing time (or the lack of it) just like she does on a daily basis.

It’s reassuring, this blanket of darkness and stars, and, for the past few decades, light pollution and the hum of a city at night, a city that never quite stills but slows to a crawl every once in a while. She rolls on her side and takes the time to map Scott’s frame in the half-light, study the contours of his torso that’s hidden under the duvet, the mop of tousled hair that frames his face.

She wants to run her fingers down the ridge between his shoulder blades, along his cheekbones, past his eyebrows, through his hair. She wants to commit him to memory, every inch and plane and facet of him, to catalogue and tuck it away in the recesses of her heart.

She wants more than anything to hold onto him forever and never let go.

* * *

Scott shouldn’t be surprised when it’s not the first sunbeams filtering through the curtains he never closed that wakes him in the morning, or the smell of coffee from his kitchen, or the construction workers that start their jobs at a frankly ungodly hour.

It’s none of those things, though. Instead, it’s a gentle press of lips to his cheek, his shoulder, his pecs and then, just when he’s gotten used to the warm feeling of waking up with another person in his bed, the rush of cold air as the duvet shifts and her lithe form slips out from under the covers.

He cracks one eye open, then two, and watches as Sam gracefully pads around his bedroom, gathering clothes and redressing herself. He’d happily spend the minutes it takes her to slip back into her skirt and blouse appreciatively raking his eyes over her slim figure and supple curves but … well, there is the small issue of her getting dressed and trying to leave his apartment at seven on a Saturday morning.

“What’r’ya doin’?” he slurs out, voice still groggy from sleep. He seeks her shake her head and giggle as she finds her coat and starts doing up the buttons.

“I’m sorry, Scott,” she says, after taking in his dishevelled state. She steps over to the bed to press a kiss to his cheek, but he’s quicker, cupping the back of her head and slotting her lips to his. No way she’s leaving without him putting up a fight. When she pulls back — appropriately flushed and breathing heavily — she shakes her head. She looks sad, as if this is as hard for her as it is for him, but it’s not a comfort, not really. “I’m moving.”

He opens his mouth to protest, but she shuts him up with a quick peck before walking to the other side of the room.

“Last night was lovely,” she says, and she sounds far too proper for the woman he saw fall to pieces just hours before. “Thank you. I mean it.”
“Sam—” he tries, pushing himself up under the covers. He’s still stark naked, and following her wrapped in a duvet seems like it might not be the best idea. “Just, at least let me make you breakfast?”

She turns at the door to his bedroom and smiles wistfully. “Scott, thank you, really.”

Desperate times call for desperate measures, and sure enough, his duvet becomes an impromptu toga that he wraps around himself as he follows her down the hall. She opens the door, and steps out. “I’ll remember last night, Scott, always.”

“Sam, wait—”

His door shuts and the duvet slips and then Scott is standing butt-naked in his entryway on a Saturday morning at a quarter past seven, wondering what the hell just happened.

If he didn’t know better, he’d be quick to believe that Sam was some sort of apparition, a ghost sent to him for a week, a fleeting encounter that could never repeat itself. A moment frozen in time, singular and ephemeral. But Scott doesn’t believe in ghosts or apparitions or anything like that so right now, on this chilly morning in March, he just feels like a guy who got dumped pretty damn bad.

And it sucks.

It sucks because Sam had been perfect, really. (Well as close to perfect as you can get, if you’re still going to be human too.) And he’d seen a spark between them, something undeniable and true, from the very first time he laid eyes on her across that crowded room. He realizes it’s cliche as hell, but he can’t deny the connection he felt — and thought she felt too.

And now she’s gone, because she’s moving, and he can’t quite understand how any of this makes any sense at all.

* * *

Three days after she leaves Scott’s apartment at the crack of dawn, Tessa talks to Abby again, and hears her friend gush over her fiancé. She tries to be nothing but excited and supportive, she really does, but there’s a feeling in her gut that she can’t shake and it’s exacerbated every time she thinks about Scott.

She knows leaving like she did was the safe thing to do, the surefire way to guard her heart. But she thinks, decades spent alone and guarded haven’t made her happy either and she can’t keep shutting herself down like this.

Sometimes, she needs to take a chance.

She has no idea if she’ll find Scott at his apartment at this hour, on this day, but she’s determined as hell to try (and if she doesn’t, well, then maybe it is really a sign from above).

So Tessa takes a taxi back to his building and practises the perfect apology speech in her head what feels like a million times. She’s still fine-tuning when she gets out of the cab and approaches his lobby, so she’s surprised at the construction crew she finds there, blocking the call buttons.

“Hello?” she says tentatively to a man in a hard hat and a bright yellow vest.

“Can I help you?” the construction worker asks, and she shrugs.
“Uh, I’m here to see Scott Moir, apartment 14B … He’s not expecting me.”

The man nods and dials a number. “Well, let’s see what we can do about that. He’s the one with the plumbing issue.” He looks over at her. “And you are?”

Tessa feels herself flush. “Incredibly sorry.”

“Mr. Moir, you got a guest down here,” he says into the phone and then, to Tessa: “I bet you got a name.”

“Samantha Carpenter,” she replies. “Please, tell him I understand if he doesn’t want to see me. I’m here just to say I’m sorry, and that my… my life has been unbelievable, since longer than he can imagine, and I just… I wasn’t thinking the other day, and… Now that I realize how incredibly kind to me he’s been, and I… I… I’ve just been too stupid to accept it, and… I know better now, and… and that’s why I want to tell him how sincerely sorry I am.”

The construction worker looks appropriately overwhelmed. “Uh, okay.”

“And ask that… if he could come downstairs maybe, and… let me make it up to him by taking him out tonight? Please?”

The man shakes his head and smiles after Tessa’s done relaying his message, holding out the phone in the space between them. “You get all that?” he asks, more to Scott than anyone else.

A beat, and then a chuckle from the other end of the line. “Where are you taking me?”

Tessa is so relieved that she nearly cries. “Wherever you’d like to go.”

* * *

Somehow, Tessa telling herself to take a chance with Scott goes as far as letting him invite her to his parents’ house for a long weekend and his mother’s birthday, and she can’t stop herself before her traitorous heart makes her say yes and agree.

So now, they’re pulling into the driveway in Ilderton and Tessa can feel her heartbeat quicken. She’s realized belatedly that meeting the parents is quite the big step to take (in her defence, she hasn’t actually gotten to that part of a relationship in over three-quarters of a century) and her nerves are getting the best of her.

Scott seems to sense this, reaching over to squeeze her hand as they make their way toward the door. “They’ll love you, Sam, don’t worry.”

She squeezes back and even manages a faint smile.

On the drive over, Scott had told her all about his family; his parents and brothers and all the nieces and nephews who are strewn around the country. She had dutifully replied with Sam’s fake family tree, and Scott, apparently satisfied at her only child status, hadn’t questioned her further.

Once again, lying to him felt like a stab to the heart.

Scott rings the doorbell and impatiently pushes himself up on the balls of his feet until the door swings open and a kind-looking woman wraps him in an enormous bear hug. “Ma!” he says, returning the embrace just as enthusiastically. “How have you been?”

Tessa stays a cautious half-step behind Scott as he greets his mother, not wanting to intrude on the
moment. When they pull back, she’s a bit overwhelmed when Alma pulls her into just as
enthusiastic a hug as she’d bestowed upon Scott just moments earlier.

(As she feels Alma’s arms wrap around her, Tessa realizes that it’s been decades since she’s
experienced a motherly hug and that Alma is probably young enough to be her daughter. Neither of
those are things she lets herself dwell on.)

“It’s so nice to meet you dear,” Alma chirps, taking Tessa in. “Scottie has told us so much about
you.”

Scott blushes furiously at the implication and the nickname, and Tessa chuckles demurely. Mothers
can be like that sometimes, and it’s best to take it in stride. Lord knows Kate would have done the
same (or at least whatever would have counted as similarly embarrassing a century ago).

They make it halfway into the foyer when Scott’s father walks in from the kitchen, takes one look
at Tessa and turns white as a sheet. Tessa regards him quizzically, and it’s only when he looks her
straight in the eye and whispers “Tessa?” that her mind starts connecting the dots.

Joe. Scott had told her his dad’s name is Joe… and Joe Moir… oh no.

(In the mid-1970s, Tessa found herself in Hamilton, working at a pub. One of her regular customers
was Joe, who was always game for a chat and the occasional flirt that she found quite flattering but
didn’t reciprocate.

One night, it was Tessa’s turn to close, and, after Joe hung around and tried to ask her out for what
would end up being the last time, she politely but firmly shot him down and he convinced her to at
least buy him a round if their romantic future was really not to be.

Too much scotch later, Tessa had confessed two things.

One: Marie was a fake name and she was really called Tessa. (She at least had the good sense to
tell him a made-up reason for the name change, but Joe insisted on exclusively calling her Tessa
from then on out.)

Two: a sweet girl from the local store had been shyly making eyes at him from across the pub for
weeks and he should really take a chance on her.

Two days later, she moved to Newfoundland and never heard from Joe again.)

Tessa is scrambling as the memories come flooding back in a rush and she curses that man’s drunk
brain for remembering the one thing she wished she’d never let slip. She needs a way to backtrack,
and fast. “My mother’s name was Tessa,” she says, hoping she sounds even a little bit convincing.
“She passed a few years ago.”

“Joe?” Alma asks, and it’s only then that Tessa notices her and Scott looking at the two of them
with odd expressions on their faces.

“You look… remarkably similar.”

“You knew my mother?” she says, needing to keep up the ruse.

“Yes. A long time ago.”

Joe thankfully drops the subject of his former acquaintance fairly quickly once he realizes Tessa’s
“mother” told her nothing about him and the next few hours pass easily. Alma is just as lovely as
Tessa imagined her to be, and the four of them talk of the next night’s plans for Alma’s birthday.

Tessa and Scott end up making their excuses early, still tired from the drive, and she only manages a weak chuckle at the Maple Leafs bedding in his childhood bedroom before she’s fast asleep.

The next morning, she wakes up to an empty bed and a note on the pillow. Smiling, she opens it, expecting a dorky message from Scott, something to complement his texting habits. Surely enough, he’s told her he’s off on a run, but as she skims the rest of the note, her heart stops.

_I think I’m falling in love with you._

For all that Tessa told herself to give this a chance, give him a chance, love was never meant to be a part of it. She’s vowed to herself never to give her heart to another soul, nor to accept someone else’s in return. It would simply hurt too much.

And so, without further thinking it over, she runs.

She throws things together in her weekender bag, grabs the car keys Scott left on his old desk (she’ll drive the car back to his apartment and leave it there for him) and runs outside, not taking a second to look back.

She knows it’ll break his heart but it’s better to do it now, she thinks, than in five weeks when he asks her not to go.

Joe is in the garden as Tessa makes her way to the driveway and she does her very best to ignore him as she unlocks the car and dumps her bag inside. He looks at her, confused, until he registers something in her gaze and Tessa can see an understanding of some sort wash over his features before they abruptly harden. “Tessa,” he calls out, and she turns, on reflex. Damn it.

“I know it’s you,” he says. “I don’t know why, and I don’t care how, but I know, Tessa.”

She’s silent, lips drawn into a thin line as she opens the driver’s side door.

“You almost told me that night, didn’t you? You almost told me, even though you didn’t love me. I think the man you do love, whom you’re about to leave confused and brokenhearted, should know more.”

“I can’t,” Tessa chokes out. “I just can’t.” She turns the key in the ignition, and with one last look at the house, and at Joe, she hits the gas and goes.

Tessa drives and drives and doesn’t notice it’s started storming, or that tears are streaming down her face. All she can think of is Scott, and the fact that she most likely ripped both their hearts to pieces in a vain attempt to keep his whole.

She drives and she drives and she thinks back to every man whom she’s had to keep at arm’s length over the years — all the hearts she’s broken and bruised — and she realizes that it never did anyone any good. When it comes down to it, she’s left misery and heartache in her wake and not much else and it’s gutting to think of this pattern she can’t seem to escape.

But then there’s Scott. Scott, who might not have realized she’s gone yet, who might buy a white lie about an errand, who might just be kindhearted enough to forgive another lie — this one far deeper and more all-encompassing — and be able to see her for who she really is.

Scott, who gave her his heart and whom she let go.
She’s on a two-lane country road in the middle of nowhere, with the rain pouring down at full force, that Tessa makes a decision that will change her life forever. She takes a deep breath, puts the car in reverse and prepares to make a U-turn to head back to Ilderton.

To head back to Scott.

To take a chance and bare her soul and hope he sees her heart and doesn’t go.

* * *

It’s pouring rain by the time Scott gets home from his run and he’s so busy cursing himself for going out in the first place that he doesn’t notice his car is missing from the driveway or that his dad is waiting for him in the kitchen, a sombre look on his face.

“Sam left,” he says, without preamble.

Scott’s heart drops to his stomach. “What do you mean, left?”

“She took your car and drove off, just ten minutes ago.”

“What did you say to her?”

“Nothing, son, this was all her.”

Scott feels like the wind has been knocked clean out of his lungs. “I told her, this morning, in a note… I told her I might be falling in…”

“Do you love her?” Joe asks, and his tone is harsher than Scott remembers hearing in a long time.

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

Scott doesn’t falter. “Because nothing makes sense without her.”

“Then go.”

He catches the keys his dad throws him and sprints to the old car, sparing no thoughts beside Sam, Sam, Sam, the word thumping around in his head over and over and over again. Just this morning, he woke up and immediately knew he loved her. He was planning on telling her with some appropriately cheesy romantic gesture, but then it had slipped out at the last minute when he was writing the note.

It felt so natural then, so right, and now all he wishes for is to take it back and rewind time to just an hour ago.

Scott has made it half an hour out of Ilderton and his visibility is crap. He hopes to god that Sam is driving toward Toronto and that he’ll catch her in time, because he doesn’t quite know what else to do. Truthfully, he also doesn’t have a plan of what to do once he does find her, but that’s a problem for Scott in the future, and he determinedly ignores it in favour of setting the windshield wipers to a higher speed.

It’s as he’s rounding the bend that he notices it — the ambulance lights, sirens, passerby drenched by the rain, and his own Acura SUV, sticking out of a ditch at an angle, crushed on one side.

He yanks the emergency brake on his dad’s old car and leaps out, running toward the ambulance as
fast as he possibly can. He spots a mop of dark brown hair on a stretcher and he swears his heart stops beating in his chest.

Sam.

* * *

In the first stages of hypothermia, the body will try to generate heat through shivering. When this fails, it would decrease the flow of blood to the extremities. Metabolism slows to a crawl.

You're dying, but you don't know it. In the final stages, the victim only breathes once or twice a minute, entering a state of suspended animation. At 10:07 p.m., Tessa Virtue's core temperature had dropped to 30.5 degrees. Her heart stopped beating. At last, at the age of one hundred and eleven, Tessa Virtue was, by any definition, dead.

At precisely 10:09 p.m., paramedics placed two defibrillator paddles on Tessa Virtue's chest. They counted the prescribed 5 seconds before administering 750 volts of electricity.

The instant Tessa's heart was struck by the defibrillator paddles, the telomere structures in her genes regained their pliability, causing her to resume the natural course of ageing.

And then, she took a breath.

* * *

The next time Tessa opens her eyes, it’s far too loud and far too bright and smells kind of funny. It takes her a second to register she’s in a hospital, and then there’s a flurry of doctors and nurses and questions and all she can think about is that her head hurts and she has to apologize to Scott.

She didn’t just break his heart, now she’s also totalled his car.

The nurse carefully bandages a few scrapes on her arms while the doctor clears her and says she’s lucky not to have gotten a concussion. She thanks them both but it’s evident that she’s distracted and preoccupied and truthfully, she just wants to get out of here as fast as she can.

She’s about to ask for discharge papers when an orderly pokes his head in and announces there’s someone to see her, not a relative, but a young man by the name of Scott?

The doctor must sense he’s significant by the way Tessa’s eyes light up and she sits up straighter and he doesn’t even ask her before telling the orderly to let him in. Tessa shoots him a grateful glance.

Once the doctor has left, it’s a few minutes until he tentatively pokes his head in through the door. She smiles and motions for him to come closer.

“Hi,” he whispers. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“Hi,” she says, sheepishly. She’s about to launch into an apology — for the car, and the running and all of it — when he speaks again.

“I know why you ran away.”

“You do?”

“It’s because of what I wrote in that note this morning, isn't it? I told you I loved you. And you got scared and I shouldn’t have assumed and...”
Tessa’s eyes fill with tears and she wonders what on earth she ever did to deserve a man like this. She shakes her head as much as she can with the bandage on her forehead and lifts one arm to pull him close, capturing his lips with her own. She needs the physical reassurance that he’s here and he’s not letting go.

When she pulls away he looks stunned; his face is flushed and he opens his mouth to speak. She’s faster, because she knows she needs to do this now or she’ll never be brave enough.

“I love you,” she says, and it feels glorious, to have it out in the open.

It’s even better when he says, “I love you too.”

She’s smiling so wide her cheeks hurt and Scott looks like the sun and suddenly, she knows this is the man who will get to know everything about her and it’ll be perfect. “Scott, there’s something else.”

“What? What is it?”

“Well, first of all, my name isn't Sam...”
make your home in my arms

Chapter by gracesvirtue (orphan_account), Miss_Six

Chapter Summary

Sometimes, you can have your happy ending.

Chapter Notes

Okay, I cranked this out in about 16 hours so if there are typos, then there they are.

Many thanks to awakeanddreaming, only_because3, EastFromEden and PinkGerberDaisies for keeping me awake in the home stretch, and of course all the ladies of the guild for your endless support! And my collab partner gracesvirtue, who may not have collab-ed as hard as she wanted to but was still instrumental in getting the vague ideas I had into a form I could work with. <3

Rating: M for Mature
Additional Tags: Modern mythology AU
Word Count: 5k(ish)

i. selkie unzips her skin, finally determined

He’s halfway through his second beer when he sees her.

She’s on the outskirts of the group, wearing a dress that looks faded and old. It’s a sharp contrast to her beauty, vivid sea green eyes and dark hair tumbling over her shoulders. She looks maybe a couple of years younger than him, like she’s just growing into herself. Must be a local girl, he thinks to himself. There’s a handful of girls there from their sister school, wearing expensive clothes and flirting with the boys, but there’s something different about her.

Before he knows what he’s doing Scott grabs another beer from the cooler and walks over to where the girl is standing barefoot among the tall grass at the edge of the beach, by a rocky outcropping that juts into the surf. She startles when she notices him coming closer, and takes a half step back, so Scott slows his stride and stops a few feet away.

“Hi, I’m Scott,” he says. “’D’you want a beer?”

She studies him for a moment before taking a shy step forward and accepting the can from him, holding it in front of her and looking quizzically at the tab.

“Here.” Scott plunks his own beer in the sand at his feet and takes the can, opening it before handing it back to her. “What’s your name?”

“Tessa,” the girl says, so quiet he almost doesn’t hear her.
“That’s a pretty name,” Scott says, bending over to retrieve his drink. “Are you from around here?”

Tessa takes a sip of her beer, wrinkling her nose at the bitter taste. “I’m from close by,” she says, hesitation in her voice, which lilts with an unfamiliar accent. It doesn’t sound anything like the Scottish accent he’s become accustomed to hearing. It intrigues him, but so does the smattering of freckles across her pale skin.

“That’s cool,” he says, cursing himself internally for not thinking of something better to say. Tessa keeps looking at him with those impossibly green eyes and it’s interrupting the synapses firing in his brain. “I’m from Canada,” he adds, “I’m just here for school.”

“Oh,” Tessa says. “What’s school like?”

“It’s…it’s kind of awful, actually,” he says with a laugh, and he’s rewarded with a shy smile that reaches her eyes. “It’s a lot of reading and writing about things I couldn’t care less about.”

“Oh, but reading is wonderful!” Tessa exclaims, and Scott jumps a bit with how quickly she lights up. “You can learn all kinds of things about the world, and about people, and—” suddenly she stops talking, as though she’s said something she shouldn’t have, and looks nervously over her shoulder towards the sea. “It’s like getting to travel without going anywhere,” she says finally, and takes another sip of beer.

The sun is setting, and the sea wind is brisk. “Come on,” Scott says, grabbing her free hand. “Let’s go sit by the fire.”

She balks for a moment, but then follows him to sit in the ring of teenagers seated around the fire pit. A few of his fellow students look up, and one lets out a low whistle. “Hey, beautiful,” he says, and Scott shoots him a dirty look.

“Back off, Walker,” he says, and the boy rolls his eyes. “Don’t mind Bryce, he can’t keep it in his pants.”

“Can’t keep what in his pants?” Tessa asks innocently as they take a seat in the circle, and the guys roar with laughter.

“He can’t keep anything in his pants,” the boy sitting next to Bryce says, laughing. “Especially girls!”

Tessa still looks confused, but laughs with everyone when Bryce playfully shoves the other boy over into the sand. “Don’t be crude in front of the lady, Kevin,” Bryce says.

“All right, all right,” Scott says. “Don’t get yourselves all worked up on my account. Are you telling stories yet?”

“Kevin was just telling us some bullshit about his uncle’s old barn,” Bryce says, and it’s Kevin’s turn to shove him.

“I’m telling you, it’s haunted!” he says. “My brother and I spent the night in there once, and when we woke up all the stall doors were opened, and they were closed when we went to sleep!”

“Are you sure your snoring didn’t just shake them loose?” another boy asks from the other side of the circle, and Kevin turns bright red.

“Screw you guys,” he mutters, shaking his head and laughing. “It’s not like any of you losers have anything to share tonight.”
“Tom said he had something,” Bryce says, and they all turn to look at the dark haired boy who flushes a bit.

“It’s nothing, really,” he says quietly. “One of my friends in town was just telling me how his great great great uncle, something like that, married a selkie.”

“What’s a selkie?” Kevin asks, and Scott feels Tessa stiffen next to him.

He looks over. “Are you cold?” he asks, and Tessa blinks at him for a second before nodding. Before he can stop himself, he wraps an arm around her shoulders and pulls her close, then turns his attention back to the fireside chatter.

“Selkies are seal people,” Tom is explaining. “They can shed their seal skin and come on land, and Ian was telling me that his uncle stole a selkie woman’s pelt so she had to stay on land and marry him.”

“Hey, there you go, Bryce,” Kevin says. “Just steal a selkie woman’s seal pelt and then maybe you can finally keep a girlfriend.” He yelps when Bryce dumps a handful of sand in his hair.

“Will you two shut up,” Scott says, raising his voice a little so the two of them can hear him over the roar of the ocean and the crackling of the fire. “You might actually learn something.”

“You might actually LEARN something,” Bryce repeats in a mocking, high pitched voice, but stops when Kevin elbows him.

“Sorry, Tom,” he says. “Go ahead.”

“Anyway,” Tom continues, “He told me his uncle kept the pelt hidden, so she couldn’t change back into a seal. And they had kids, and the kids all had webbed fingers and toes. Then one day, when the kids were older, they found the pelt and took it to their mom to show her, and she put it on and went back into the sea.”

“She just left her kids?” the girl sitting next to Tom asks. “That’s awful!”

“But imagine being stolen away from all your family and friends and everything you knew!” Tessa blurts out, and everyone’s heads swivel to look at her. “Imagine being kidnapped and forced to be someone’s wife, that’s awful!”

A hush falls over the group as they consider her words, and Tessa puts a hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry,” she murmurs, but Scott shakes his head.

“No, you’re right,” he says. “That would be awful. I could never do that to someone.”

Tessa looks at him then and something shifts, Scott can feel it, can see all the emotions flickering across her gorgeous eyes–fear and fondness and something else, something he’s feeling right now but can’t name, and then she sets her beer in the sand and stands up.

“I should go,” she says, and takes off walking at a fast clip towards the outcropping of rocks where he had first seen her.

“Hey–Tessa, wait!” Scott jumps to his feet and runs after her. She speeds up a bit, but slows when Scott catches up to her and takes her hand just outside the reach of the firelight. “Hey, I’m sorry those guys upset you. They can be a lot sometimes.”

Tessa shakes her head, looks back and forth between the group around the fire and the pounding
surf. “They didn’t upset me, just–this was a bad idea.” Scott’s face falls then, and she must see it because she places a hand on his cheek to make him look her in the eyes. “No, it’s not you, you’re very kind, but I…” she trails off, then leans in and kisses him.

Her lips are so soft, and taste faintly of ocean salt and something else, maybe it’s just her and just as he’s relaxing into her she breaks the kiss, a smile dancing around the corners of her mouth.

“Thank you,” she says, “I’ve never done that before. But now I really do have to go.”

This time she takes off running full speed towards the waves, and again Scott runs after her but can’t seem to catch up. She disappears around the taller rocks of the outcropping, and Scott has to slow down so he doesn’t slip and fall on the slick stone under his feet. He rounds the rocks where she had and he can see another stretch of beach, but no Tessa.

He looks around, but it’s as though she’s vanished and all he can see is sand and stars and water, and the head of a seal bobbing in the waves as it makes its way to the open ocean.

ii. he’s been waiting on his selkie to come back

Scott heaves his stack of books onto the counter, to the amusement of the woman at the register. “I don’t think you have enough to read,” she quips, and he grins.

“Unfortunately, this is only about half of what I’ve got to get through this summer,” he says ruefully, pulling out his wallet.

“Are you a student, then?” she asks, and he nods.

“Grad school,” he replies. “Anthropology, specializing in Scottish culture and mythology.”

“Then you’re in the right place,” she says. “Plenty of that in this area. Have you met a selkie yet?”

Scott smiles at how she makes it sound inevitable. “You know, I think I did once,” he says, wistful. “But it was a long time ago.”

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Back at the little seaside cottage he’s rented for the summer, Scott muses on his reasons for returning to the beach he’d spent so many nights on when he was in boarding school. The clerk at the bookstore hadn’t been wrong—it was the origin for many a legend, and was steeped in lore. That story his schoolmate told about his friend’s ancestor was in fact one of many tales about men taking seal women for their wives, and selkie men tempting women away from their home and family. It’s a veritable gold mine for a student like him, rich with material for his thesis.

And maybe, just maybe, deep down he’s hoping to get a glimpse of his selkie, just to prove she was real.

Don’t be ridiculous, he scolds himself. There were a million better explanations than “she turned into a seal and swam away”. It was dark and he didn’t see her, she was hiding, she’d run in a direction he wasn’t expecting. But underneath all that, he’s just never quite been able to forget the girl with gorgeous green eyes to whom he’d given her first kiss.

The compulsion to return to this specific beach had eaten at him for months when he’d first decided to spend a summer in Scotland, although realistically he knew the chances of running into her were virtually nil. After that strange and wonderful night on the beach, he’d never seen her
again, even though she’d said she lived close by. Plus, all he had was her first name—Tessa—which was unusual but not so unusual he’d be able to find her with it.

*And now you sound like a stalker,* he thinks, and with a sigh he pulls out the first of the books he’d bought and starts reading.

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A few weeks into his trip, Scott is falling into a nice routine. Most of his day is spent poring over books, taking notes and marking passages he thinks are interesting. Sometimes he wanders into town for lunch, or to the pub in the evenings if he’s feeling the need for human interaction. On those nights when it’s clear and he’s not feeling social, he goes for walks on the beach, and that’s when he finds her again.

She’s standing close to the very place he first saw her, still barefoot but this time wearing an oversized sweater and jeans. His breath catches, and he almost pinches himself to check if he’s dreaming, but instead he slows his pace until he’s almost standing in front of her.

“Hi,” he says with a wave, deciding to approach the situation as though they’ve never met. “I’m Scott.”

She smiles. “I know,” she says.

Scott lets out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “I just thought...maybe you wouldn’t remember me.”

“Of course I do,” she says, cocking her head just slightly to the side in amusement. “You were my first kiss.”

“You did tell me that,” he says with a laugh.

“I remember you were very nice,” she adds with a shy grin.

“Well, I try to be nice to everyone,” he tells her. “You seemed like you needed a friend.”

“I did,” she says softly. “And I know it’s been a long time, but...I could use a friend right now.”

“Of course,” Scott says, “Want to walk with me?”

Tessa nods, and falls into step next to him. They walk the first little while in silence, Scott not wanting to make her feel pressured, then finally she speaks.

“I’m having trouble with my family,” she says.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Scott says. “What kind of trouble?”

Tessa sighs. “I want to leave home, and they don’t want me to.”

“Well,” Scott says, hands in his pockets, “You look like you’re old enough to make that decision for yourself.”

“I am,” she says, a bit defensive. “It’s just...my family is very close, and they’re afraid if I leave home I’ll never come back.”

“Would you?” he asks.
“Of course I would! It’s just,” she sighs again, “it’s complicated.”

“Most family issues are,” he says, “not that I really know about your issues, but I’ve had some experience.”

Tessa smiles, but it’s a small, sad smile. “Your parents sent you away to school.”

“They really didn’t have much choice,” he says, trying not to sound defensive himself. “I’m the youngest of three boys, and my family was struggling, you know, they wanted the best for us but couldn’t always afford it. Anyway, I had a great aunt who offered to pay for my schooling if I came out here, and they just couldn’t pass that up.”

“That’s a generous offer,” Tessa says, sounding impressed.

“It was, but it also meant I did a lot of growing up away from my family. I think my mom still resents her. See?” he says, shrugging. “Complicated.”

“Yeah,” she replies softly.

They’re almost to his cottage, so Scott stops walking and turns to face her. “Look, I feel kind of weird trying to give you this kind of advice when I don’t really know anything about you, so...could I get to know you a little better? Over dinner tomorrow night, maybe?”

Tessa presses her lips together as though she’s thinking hard about his offer, then breaks into a broad smile. “I would like that,” she says.

“Okay. Great.” Scott knows he’s grinning like a fool but he makes no attempt to hide his elation. “Can I pick you up? Or meet you somewhere?”

She shakes her head. “Is that your place?” she asks, pointing at the cottage closest to them, and he nods. “I’ll come by tomorrow.”

“What time?” he asks, and she shrugs.

“When it’s time to eat,” she says.

He can’t argue with that logic. “Then I guess I’ll see you tomorrow when it’s time to eat.”

She nods. “Goodnight, Scott,” she says, then turns to walk back the direction they had come.

“Goodnight, Tessa,” he says, and watches her retreat into the darkness.

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She knocks on his door a little after six, and Scott does his best to pretend he hasn’t been ready to go with his heart in his throat for the last three hours. Her long dark hair is pulled back in a braid, and the dress she’s wearing is a little threadbare, but well kept. She looks radiant.

“Hi,” is all he can say, but she shakes her head and laughs.

“We did that already,” she tells him. “Let’s go, I’m starving!”

He takes her to one of his favorite places, and when the hostess sees he has someone with him, she puts them in a booth in a quiet corner.

The conversation flows easily, so easily that it’s not until halfway through the night that Scott
realizes she’s been artfully dodging all his questions about her.

“You know...I brought you out to get to know you, and I’ve still hardly learned a thing,” he says, and she flushes.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “It’s just that I’m a very private person, and there’s a lot about my life that I worry people won’t understand, so it takes me a long time to open up.”

Scott laughs. “I’m sorry that I’m the opposite,” he says. “You’ve probably learned more about me than you ever wanted to know.”

“No, not at all!” she exclaims. “I like learning about you!”

“Well, how about this,” Scott says. “I’ll stop asking you questions, and you can tell me what you’re comfortable telling me.”

She’s quiet across the table, and he can tell that she’s thinking about it. “Even if...even if it takes a long time for me to tell you everything?”

“Yes,” he replies. “But I hope it won’t take that long to feel comfortable with me.”

“I mean, I do feel comfortable with you,” she says quickly. “But like I said last night...it’s complicated.”

“Something tells me you’re worth every complication you might come with,” he says, and she flushes an even deeper shade of red.

After dinner she walks back to his place with him. “It’s a bit of a hike to get to my place, I wouldn’t want you to have to walk it twice,” she tells him, so he acquiesces, with only a little grumbling for show.

“I’m used to being the one walking a girl home,” he says, “but I’m happy for the company.”

They reach his door and Scott lingers for a moment. Tessa reaches out and threads her fingers through his, pulling him close, and then she’s kissing him.

It’s both the same as he remembers, and completely different. They’re no longer a couple of kids, but the tang of salt on her lips takes him right back to that night, making him feel young and stupid again.

This time she doesn’t pull away but leans into him, wrapping her arms around his neck and pressing herself against him, and he pulls her even closer still.

When they finally part, hearts pounding and breath heavy, Scott leans his forehead against Tessa’s and closes his eyes, trying to gather himself for a moment.

“There is nothing I want more than to invite you in right now,” he says, “but for tonight...I have to say goodnight.”

She nods against his forehead, still catching her breath. “Goodnight, then.”

They separate completely, Scott’s skin mourning the loss of her warmth. “Can I see you again?”

“Is tomorrow night too soon?” she asks, and he shakes his head.

“Not at all,” he says.
He does see her the next night, and the night after that, and the night after that. Always she shows up when she’s ready to, and Scott begins to trust that he’ll continue to see her.

On the fourth night, he does invite her in wordlessly, and she answers in suit, following him through the door when he opens it and when it closes he pins her against it, kissing her until her cheeks are flushed and she’s making the most delicious tiny noises against his mouth. Her hands rake down his back and, god, she’s going to make him come before he can even get their clothes off.

She’s already got one leg around his waist and he lifts the other one up so he can carry her into the bedroom, kissing her the whole way. When they finally reach the bed he backs into it and lies down and she straddles him, gazing down at him while she rolls her hips against him, making him groan and grab her hips to still her movements.

Even then she continues to move on top of him, so he pulls at the hem of her sweater to tug it over her head and she bends forward to let him, and as it slides free of her arms he grabs her wrists to pull her down and kiss her again. His hands roam over the bare expanse of her back, and Scott realizes two things: 1. She’s not wearing a bra, and 2. her skin is so soft he needs it against him immediately.

Quickly he begins unbuttoning his shirt, and when Tessa realizes what he’s doing she undoes her pants, but he catches her wrists again and shakes his head. “I want to do that,” he says, and she giggles, moving instead to undo his belt.

Scott rolls so Tessa is on her side next to him, and he pushes her gently to rest on her back so he can be true to his word and finish what she had started. He wants to go slow, so help him god, but she pushes her panties down with her jeans when he slides them off of her and the image of her naked in the moonlight all spread out and wanting has him scrambling for a condom before he’s even got his pants all the way off.

He manages to pull himself together enough to get the condom on correctly, and then Tessa says “Please” in an urgent whisper and he almost goes to pieces right then and there. He doesn’t want to hurt her, though, so carefully he lines himself up with her and slowly, so slowly he might pass out, he pushes into her.

Tessa gasps and her hips buck against his, and slow goes completely out the window as he buries himself in her completely, thrusting into her over and over again as she rises to meet him, matching his pace, fingertips dragging against skin, his mouth on her neck and her back arched and her cries of yes, yes, yes ringing in his ears.

She’s getting close, he can feel it in how her body tenses so he does his best to keep his rhythm steady until her nails dig into his back and she clenches around his cock, and only then does he let himself speed up to reach his own release. She whispers to him yes, come like you made me come and he falls apart with a shout, the world around him coming to a crescendo in waves that echo the pounding surf outside.

Scott pulls out and collapses on the bed next to her, the only sound in the room their panting gasps for breath. He reaches out and pulls her to his chest, tracing his fingers along her spine, her cheek, her collarbone. They lie together like that until their breathing is back to normal and she’s shimmied off the bed to go to the bathroom, leaving him to dispose of the condom.

When Tessa comes back she cuddles up next to him on the bed, and they fall asleep to the tune of
the ocean and their own beating hearts.

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When he wakes up the next morning she’s already gone, a folded piece of paper next to him on the bed. In loopy script it reads:

_Had to run, didn’t want to wake you up. See you tomorrow night!_

_T_

He smiles at all of it, at the note, at her knowing he’d be waiting for her to come back, at his clothes all over the bedroom floor, before rolling over and going back to sleep.

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Tessa spends more and more time at the cottage until she’s practically moved in with him. She still disappears for a day or two here and there, but always she comes back. She likes to lounge on the couch with Scott seated on the floor in front of her, reading her particularly amusing or interesting passages, and his studying is interspersed with their lovemaking.

She never does tell him more about those mundane things he’d thought to ask her on their first date, things like where she lived and what her parents’ names are, but instead he learns more about the person she is. He learns that she loves coffee but has to take it with cream and sugar; that she is competitive with everything from trivia to darts; that she always, always makes sure to tell him when he’ll see her again.

Things begin to shift as the summer draws to a close. Scott doesn’t have a plan for this–hell, he hadn’t expected to run into her in the first place.

Tessa is the first to bring it up, as they lie naked in his room one night. “You leave next month,” she says, as she’s curled against his chest.

“Yeah,” is the only thing he can think of to say.

“There’s something I should tell you,” she says. “It might make it...easier to leave.”

“Tess,” he says gently, “nothing you could tell me would make it easier to leave you.”

She goes quiet at that, and he can hear her rolling his words around in her head. “It’s about me. I mean, about what I am.”

He can feel wetness on his chest and when he looks down, he can see tears slipping down her face. “Hey, shhh,” he says. “You don’t have to. I already know.”

He lifts her head to look at him. “What do you mean you already know?”

“T,” he says patiently, “You’ve been listening to me read to you from these books all summer. I think I’ve always known.”

She rests her head on his chest again. “Then you know I can’t go with you.”
“Yeah,” he says again. “I know.”

That night she leaves. “Goodbye, Scott,” she says sadly, and he knows he won’t see her again before his departure.

He doesn’t.

iii. selkie battled tide and wave just to gaze upon his face

At 37, Scott has stopped being surprised by a lot of things in life. So it’s an additional shock to his system when he opens his door to his home in Ilderton and finds Tessa standing outside.

He can’t even speak for a solid two minutes, he’s so certain that he’s finally lost his mind and has started hallucinating.

“Hi,” she says, and he finally finds his voice.

“We already did that,” he says with a half smile. “Come in?”

She follows him through the door. “Before you say anything,” she says, “I need to give you something.”

From the tattered canvas bag on her shoulder she pulls out something neatly folded and hands it to him. He takes it from her; it’s fur of some sort, brown and shiny and…

“Tessa,” he says in a hushed tone, “is this what I think it is?”

She nods, tears beginning to pool in her beautiful sea green eyes. “I’m sorry, I should have done this a long time ago…”

“No, it’s okay, I just–” he runs a hand through his hair. “I just don’t know what to say.”

“You can tell me to get lost,” she supplies helpfully, “or that there’s someone else, or…” she trails off. “Is there someone else?”

“No, there’s not,” he says, and her shoulders visibly sag with relief.

“Should I just get lost, then?” she asks.

“No, god, Tess, of course not. But…” he holds the seal pelt out to her. “You don’t have to give me this.”

“I don’t have to, but I want to. I mean...I want to be with you,” she says, but he’s already shaking his head.

“I would never keep you from the sea, Tess. I know how much you need it.” He offers the pelt again. “So yes, come to me, stay with me for as long as you can. But go when you have to.”

She throws her arms around him then, almost knocking him off balance. “I knew it,” she sobs, “I knew it.”

“Whoa, hey, it’s okay. You knew what?” he asks, wrapping his own arms around her, careful not to drop the pelt on the ground.
“That I made the right choice,” she says. “I just wish I’d made it a lot sooner.”

They hold each other like that for several long minutes before they finally separate. “Can I ask you something?” Scott says.

“Of course,” Tessa says. “There’s nothing you can’t ask me about anymore.”

“Not about that, I mean...how did you get here?” he asks.

She looks at him with equal parts amusement and adoration. “How do you think I got here?”

“You mean you really—all the way here?” he asks, stunned, and she nods. “But how did you—” he gestures vaguely at her clothes. “Is there some kind of...selkie support network?”

“Something like that,” she says, shoulders shaking with laughter. “Let’s sit down. I have a feeling we have a lot to talk about.”

he said "I know these shores are not like yours

but will you make your home in my arms?"

– “Selkie”, Tori Amos
you can build your kingdom in my heart (if you want)

Chapter by awakeanddreaming

Chapter Summary

Our story starts with once upon a time, because of course that’s how all fairytales begin.

Chapter Notes

I am honoured to get to be the last edition to our spooktober collection. All the stories here have been so wonderful, I am so proud of the work of all my friends and I can only hope I live up to what's come before.

This story is my take on the classic Rapunzel, but this isn't your Disney-fied fairytale--it's a little dark and a little twisty and a lot sweet and maybe a bit sexy. I used the original Grimm Brothers fairytale as my template though with a little extra magic borrowed from some other versions. I also played around with narrative style so, hopefully that's a little bit fun as well.

Rating: M

Additional Tags: Fairytale AU, Rapunzel, underage, innocence, first time smut

Word Count: 19.2 K

you can build your kingdom in my heart (if you want)

Our story starts with once upon a time, because of course that’s how all fairytales begin. A fairytale, by definition, is typically a story intended for children often about magical beings and lands, traditionally concluding with a strong moral lesson. Fairytales may also be a fabricated tale, intended to deceive... Let me tell you now, dear reader, that this particular tale is in no way intended for children, and there is very little moral about it.

Once upon a time, there lived a man and a woman, who for the purpose of this story we shall call Jim and Kate Virtue. They lived in a cozy cottage—in this case cozy means very small—and Kate was heavy with their fourth child. With two boys almost grown, and a small daughter, Jim and Kate hadn’t expected the fourth, but were mostly happy nonetheless.

“It’s another mouth to feed,” Jim said, from his seat by the fire, after his wife told him her suspicions. “But there’s nothing to be done about it now. We will make do.”

Kate, who had Jordan—their youngest and only daughter—sat on the floor in front of her paused in her brushing of the young girl’s hair to place a hand over her belly. “We have enough love for more,” she said, with a small smile. “Even if we don’t have a lot of much else, they will be
loved."

Kate knew, right from the start that this child would be different—special. It was a feeling she had, a mother’s intuition if you will. It was that and the cravings. You see, reader, it wasn’t cakes or pies or pickles or any of the other typical things that she craved. It was flowers. One particular kind of flower that only grew on a small farm several miles away. It grew on long, twisty vines, and bloomed deep purple until the month of May when the petals would turn a soft pink for the rest of the summer, before turning purple again in the fall. No one in the area knew the name of the flower, but all believed it had mystical properties. Some even claiming it could heal any ailment.

Kate would walk, with her three children in tow, to pull petals off the sweet flowers from the edge of the farm every single day. She would pop the petals in her mouth like delicate little candies and let them dissolve on her tongue. Just a small handful of petals later and she would feel settled, warm and at ease for the rest of the day. She could feel her baby in her belly flip happily inside her.

It wasn’t until later in her pregnancy when walking back and forth was too difficult that cravings got more severe. Where as earlier in her pregnancy she would feel nauseous, drained until she had eaten some of the flowers, now that their child was growing she’d become overcome by illness and fatigue if she didn’t consume at least one purple flower. It was so difficult that her husband, Jim, had to make the walk, pick bunches of the flowers and walk them back to his wife. It was one morning, not long before his wife was due to give birth, that the old woman—who everyone in town referred to as the witch—caught Jim stealing the flowers.

As Jim plucked the purple petals—now a muted purple, the edges fading to pink as May quickly approached—he felt a sting in his side. Something sharp had struck him.

“Man!” a shrill voice cried from beyond the fence surrounding the farm. “What do you think you are doing with my flowers?”

Before he could answer Jim found himself wrapped tightly in vines. They spiraled up his legs, tightening, like a snake constricting its prey.

“Tell me,” the witch said, approaching Jim. “Why are you stealing from me?”

She looked younger than he expected, having heard stories dating back to his own childhood of the woman who lived alone at the edge of the woods on the farm with the flowers. The woman approaching him now barely looked older than Jim himself. He couldn’t muse on this fact long as the vines began to tighten around his torso, creeping their way further up his body.

“They are for my wife,” Jim sputtered.

“You’re lying,” the witch answered. “Men always lie. You can never trust a man.”

Jim shook his head, a hard back and forth. “I swear it,” he breathed in deep trying to maintain his composure as the vines wrapped around his torso. Jim was sure he was going to die. “My wife, she is with child—”

The witch paused, the vines loosened slightly. “Tell me,” she said. “Does she feel ill if she does not eat the flowers?”

All Jim could do was nod.

“And when is the child due to be born?” the witch asked. “Will the child be born in the coming month? Will the child be born in May?” The witch’s pitch increased, excitement rising in her voice.
Jim nodded again. “The child should be here in the next few weeks, yes.”

“Does your wife suspect if the child is a girl? Is she carrying high?”

Poor Jim, he had no idea why the witch had become so excited over the birth date of his fourth child, but he was smart enough that he sensed that answering in the affirmative could mean his own salvation.

“Yes,” he nodded yet again. “Yes, she strongly feels that this child is a girl and she is carrying the same as she had with our last—a girl.”

“Take me to her, take me to your wife and I will spare your life. We can strike a deal and I will not punish you for stealing from me,” she smiled. “In fact we may all be rewarded.”

Jim could do nothing but obey once the witch released him from his flowery binds. As they walked he already found himself agreeing to the witch’s offer. More easily than he maybe should have. He knew his wife would not like it, but in the end she would see that the arrangement would bring the most benefit to everyone, especially their three oldest children. The ones which they already raised and loved. They did not know this new baby yet.

Once Jim arrived with the witch at the small thatch roofed cottage he shared with his wife and children—who shared one small room—the witch was radiating with excited anticipation.

Kate was laying in their small bed, Jordan cuddled in to her side. The boys, she said, were out in search of more firewood and something to cook for the evening’s supper.

The witch approached her with a crooked smile. One that instantly made Kate uncomfortable, the way the witch leered at her belly, and commented on how beautiful sweet little Jordan was. She placed a string over Kate’s belly and when it began to move ‘round and ‘round her smile grew.

“It is a girl,” the witch announced. “This one,” she said, rubbing Kate stomach. “This one will be just as sweet and just as beautiful as her sister. If not more.”

Kate looked to her husband, confusion evident in how she knitted her brows together, a frown forming.

“I am so sorry, darling,” he said. “But this will be for the best.” And then he explained the deal he struck.

As you can imagine, reader, Kate, who had already formed a deep bond with her unborn baby, was devastated, but the deal was already struck. Kate trusted her husband and with the amount she loved her three older children she was heartbroken but allowed herself to be convinced this would be the best arrangement. If she argued, her husband might die and where would that leave her and her four children?

The witch offered the family her entire farm and the two cottages that stood there—one a family home, with four rooms, and proper roof, the other a guest cottage the size of the one this large family currently lived in. She offered them Jim’s life, she would not harm him for stealing from her. In exchange when their daughter was born, in just a few short weeks, they would give her to the witch.

“I’ve always wanted a little girl of my own,” she had said. “I was never able to have one. This girl,” she assured them, “will not go wanting. I will provide her with a sturdy roof over her head, she will never have to work, she will be given beautiful dresses, toys to play with, and books to read. You will have one less mouth to feed and more to provide for each of your other three children.”
If you are a parent you can imagine how difficult this would be for Kate. How much she would miss the child she would never get to know. Kate did, however, manage to leave a small part of herself with the baby. A name. She agreed to the deal only if she be allowed to name her daughter.

Kate chose the name *Tessa*. Such a lovely name, don’t you think? It flows beautifully off the tongue, soft and sweet like the girl herself would grow to be.

The witch would be true to her word. The girl, who as promised was called Tessa, would grow with a sturdy roof over her head, she would never be subjected to farm labour as her siblings would be, she would have many beautiful hand crafted dresses, the witch would hire a tutor to teach the girl to read and she would have plenty of books. But of course, this can’t be the end of our story.

You must understand, reader, that the witch had not wanted a daughter, she had no interest in the raising of children. The witch had much more sinister plans for young Tessa—who was, as her mother knew right from the start, a very special girl.

This, reader, is the beginning of the beautiful Tessa’s story. This is the part of the story that she may never know. But what transpired before she was even born would shape her entire future...

**

We will briefly journey through the next part of Tessa’s tale, for there are some important parts—of course we do not have time to explore her entire early childhood, there would be too much to unriddle, so we will just summarize what we can.

Our young protagonist was a very agreeable child. Always sweet, kind and eager to please. This was of great benefit to her, as the witch, who Tessa would grow to call Aunt or Auntie, had little patience for children. The witch had her own traumatic past—a story for another time, as all that matters here is the person that past created and how she treated our young Tessa—which lead her to be incapable of forming regular human attachments. She bonded with baby Tessa, not out of love, but out of need. She knew how important keeping the child healthy, and most importantly innocent and pure, would be.

She provided for her, not out of caring, but out of duty. For the witch a promise was an unbreakable vow and she had promised to care for the child. So, she did. Tessa, for her part, grew to know to stay out of the witch’s way as often as she could. She learned not to be underfoot, not to complain and to do exactly as she was told. She was only praised for excelling. When she learned to read before the age of four, the witch nodded her head, smiled at Tessa and said, “what a clever girl you are.” When Tessa was five and mastering songs on the piano the witch laid a hand on her shoulder and said, “those notes are beautiful.” This was what little affection the witch was able to give the girl. So, Tessa sought it elsewhere.

One of the few kindnesses the witch offered Tessa in her early years was the ability to leave and come home as she chose—allowing her to wander the village and meadow as she pleased, able to interact with other people aside from the witch.

When Tessa turned six, she began venturing away from the home she shared with the witch more and more, though she never strayed far. At home she would spend most of her day tucked in to a book, or practicing the piano, or simply just staying out of sight. Instead she would walk through the meadow behind their home, where children often played. Tessa loved to watch the other children play, but seldom tried to join. She was never quite sure how to interact. For the most part, the other children were kind to Tessa, she enjoyed holding the hands of other children while they ran about the field or being praised on helping her team win a game. However, her sweet, docile nature often made her an easy target for teasing, or manipulation—Tessa, eager to please, would
often do whatever the other children asked for them, often unaware of the potential consequences.

After about a year of playing with and observing the neighbouring children Tessa decided to venture further from home. She walked through the meadow to the farm on the other side. She watched quietly as the woman who lived there fed the animals and milked the cows. After picking up a full bucket of milk, the woman stumbled on a large rock and milk sloshed over the edge, she easily righted herself, but sweet Tessa couldn’t help but approach, feeling compelled to offer her assistance.

“Can I help you?” she asked, smiling at the woman, showing off her missing teeth.

The woman startled, but settled once she spotted little Tessa. This woman was named Alma, she lived on the farm with her husband Joe and their three sons, Danny, Charlie and the youngest Scott. The last of which ought to be remembered as he will become very important later on in our tale.

Alma put her hands on her hips and scanned her eyes over the child before her, taking in delicate little Tessa, with her tiny shoes and expensive dress. She couldn’t imagine this child suitable for farm work, and she didn’t want to be at blame for ruining the child’s expensive attire—knowing where Tessa came from, Alma was afraid to incur the anger of the strange woman the villagers called the witch. But Tessa was looking at her with big, doe-like, green eyes, rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet waiting for an answer, genuinely wanting to provide what little help a seven year old could. Her smile was bright and cheery and she clasped her hands in front of her.

“I’m alright sweetie,” Alma answered. “I have had so many years working here on this very farm that I could do it in my sleep.” She could see the young girl’s face fall. “But,” she continued. “It does get lonely here while all my boys are out in the fields. I could certainly use the company.”

That is how Tessa ended up spending the next five years at the Moir farm several times a week keeping Alma company as she went about her daily chores. Alma was little Tessa’s first teacher of affection, of love, of kindness. The lessons she learned in her mornings chatting with Alma would never leave her. Without the care and affection Alma had shown to her, there is a chance, reader, that Tessa herself would have turned out jaded, much like the witch herself, never learning compassion and how to truly love another. Which, unknowingly to the witch, would have spoiled Tessa for her.

Tessa would practice her reading while Alma milked the cows, or baked in the kitchen. Or she would work on her music, singing the few songs she knew while Alma knitted in her rocking chair.

One afternoon when Tessa was about ten she and Alma were surveying the property, walking the perimeter together while Tessa regaled Alma of the adventures in her latest book. Alma had long ago realized that the young girl who kept her company desperately needed affection and attention and willingly gave her as much of it as she had to offer. Though Tessa rarely spoke of the woman she called her Aunt, and never a bad word, Alma knew the child was mistreated, not in the obvious ways but Alma could sense that something was very wrong. She longed to hide the little girl away, though she could not offer her the same expensive clothing or lessons, she had more than enough love for the sweet little girl.

They came about the stream at the northwest corner of the property and she could hear her boys before she saw them, hollering and splashing about in the water, bathing away the previous days’ grime. They rounded the bend and her young companion froze, eyes wide her hands drawn up around her body. Alma looked up to find her sons naked as the day they were born, swinging from a low branch of one of the bowing trees on the bank into the stream below. Tessa was staring at them, something akin to horror on her face.
“It is impolite to stare, sweetheart,” Alma urged, trying to divert the child’s attention. To her boys she shouted, “Have a little decency, would you!”

The three of them shot into the water like lightning, red to the tips of their ears. She was just about to scold young Tessa as well, who was still routed to her spot, eyes still wide when she noticed the way the girl’s arms wrapped protectively around herself, how she glanced down at her own figured, cloaked in large skirts. Realization dawned on Alma. She knew the child was an innocent little flower, most of her knowledge of people coming from the books she read, or Alma herself. She rarely played with other children and lived alone with a woman only keen to teach her music and reading, of course there would be things she wouldn’t know.

“Have you never seen a boy before?”

Tessa shook her head.

“Boys are girls are built differently,” she said. “There is nothing wrong, we just aren’t the same.”

“How?” Tessa asked, ever curious.

“That,” Alma started. “Is something you will learn when you are older dear, much older.”

Tessa simply nodded in agreement, still looking relatively shocked by what had just been revealed to her.

Alma feared that this time would come too soon for young, sweet Tessa always so curious and so trusting. Too soon especially if she didn’t keep a watchful eye between her and her youngest. Scott was always straightforward and impulsive, wearing his heart on his sleeve, he never hesitated to make his feelings known, or to act upon them. And he had already taken quite a liking to Tessa, sneaking into the kitchen to listen to Tessa read or sing, blushing furiously whenever he was caught.

It had started one afternoon months before. The youngest Moir arrived in the kitchen early enough to hear Tessa reading, and was captivated. Every day thereafter Scott would arrive to the house early for lunch just to have a few minutes to hear Tessa read before continuing his own chores or going out to play with the other children.

His interest in Tessa didn’t wane over the next two years, only growing stronger as they both moved out of childhood into adolescence. He was fascinated by her peculiarity, by her gentleness and particularly by her voice. Scott couldn’t read himself, and he loved hearing the songs and stories that Tessa sung and read.

One afternoon when Tessa was newly twelve, now grown into a beautiful young lady, she was sitting in the meadow, deep in her newest book. She had changed so much in the past months, looking less the tiny girl she had once been. Her hair had darkened from chestnut to a deep mahogany, darkening still towards the ends where it appeared to be a deep forest green, where it curled like the ends of tiny little vines. She was a strange, magnificent girl. Scott was drawn to her as if by magic.

Scott found her in the meadow and sat down on the grass next to her. He put a hand on her arm to get her attention, the contact startling her.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to frighten you. I was just wondering if you could read to me? I love to hear you read.”

Tessa merely nodded, opened the book to her favourite passage and began to read aloud. Scott
settled in closer, so that they were sitting hip to hip as Tessa read about a forbidden love, a secret marriage, and the ultimate happily ever after.

“Do your books always end this way?” he’d asked. “Happy?”

Tessa smiled, tucking her long hair behind her ear. “Usually. I don’t like the unhappy ones as much. I like when the characters get to fall in love and get married. I always want there to be a happily ever after.”

Words on the page you see, had always been Tessa’s escape, just like they are for so many others. She wanted to live in a world where everything ended as it should.

“Me too,” he found himself saying, a smile on his lips. “I like that a lot.”

Tessa hummed, fiddling with the pages of her book, unsure what else to say. She liked Scott, even though they didn’t often speak to each other, he was always kind to her and had such gentle eyes and a warm inviting smile. Even though he was only fourteen, he made her think of the princes in her storybooks. Scott, she thought, would make a very noble prince. She liked that thought. She liked to pretend she was a princess. She never knew her real parents, Auntie had told her they died when she was just a baby, but she thought maybe they were a King and Queen.

“Maybe,” Scott said, his voice cracking slightly— perhaps with nerves. “Maybe when we are older, you’d like to marry me? I could protect you from the witch.”

Tessa’s head snapped to attention. “She’s not—” she cut herself short, because she wasn’t actually sure. Her aunt—she wasn’t even sure she was her true aunt—was different. She was cold and distant and had little time or patience for Tessa. She knew her aunt was feared in the village—strange things happened when she was near, and no one knew how old she was. Tessa knew there were secret rooms in the house she was not allowed to enter, rooms lined with books and trinkets where her aunt would spend hours on end. She also always had these strange purple flowers that she would boil down and make into tea. She’d struck Tessa once—hard enough to leave an imprint of her open palm for days—when she’d asked if she could try the tea. Maybe she was a witch. Whatever she was, Tessa had experienced enough loneliness in her young life that she knew she’d be happier gone from her. “I think I’d like that.”

“Is that a promise?” he asked.

“Sure,” Tessa smiled. “It’s a promise.”

Scott kissed her gently on the cheek, just the lightest brush of his lips against her soft skin. She felt a warmth flood through her entire being. She could feel the heat in her cheeks where they were furiously blushing.

Scott ran his fingers through Tessa’s hair, pausing at the tips that were stained a deep green. “How do you make it green like this?” he asked.

Tessa shrugged. “It started to get that way, once I turned twelve… Auntie said it’s because I’m special and it means I’m becoming a woman… I think it’s just a little bit magical. Wanna see?”

He nodded, curious.

Tessa closed her eyes and began to hum, as she did the green tips of her hair wrapped around each other, becoming small tightly coiled vines with little green leaves, though the hair from above her shoulder blades remained the same as it had always been. A single white flower appeared at the end of one of one of the vines.
The flower looked the exact same as the purple ones the witch used for her tea, except for the colour of the petals. Tessa’s flowers grew a pure white, like snow.

Scott, though his eyes were wide in surprise, smiled softly at her. He didn’t run from her magic, or gawk like she was some freak, he looked at her with awe, like she was amazing. “It suits you. The green matches your eyes. It’s beautiful and magical, just like you.”

Tessa had never received a compliment before, not like this. It made the warmth from before return and this time it was her who planted a light kiss on his cheek, leaving him the one blushing.

Later that day, the two children would reveal their promise to their respective caregivers. Each confession would have lasting—and, in one case, drastic—consequences.

When Scott arrived home that afternoon, he was grinning from ear to ear. Alma questioned why he was so content.

“I’m going to marry Tessa,” he told his mother. “She’s wonderful. I’m going to save her from the witch and we will run away and be married.”

Alma froze in place, placing the potato she had been peeling back in the bowl with the other so she could properly speak to her son. She knew it was just a childhood fantasy, the dreamy far off promise of two kids who didn’t know better. But you see, reader, she also knew her son, she knew how determined he could be when he set his mind to something, she also knew how beautiful and charming a young lady Tessa was growing to become. Another thing that Alma knew, reader, was that the witch wouldn’t like the arrangement at all. The young boys who came near herself or Tessa she tolerated, but she knew that would change once her youngest boy became more of a man. She feared that her son would try to run away with the girl before either were ready, because he’d made a promise and time wouldn’t be on their side. They were still little now, just fourteen and twelve, but what of when they became sixteen and fourteen, eighteen and sixteen, would they know better?

“Scotty,” she sat down on the long worn wood bench at their table motioning for her son to join. “You like her a lot don’t you?”

Her youngest boy nodded, still sporting the same dopey grin he entered with. “She special, Ma.”

“That she is,” Alma answered, more probably than any of them realized. “But you have to be careful.”

“The witch doesn’t scare me,” said Scott, though he looked down and away from his mother.

“Not the witch, Scotty.” Alma sighed, not sure how to go about this talk with her boy who was to her still her baby. ‘Be careful with Tessa. She’s special for sure. But she is also very trusting… She would probably do whatever you asked without really understanding the consequences.” Alma knew Tessa was a smart child, too smart sometimes but she was painfully naive to the ways of life. “Do you understand?”

Scott shook his head.

“The witch, her aunt, whoever that woman is, hasn’t taught Tessa much about life, about people, she’s told her not to trust men, but not why she shouldn’t...” Alma began, struggling herself to come up with the right words. She knew the witch had tried to seep her own hatred of the world into the young girl, but without giving her reason why, Tessa shrugged it off, too sweet and too
trusting for her own good. A truly good soul.

“But she has you, Ma, you can teach her.”

Alma smiled at that. She wasn’t the girl’s mother but she had a considerable soft spot for her, maybe now was the time Alma ought to give her some life lessons if only to protect her later on. But she still worried.

Alma sighed again. “Just wait until you’re older Scott. And for god’s sake if you do anything with that girl you really had better marry her first! You’re a good boy.”

Reader, this conversation with his mother will come back to Scott many years later, but for now the more important conversation was happening just across the meadow. Tessa had skipped home, her pale cheeks still aflame. She had no idea that the witch had been watching her with Scott in the meadow.

As soon as Tessa was through the front door the witch yelled, her voice shrill. “Has that boy touched you before?” she demanded, slamming the door behind Tessa.

Startled, Tessa dropped her book to the floor.

“I said,” the witch rounded Tessa to face her. “Has he touched you before?”

Tessa shook her head.

“Are you lying to me, child?”

Tessa shook her head again, she had never once lied, she learned at a young age that liars were punished severely—again, reader, another story for another time. “No, never,” she said. “Just today.”

The witch looked at her for a moment, gaging whether or not to believe her. “What did he want from you?” she asked after a few moments looking Tessa up and down. “What did you give to him?”

Tessa wasn’t sure she understood. “He just wanted me to read to him.”

The witch laughed, a loud cackle. “No dear child, he is a boy, he will be a man soon… That isn’t what he wants from you.”

Tessa swallowed, she didn’t want to lie but she felt like her promise to Scott was meant for just them. She shook her head. “He is kind to me.”

The witch laughed again. “For now darling. He seems nice now, wait for him to get older then he will want nothing but your body, your youth and your beauty. He will want your virtue. Your innocence and nothing more,” her voice rose as she spoke, quivering in anger, she squeezed Tessa arm, hard. “I need those. You must not let a man take those from you, ever. Those things are to be protected at all costs, dear sweet one.”

Tessa was shaking. She was only twelve, she didn’t know what the witch was talking about but Scott wasn’t like that... he wouldn’t ever take from her. He liked her, he was kind to her, he had gentle eyes and a warm smile. He was a prince like in her books. He wanted to save her, to marry her.

The words spilled out without her meaning them to. “He wants to marry me,” she said, voice barely
above a whisper. “When we are older, he wants to marry me… We promised and he kissed me.” She rubs her cheek where it is still warm.

The witch’s grasp tightened around her arm, her fingernails digging into soft flesh. “No!”

“I want to marry him one day! I will!” Tessa was never defiant, never spoke out of turn and was surprised by her own fierceness. This, reader, was because, even though she didn’t understand it then, Tessa knew she was connected with the boy across the meadow, even spending a short amount of time alone with him, she felt safe and happy. With him she felt warm, warmer than she ever had in her young life.

“You will not! We are leaving, immediately,” the witch flung Tessa towards the stairs, making her stumble and fall, leaving bruises on her knees. “Get your things. We are leaving now.”

“No!” Tessa sobbed. “I have to say goodbye.”

The witch shook her head and Tessa could feel the anger radiating in waves off of her, like the change in the wind when a storm approached. “He won’t remember your name. I will make sure he won’t remember your name. That’s a kindness, is it not?”

Tessa sobbed harder, folded in on herself on the stairs. The witch offered little comfort to the distraught child. She simply shook her head as if she were disgusted by the outburst.

“I am protecting you, my sweet flower,” she said, bringing calm back to her voice.

They left; the witch was good on her threat. They left that very night, without so much as a word to anyone.

Magic has its limits. There is very little magic powerful enough to erase an entire person from the memories of an entire village and certainly no magic within the witch’s ability. So, to prevent those that young Tessa had befriended from coming looking for her, the witch was able to erase her name from their memories, fading them at the edges, so that the memories of Tessa felt more like dreams than reality.

Poor Scott though, wouldn’t forget the promise he made to a little girl whose name he no longer knew. He couldn’t forget the sweet sound of her voice when she sang or read aloud. He couldn’t forget her smile or the blush on her cheeks when he’d kissed her chastly there. He couldn’t forget her bright, curious green eyes. But he couldn’t remember who she was. She haunted his dreams for the next five years.

Tessa, on the other hand, remembered so clearly both Scott and Alma, and her time at the Moir farm. Those memories and her books were what got her through the very lonely years to come.

Tessa was young, naive and full of hope. She’d raised herself on fairytales and love stories. Though she knew—she’d seen the witch enact her spell—that Scott wouldn’t remember her name, that his brief time with her would feel like it wasn’t real she still had hope that one day her prince would find her. Love would prevail. Even though they had only been children, she believed he could love her, that he did. That’s the power, reader, of being so pure of heart. She wished for him every night as she looked out at the stars.

Can you guess where our story goes next? What happens to our childhood loves? Where does the witch take Tessa and what are her plans?

All these questions bring us to the next part of young Tessa’s tale. Now into her seventeenth year, we begin our story anew.
Once upon a few years later, Tessa stared out the window of her tower into the great expanse of forest surrounding her. There were trees as far as her eye could see in any direction. Except for if she looked off to the east, she thought she could make out, just past the line of trees, a clearing of grass and a small dot that might be a structure, a home maybe. She thought it looked like a farm. It reminded her of a farm she once knew well, with a kindly mother figure and a boy who made her blush.

She looked below at the brambles of thorns that encircled her tower. Their branches reaching nearly three feet up, with thorns nearing an inch, sometimes two in length. This, she’s been told, was to keep her safe from harm. Safe from men who may have tried to climb into her tower to seek her out. Men who would wish her harm. Though what harm, she did not know, she’d never been told and had been too afraid to ask.

All she knew was that it's been this way for the last five years. She’d been kept alone in this foreboding, stone tower with only one way in or out. The way out was not one she was able to take either. Only the witch could come or go. She’d been stuck here for years all to keep her safe from a threat she did not understand, all because once upon a time a kind boy had promised to marry her and had kissed her cheek.

Tessa perched on the ledge of the only way in. There was one single window that was both wide and tall enough for a person to fit through. She let the cool breeze prickle her skin and breathed in the scents of the damp forest below. This was her only taste of the outside world now and she so dearly missed her younger days spent in the meadow or on the farm.

She missed having someone to talk to. The witch visited her most afternoons to bring her food to cook in her small kitchen, or more books to read, or new songs to play on her piano, or a new beautiful dress (though Tessa often found herself in just her shift, no one else was going to see her so why bother with expensive dresses when she can be comfortable instead?). But she and the witch—she knew for certain that she was a witch now—did not share meaningful conversations. The witch did not care to know about the characters in the books she’d read, or that the red bird in the tallest tree just to the west of the tower hatched her eggs.

She especially did not want to hear how Tessa longed to leave the tower. How she wished to find the boy with kind brown eyes who once promised to marry her and see if he still wished for that. To know if he’d still take her hand, even if he didn’t remember her any longer, maybe he’d fall in love with her anyways. The witch didn’t want to know how Tessa longed for a happily ever after just like her books.

The witch warned her about the dangers of the outside world, reminded her that she was up in the tower to keep her safe, to protect her purity, her innocence, her beauty. ‘We need all these things, this is what makes you so special,’ she often said. The witch called her a beautiful flower, just waiting to bloom.

“Sometimes,” the witch said to her once, “beauty is a great curse. You’ve been blessed and cursed all at once child.”

Tessa often thought that the witch wished she could have erased Tessa’s own memories of before just like she had the village’s memories of Tessa’s name. Tessa wished for that sometimes too, then she wouldn’t have spent so much time yearning. But, as the witch explained, Tessa had magic and the spells wouldn’t work on her. Tessa’s magic was in her hair, in the vines that grow from the tips and the flowers that sprout from them.
Tessa’s vines had appeared when she turned twelve and began to mature. As Tess grew older and with the arrival of her first menses the flowers began to bloom and the years that followed her vines matured with her. They took on a life of their own. Each year closer to womanhood the magic within her strengthened.

She discovered the full potential of her vines solely by accident, sitting on the ledge of her window in the light of the sun, about a year after arriving in the tower, she was singing a song, one about longing and the tips of her long dark hair wound themselves into thick green stalks and snaked down the side of the tower, reaching for the ground, touching the earth that Tessa so desperately longed to walk on. The vines weaved around and through each other forming a trellis of greenery, leaves and pure white petals blooming and reaching out for the sun. This ability would soon be used by the witch as a makeshift ladder for her to climb into the tower.

When she sat in the sun that shone through her window, she felt like light itself, pure and unfiltered, was coursing through her feeding her soul. Like she herself was part of the plant, feeding off sunlight.

Exactly six months after Tessa turned seventeen our young prince returned to our story. Scott was walking through the woods, compelled by what he wasn’t really sure but it was a compulsion all the same. He had arrived at their perimeter and felt a strong urge to venture into the thick underbrush. It was as if there were a whisper in his ear telling him that he’d find something he’d been searching for inside. After half a day of aimless wandering he heard it, a sound sweeter than anything he’d ever heard and yet it was so achingly familiar.

The song traveled on the breeze, being carried to his ear as if by magic. He followed the beautiful sounds until they grew louder and louder, nearly walking straight into brambles of thorns, stopping just short of injuring himself. Scott found himself face to face with a tall stone tower. The voice of a young woman singing drifted down from a large window at the very top.

Her song was sad, lonely, but the tune carried hopeful notes too, like the singer was wishing for something, waiting for it to happen.

The song and even the voice that carried it sounded so familiar to him, like a distant memory or a dream but he couldn’t place where he knew them. Scott only knew he ached to get closer. He circled the tower but could find no way in. There was no door. No staircase or ladder. The only break in the stone facade was the wide window at the very top. Momentarily defeated Scott sat on a patch of moss and leaned against the trunk of a large tree facing the window, staring up at it hoping a way up would appear to him.

He began to hum along to the song, knowing the melody as if he’d heard it a hundred times before. As he hummed along he watched in awe as vines slowly crept down the side of the tower from the open window, weaving themselves into a ladder that reached all the way to the ground and over the thorn bushes that surrounded the base. It was fate he thought. Fate wanted him to meet whoever was making such beautiful music. The young woman who was the owner of such a mesmerizing voice. He was already in love, just by the sounds of her singing.

Tessa, for her part, had no idea that her vines had grown down the side of her tower as she sat singing in her window ledge in the fading sunlight, eyes closed, feeling the last bits of the sun's warm rays on her cheeks. She didn’t know that her magic had reached out to Scott, had carried her song straight through the earth to the trees, out their leaves and onto the breeze. Right to his ears into his heart, guiding him to her. She had no idea that her hair had reached out to give him a way up to her. She didn’t know that her wishes were all about to come true.

She didn’t notice until Scott was halfway up the tower and she felt a slight tug on her hair. She
peered down and saw what had happened. She saw a man climbing up towards her, intently focused on his assent. With the witch’s warnings fresh in her mind Tessa grew fearful. She tried to back away from the window, tried to retract her vines back into her hair but they held fast to the side of the tower. The pace of her heartbeat increased and she breathed in short staccato breaths, frantically trying to figure out where she could hide, what she could do.

As soon as Scott had reached the widow, his hands firmly gripping the ledge to haul himself into Tessa’s chambers that her vines released the sides of the tower and shrank back into the ends of her hair. Tessa, having been pulling away from the window, stumbled backward at the release of her vines, falling to the floor in front of her bed. She scurried back as close as she could to the bed, clutching tightly at the corner of the sheets as the man finally touched both feet onto her floor and looked up at her.

Except he wasn’t a man. Not really. He looked in between boyhood and manhood, not much older than Tessa herself—maybe only a year or two. He wasn’t large, or imposing. But still somehow, for some reason he had found her and he had entered her tower. She cowered by the bed, eyes wide and a bit wild, like a frightened animal with no where to go.

Scott, though she didn’t know it was him just yet, looked at her, holding his hands up in front of himself, in a gesture we typically know to indicate he meant no harm. “I’m sorry,” Scott said. “I’m sorry I frightened you. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“What do you want from me?” Tessa asked, working to steady her breathing. “What are you here to take?”

He shook his head. “I am not here to take from you. I...I just heard you singing from down below and I felt like I had to climb up to see who such a beautiful voice belonged to.”

“Oh,” Tessa sat up a bit straighter, leaning forward to get a better look at him. With the sun setting in the window behind him he was cast in silhouette and it was hard to make out his features, but something about him seemed familiar to Tessa.

Of course, reader, both Scott and Tessa had changed a lot in the last five years, through growth and puberty. But having thought of him almost every day, Tessa would recognize Scott anywhere—as soon as she saw his eyes at least.

“I am truly sorry,” he spoke quietly, venturing a step further into the room. “I don’t want you to be frightened...uh, if you wanted me to leave...uh, if you could just make that ladder again I will go.”

“No!” Tessa nearly shouted. “No, please don’t leave.” It had been so long since she’d spoken to anyone but the witch, and even the prospect of being left alone now filled her with dread.

“Okay,” he said softly. “I’ll stay over here though, so you won’t be afraid.”

She shook her head. “Could you step into the light?” she asked, nodding to the small lantern burning on the table next to her bed. “So that I can see you?”

He hesitated a moment, but followed her request, stepping into the light. As soon as she saw his eyes she knew. It was him. Her prince. Her wishes had come true. Scott had come for her. Even if he didn’t remember, he’d been drawn to her.

“I’m Tessa,” she said, hoping that maybe saying her name would trigger his memories.

Briefly, recognition flashed on his face but in an instant it was gone. “Tessa is a beautiful name,” he said. “I’m Scott.”
“Prince Scott,” Tessa said with a shy smile, trying to hide her own disappointment that he didn’t remember her.

Scott laughed, shaking his head. “I’m no prince, just a simple farmer.”

Tessa just smiled more. “You don’t need to be royalty to be a prince. You managed to find me, I think that makes you my prince.”

“Are you a princess?” He asked, raising his eyebrows.

Tessa shook her head, relaxing a bit and releasing her grip on the bed sheets. “Only in my head and in the stories I make up for myself.”

Scott looked from her then, to the room around them taking in the shelves of books she’d acquired over the years. Mostly romances and fairytales—because they had always been her favourites—but others too. She had some about plants, always hoping to find something about her own curious hair. Some about the birds and other creatures she saw out her window. But mostly they were her stories with their rich fantasy lands and happy endings.

“Do you like to read?” Scott asked her.

“Well, there isn’t much else to do up here,” she attempted to joke. “But, I’ve always loved books...Even before I lived up here.”

Scott nodded, taking a step away from her to run his fingers along the spines of her books, admiring them. “I never learned to read,” he admitted. “But I’ve always loved hearing stories.”

Tessa perked up, wondering if maybe she had a way to help spark his memories. “I could read to you,” she said.

He paused, maybe surprised at her offer, maybe remembering something. “You don’t want me to leave then?”

“Please don’t,” Tessa said. “I don’t ever have much company. And I trust you...I trust that you don’t wish me harm.”

“I don’t. I don’t want to hurt you. I would never. I just...I wanted to see you.”

Tessa breathed in deep. “Well, I’m happy you climbed up then.”

“Me too.”

Scott picked and book off the shelf, one with an interesting looking cover about a knight and a princess and brought it over to Tessa. They sat on the floor together side by side at the foot of Tessa’s bed while she read to him.

Once the sun had completely set and the stars had come out Tessa grew her vines and Scott climbed back out her tower and returned to the forest. Though, he left with a promise to return the following evening.

Scott was good on his promise, he returned the next evening the same time he had the previous day, when the sun was low in the sky, streaking orange through her window. He called to her from below, asking her to grow her vines to allow him up, but she already knew he was there, her hair already making its descent down the side on the tower.
Again, she read to him while he sat next to her listening, mostly just to the melodic sound of her voice. He enjoyed being wrapped in the comfort of its familiarity—even if he did not yet know why it was so familiar. He did remember listening to a young girl read at some point in his childhood, being captivated by how engrossed in the stories she got. Though maybe it was a dream, he thought to himself. His brothers used to laugh at him, for how determined he was to find out what happened to this little girl he could barely remember.

Once she’d finished the book they’d begun the day before she placed it back on the table and not wanting to leave each other’s company they talked. They talked for hours, just basking in the sounds of the other speaking.

He told her about his life on the farm. About his parents and his brothers—now grown and married with a few of their own children. She could picture them all clearly in her memories. Especially Alma, with her kind eyes—just like Scott’s—and friendly smile. Tessa wanted to blurt out that she knew him, that they grew up together, in a way. But found when she tried she couldn’t. The words refused to form. She couldn’t work them out with her tongue. Maybe it was part of the spell, preventing her from reminding him, or maybe she didn’t want to cause herself hurt when he didn’t remember. Either way, she was only able to smile and nod along to his story as if he were a perfect stranger. The feeling of longing for those days back on the farm with Alma clutched tightly at her heart.

She told him about her life in the tower. How the witch, who may or may not be her aunt, brought her here when she was twelve to keep her safe.

“Safe from what?” Scott asked.

“You,” she said, maybe a bit too quickly, looking away from him thinking of the time he’d asked her to marry him one day when they were grown and kissed her cheek. “I mean men in general...the world, I guess.”

“Would you try to leave?”

“I can’t,” she said. “The only way in or out are my vines and I can’t climb them.”

He sighed, glancing out the window. “But would you want to leave? If we found a way.”

Truthfully, she would have loved to leave with him that very day if she could have. But she felt a pang of guilt for the woman who’d cared for her her whole life, because she was Tessa and Tessa always saw the best in everyone, even a witch who wished her harm. She believed what she’d been told, that this was all for her own safety and benefit, even if she didn’t like it. But now she had found Scott again, or more aptly he had found her, and she believed that he could keep her safe from whatever there was out in the world that might harm her. She could feel it in her bones, as long as she had him she’d have nothing to fear.

“Maybe one day,” she said softly. Maybe one day the witch would trust her. Would see what she saw and know she was safe in Scott’s care. Maybe one day they would find a way for her to get out anyways. One day she’d be free from here and she would be with Scott. And maybe one day he’d remember who she was and it would be just like one of her books.

He left just before the sun began to rise, with the same promise to return the next night.

“Goodnight dear Tess,” he said as he climbed out her window, he looked like he wished to reach out to caress her cheek but stopped himself just short, noticing how she stiffened slightly.
The next evening when Scott returned Tessa had already chosen a book for them to read. One with her absolute favourite passage. He sat next to her, keeping enough distance to be appropriate but close enough that she could feel his warmth radiating off of him. The vines on the tips of her long hair grew, inching towards his heat, as if he were the sun.

After she’d finished reading the passage Scott smiled, running his hand up her bare arm and brushing her hair back off her shoulder. His touch was soft, so, so gentle against her skin and yet she felt a violent shudder overtake her body as she recoiled away from him. The feeling of being touched, especially with such tenderness so foreign to her. It brought back old memories, from before the tower, when she was young and used to play with the other children in the meadow. It made her think of one boy in particular, who was so kind and gentle. The one next to her now, his touch as gentle as it was then.

Could Scott really be as dangerous as the witch seemed to think? She couldn’t imagine how, not with how sweetly he touched her. Not with what she remembered of him, the chaste press of his lips on her cheek in young promise. Not with the kindness in his eyes, the tenderness of his voice when he spoke to her...letting him touch her couldn’t lead to anything bad. Never.

Touch. He touched her and all she wants is more.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, backing away from her. “I didn’t mean to frighten you. I never want to do that.”

She shook her head. “You touched me,” is all she managed.

“I won’t do it again,” he answered, he looked a bit sad at that but his voice was earnest.

She shook her head again. “No one ever touches me. Not since I was little...I...I am sorry I jumped.”

“Tess,” his voice was soft, curling around the letters of her name. “You don’t have to be sorry. I won’t do it again.”

She shook her head more aggressively this time. “I don’t want that,” she said. “I want you to touch me. I think I miss it...it just it shocked me...the feeling. I liked it...your touch.”

He came back a bit closer to her, “I don’t want you to be scared.”

“Can I touch you?” She asked, swallowing the lump in her throat.

He nodded. “Of course.”

Slowly, carefully, she stepped into his space. First, running the tips of her fingers up his arms, then over his chest, back down his arms again to touch the point of every finger. She ran her fingertips over his face, running along the bridge of his nose and smiling when he wrinkled it slightly. Finally, she encircled him in her arms. She held him against her, feeling his heartbeat through his chest into her. She sighed against him. She’d never felt more at home.

It took a moment but eventually he wrapped his arms around her, holding her more tightly against him, dipping his face into the crook of her neck. He took a deep breath and she felt his shuddering exhale against her skin. She closed her eyes and rested her head against his collarbone. She could stay here forever, being held in his arms was nothing like she’d ever known, it was close to overwhelming. She squeezed him tighter, desperate to hold on to this closeness.

He pulled away from, just a bit, not going far when she clung tighter. “Have you never been
“Hugged before?”

She looked up at him, blinking her eyes. The no was on the tip of her tongue before a memory flashed before her. She was little, maybe eight and she’d fallen on the path to the Moir’s farm, tripped over a fallen branch. She’d scraped her hands and torn her dress and when she reached Alma her cheeks were wet with tears. Alma had pulled her into her arms without hesitation, holding her close, telling her it would be okay. That’s what mothers do, she thought.

But this was different. This felt comforting too, but in a different kind of way, one she couldn’t quite name.

“Not in a very long time,” she finally answered.

“Okay,” he said, and pulled her back against him. “Okay.”

At some point she yawned, sleep creeping up on her, and she asked if she must let go. He hesitated for a long moment, deliberating something.

Reader, you can imagine Scott’s trepidation at laying down in bed next to an unwed young woman, one who looked up at him with stars in her eyes, who was the most beautiful girl he’d ever seen. A conversation from years ago with his mother about being careful bounced around in his head. But ultimately he couldn’t say no to her, not to Tessa.

He laid down next to her in the small bed and she rested her head on his chest, not wanting to be far from the steady beating of his heart. Not now that she discovered how it felt to be held. It was like she was fitting years worth of the need for physical comfort into one night and she couldn’t let go. Didn’t want to.

She awoke early the next morning still cuddled against him and it was the happiest she’d felt in her seventeen years. This, she thought, feels like what love should feel like. She loved him, this boy who just days before climbed through her window, this boy who she remembered from childhood but who did not know her. He didn’t remember her, yet he was still so kind and so gentle with her. She loved him. Her heart was filled up with it.

Scott left early that morning, not wanting to be caught by the witch, but returned the following evening and the one after that and the one after that—and so on and so forth as you could guess, reader. Most afternoons the witch would come to give Tessa food and books and in the evenings Scott would arrive and often not leave again until the early hours of the morning. Tessa read to him or played him songs on piano, they talked and he let her hold him and he held her in return. She found herself craving the sound of his heart beating beneath her ear or the feel of his warm arms surrounding her, but after a few weeks she found herself curious for more, a different kind of touch. More of him.

She was reading to him from one of her storybooks and at the end the prince and princess share a true love’s kiss. It was described like the stars in the night sky, a light guiding the lovers home. It was like a sealing of fate, like the warmest hug, and Tessa wanted to be kissed. She wanted Scott to kiss her. She wanted to feel the press of his lips against hers. She wanted to be overwhelmed by the sensation of him. She wanted to feel what real true love felt like.

“Can I kiss you?” she asked, once she’s finished reading and closed the book.

Scott looked at her in question, eyebrows raised. “Um,” he began.

“On the lips,” she clarified, bringing her fingers up to touch his lips. Scott coughed, nearly
choking, his eyes bulging wide. “Please,” she added.

“Are you sure that’s what you want, Tess?” he asked, eyes still wide. Of course, it is safe to say Scott wanted greatly for Tessa to kiss him, to kiss her back. He wanted feel her lips on his. To know what she tasted like. He found himself often staring at her lips while she read, unable to look away. But he was keenly aware of the position they were in and that he’d only known her less than a month—though they’d spent countless hours together.

She nodded. “It is. Please Scott. I want to kiss you. I want to feel what it’s like.”

“Okay,” he said shifting closer to her. “Okay, I would like that too.”

This made her smile before she puckered her lips and leaned in towards him. She looked a bit like a fish and he laughed. “Let me show you,” he said, his hand finding its way to the back of her neck, fingers tangling in her hair. He smoothed her lips with his thumb.

“Please,” she said again.

“Close your eyes,” he said, and she did, without hesitation, trusting him implicitly. He used his hand to help guide her towards himself and brushed his lips to hers.

She liked the feeling of his lips on hers, just lightly pressing against the soft pink flesh, but it didn’t feel like enough. She didn’t feel like the stars were guiding her home, or that their souls had come together. It felt like a promise of more. So, she sought it. Tried to find more. She puckered her lips again and pressed them more firmly against his.

He laughed against her but didn’t pull away, just moved his lips a little against hers. It felt nice and she wanted to be closer. She smiled against his smile and followed the movement of his lips, mimicking his actions. It felt nice, so she kept going, pressing in just a little more.

It was more than nice. It was thrilling. She wanted more of him against her, she wanted to press herself flush against him. She felt something tightening in her tummy and something tingling between her thighs, the feeling pulled her closer to him. But then he pulled away.

“I think that’s probably enough for tonight,” he said, trying to manage catching his breath. “We can, um, try more later...if you like?”

She felt a bit bereft from the lack of contact but nodded. “Please, show me more tomorrow.”

So, they kissed again the next night and the one that followed and so on and so forth. Each night Tessa learned more about kissing, how it felt and what to do. Each night she wanted to learn even more. Each night Scott eventually pulled away and breathlessly said it had been enough, for now.

Every time this happened Tessa noticed a dark look in his eyes, almost wild, hungry. It intrigued her. The look was something that made Tessa’s heart rate pick up, thumping wildly in her chest. She wasn’t scared of it, because it was Scott, she just wanted to know what that look meant. Why he looked at her with hooded eyes, as she if she were meant to be devoured.

But with each passing evening she failed to learn the meaning of the look. Though, each night Scott stayed with her, holding her tightly. Each night he whispered into her ear as she fell asleep in the safety of his embrace.

“Goodnight, my beautiful Tess,” he said, kissing her softly on her hair.

“Goodnight my prince,” she always said back.
Each night that she fell asleep with his arms wrapped around her and she felt safe. She felt protected. She felt loved.

Over a few weeks their kisses developed. Tessa was a quick study and even though she’d only read about kissing like this, had only witnessed chaste kisses and had only experienced his peck on the cheek, she picked up what to do quickly, almost intuitively.

She learned how best to angle her head to meet his. She learned that she very much liked when Scott nipped lightly on her lip, and he liked it when she returned the favour. She learned that she loved being overwhelmed by him when he slipped his tongue in between her lips and opened her up to him. She learned that he loved when she stroked her own tongue alongside his. She learned she really, really loved kissing him, loved being so close to him that she felt her breathing synch with his own, inhaling each other’s exhales. She loved him. Was undeniably in love with him.

It was one evening, a few weeks after they shared their first, tentative kiss, when Scott pulled her in closer than he’d allowed before, pressing her body into his own. His hands migrated from where they usually rested on her cheek or tangled in her hair down her spine. She felt as his fingers run along each vertebrae through her night dress. His other hand traveled up her front, over thin cotton until it landed on one of her breasts and squeezed. She found herself moaning into his mouth, a sound she’d never heard herself make before. One forced through her lips because it felt so deliciously, overwhelmingly good to have his hands on her there. She felt his returning groan travel through her whole self as he pulled her in even tighter.

She wanted to ask him if he would touch more of her. She wondered if it would feel better if he dipped his fingers under the cotton of her dress and caressed her skin. She wanted to feel his skin against hers. She thought maybe she could ask if he’d caress between her thighs, where she felt an instinctive yearning to be touched, a need for some kind of pressure. She thought his hands would feel good there, touching her. When she’d skimmed her own fingers over herself when she bathed it felt nice, pleasure shooting through her body, she knew he’d only be able to bring her more. But then he stopped and tore his hands off her body like he’d been burned.

She blinked up at him, confused. “Why did you stop?” she asked, voice quiet, unsure.

“I am sorry Tess,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “I shouldn’t have done that. I shouldn’t have touched you like that.”

“Why?” she questioned again, she enjoyed his touch, she wanted him to touch her everywhere. But maybe that wasn’t what he wanted, she frowned slightly. “Do you not like touching me? Do you not want to?”

He caressed her cheek and shook his head. “Of course I want to touch you,” he groaned again. “Of course I do. You’re beautiful and amazing and of course I want to touch you.”

“Then why did you stop?” she asked, cocking her head to the side, not understanding. She grabbed for his hand, pulling it back up toward her breast. “It felt very good when you touched me here, I liked it very much. And I think there are other places that might feel good to be touched, if you wanted to?”

“Tess!” he pulled his hand out from under hers. “If I keep touching you I’m afraid I won’t want to stop, that I will just want more from you.”

“More than kissing and touching?”

He sighed. “Yes, more than kissing and touching. Which is exactly why I can’t…”
She bit at her lip, pulling her knees in towards herself, she thought she knew what he meant, she’d read enough about love. “You want to make love to me?” she asked, unable to hide the nervous tremble and hopeful lilt to her voice.

Scott coughed, nearly choking on his own spit, grappling with his words. Finally he nodded but said, “But we shouldn’t...we can’t.”

“Do you love me?” she asked, hopeful, ignoring what he’s said, focusing solely on his nodding head.

He nodded again. “Very much. I love you very much, Tessa.”

“Then you should make love to me,” she smiled at him, bringing her hand to his cheek. “Because I love you too.”

“Tess,” he breathed her name, resting his forehead against hers. “You are so amazing, so beautiful and I love you...but—”

“But what? Isn’t that what you’re meant to do when you love someone? To share that love,” she paused, reaching for the book on the small table next to her bed. He watched her quietly as she flipped to where she knew there was a passage that said exactly what she wanted. “They fell into bed together and made their love corporeal, it was as if their souls had come together, joined in the act of love making.”

He stroked her arm, smiling gently at her before sighing. “Tessa, do you even know what that means?”

She laughed. “Don’t insult my vocabulary Scott, of course I know what it means. It means related to the body rather than the spirit to make it...uh physical.”

He sighed again, closing his eyes. “Physical...yes.”

She rose up on her knees and took his face in both her hands, kissing him, before tucking her hand inside his shirt and resting her palm over his heart, feeling it’s rapid beat course through her. “I love you, Scott.”

He kissed her back, his words a whisper against her lips. “I love you.”

It was like now that they’d both said the words they couldn’t hold them back anymore. She wanted to lean her head out the window and shout it to the world, to anyone that might hear. After years spent alone with no company save for fairytales she finally felt like she was living in one. I love you, I love you, I love you she shouted in her own head.

His hands began to explore her body again, over the fabric of her dress. She sighed into him, becoming pliable under his touch. When he finally, reluctantly pulled away again, tucking his fists into his sides she reached for the hem of her night dress and pulled it over her head.

Scott’s eyes went wide and he let out a little gasp before tearing them away from her, searching for something on the bed. “Tess,” he hissed. “What are you doing?”

Tessa bit her lip and frowned. “I thought I was meant to undress, in order to make love...isn’t that part of it? I’m sorry, was I wrong? The books don’t always say much about it, but that...that’s what the books say.”

Scott found a sheet from the bed and wrapped it around her body to cover her. He shook his head.
“You're not wrong...no...but...”

“But you don’t want to see me like this?” the vulnerability was clear in her voice, her confidence fading along with Scott’s own convictions.

You see, as a young man of nineteen of course he wanted what Tessa was offering, he wanted it very much. He, however, wanted to do it the right way. If you remember from earlier, reader, a conversation with his mother from another time about another girl, one who might not even be real, played itself on a loop. For god’s sake, Scott, marry her first, his mother’s voice rattled inside his head.

“Of course I want to...I want to see you naked,” he paused. “You’re beautiful.”

She smiled again, the most beautiful smile and started to pull the sheet off to expose herself to him, but he stopped her movement.

“I want to marry you,” he rushed out, hoping to better explain his hesitation without hurting her. “I want to do this right. I love you Tessa, I want to marry you first.”

She smiled, smoothing her hand down his cheek and in that moment he looked so much like the boy of five years before. “You’ve asked me this before,” she said. “My answer is the same. I promised that I would marry you when we were older and now, we are older.”

Scott looked at her curiously, confusion transforming his face, furrowing his brow and setting his lips in a straight line. “You...how? There was a girl once...I remember it like a dream...but...it can’t be, she disappeared.”

Tessa nodded. “That very night my aunt brought me here.”

“You’re her, Tessa. You’re the girl from my dreams,” he reached out to hold both her cheeks in his hands, a bright smile slowly spreading across his lips. “I feel like I’ve loved you most of my life. It’s fate that I found you again.”

She leaned in to kiss him. “It was indeed. I’m sorry you had to wait so long to find me.”

“It was worth it, Tessa. You’re worth waiting for, my love.”

Overjoyed with the fact that he was beginning to remember her Tessa nuzzled into his chest, just to be closer to him. “We should make good on our promise then,” she said softly. “It’s been five years, we are older... I want to marry you Scott.”

“We have no priest,” he said. “No witnesses.”

Tessa smiled looking out at the moon that shone brightly through the window. “We have the moon and the stars. We can make vows, they will be our witnesses.”

“Tess,” Scott said her name not quite like a question, looking out the window himself contemplating.

“It’s a full moon,” she offered. “They’re always a little bit magical. I’m sure your God will hear us and understand.”

Scott watched her, sitting in the bright light of the full moon, in nothing but the sheet that was still draped loosely around her body. Her dark hair shimmered in the light, little flowers blooming from the tips of it. In the light he could make out every one of the freckles that dotted her skin,
constellations like the stars that literally shone in her eyes. He really, truly did love her. A love that rivaled the ones in the stories she liked to read to him. He felt it fiercely. And maybe the night did feel a little bit magical. He had just discovered that the little girl from his memories, the ones that seemed worn and faded like dreams, was the same girl before him now, was his Tessa. The same Tessa who sat before him. Maybe it was actually a very magical night.

“Okay,” he said, before the lines of doubt could cast themselves upon her face again. “We should marry ourselves, right here, right now under the stars and the moon.”

Tessa bounced excitedly on her knees, leaning over to give him one quick peck on the lips before shuffling over closer to the window, directly in the moonlight. “Right here,” she said.

Scott followed her, kneeling on the floor across from her in front of the window. She took his hands in hers, smiling brightly, full of a child like giddiness. “You are quite extraordinary,” Scott laughed, adjusting their hands so that their fingers were intertwined. “How should we start?” he asked.

“I suppose,” she started, trying to conjure up all the knowledge she had from books about romantic proclamations, “we just tell each other how much we love one another and promise to love each other forever? Would you like me to go first?”

He nodded.

“Scott,” she began, looking up from their joined hands into his eyes. “I wished for you to come find me every single night since I arrived in this tower. My memories of your kindness kept me going and gave me hope. Now you’re here, you found me, and I couldn’t wish for anything more. I love you and I want to continue loving you as long as we both live and forever after. I want to be your wife and I want to make love to you,” she smiled at him, her cheeks reddening.

Scott went to run his thumb along the blush in her cheeks only to find himself unable to move his hands. He looked down at their joined hands to discover that Tessa’s vines had grown, snaking down her arms and wrapping around their hands to bind them together.

“Magic,” she said with a smile, squeezing his hands just a bit tighter.

Scott kisses both her cheeks. “Magic indeed.”

Tessa looked at him expectantly, with such unabashed joy and want. He took a moment just to take her in, in all her magical wonder before clearing his throat to begin his own vows.

“Tessa, I don’t know where to begin. I feel like I haven’t had enough time with you, that the past five years you’ve been missing from me...but at the same time it’s as if you’ve been with me forever. I feel like you’re a part of me, like the idea of you has kept me alive, like I’ve spent all this time searching for you without even knowing it. I love you with all my heart and I want to be married to you. I vow to love you and keep you safe, to always find you wherever you are for the rest of my life.”

Scott could feel the vines tightening around their wrists before releasing and slithering their way back in to Tessa’s hair. When he looked down they each had a matching mark on the inside of their wrist, a small white patch that glowed in the moonlight and looked so similar to the flowers that sprouted from Tessa’s hair.

“See, magic,” Tessa said again, a face splitting grin. “Now we’re bound to each other, under the magic of the full moon.”
“I like that idea,” Scott smiled and kissed her.

Tessa smiled against his lips before standing up, letting the sheet fall from around her shoulders and pool around her feet. “Will you make love to me now?” she asked, backing away toward her bed. “I want to lie with you like a wife does her husband.”

It felt like all the air had left Scott’s lungs, the words she said, he knew sounded seductive, an offer he didn’t want to refuse. But they were juxtaposed with the way in which she said them, so earnestly, her voice soft and sweet and full of hope and wonder, the words spoken around a bashful smile. It was like she were asking for no more than a simple favour.

Tessa had made it to the bed and Scott could do nothing but stare, unable to move from where he stood, immobilized by what he knew was to come. A rush of both excitement and guilt in equal measure coursed through him. Excitement for what the near future had in store, excitement at seeing Tessa naked amongst the deep red sheets, but guilt at the thought that maybe she didn’t know enough about what she was asking for.

He approached slowly, smiling when he noticed the way she looked at him. If love could be described with a single look, that would be it. The muscles in her face were relaxed, soothed by what she saw and her eyes were wide and gleaming. Looking at him as if he were everything. It was almost enough to make him look away.

Scott had never been so close to having sex before, kissing and a bit of touching yes but nothing like this and he’d never loved someone like he loved her. It was overwhelming and he found himself growing hard just looking at her. His heart beat frantically in his chest, pumping love and desire into every part of him. But he knew, still to take things slowly and carefully.

“Are you sure this is what you want, T?” he asked as he sat on the edge of her bed. He reached out to gently stroke her arm, but didn’t chance touching her anywhere else, just yet.

She nodded. “Yes Scott,” she said, placing her own hand over his where it rested on her arm. “I want everything with you.”

He kissed her then, long and slow, one hand gripping tightly on her bicep as the other found its way to her hair. Her hand tugged at his shirt as she kissed him back with more fierceness than she’d yet to display, tucking itself under the fabric, placing her palm directly against his skin.

When she finally pulled away she was breathless and a little flushed. “Should you not be bare as well?” she asked, her voice sweet and soft even through her laboured breaths.

Scott hesitated. Though his body urged him to jump right in, to move the act along, it yearned for her, but he wanted to wait for them both to be ready, and he knew lying naked with her it would have caused things to move far more quickly then he wanted. He cleared his throat, “Maybe we should wait until we are a bit, uh, closer until I undress.”

She blinked up at him, confusion marring her features. “Are we not to make love now?” she asked.

Scott shifted closer to her on the bed, kissing her nose and then her brow to soothe her. “Soon,” he said. “I would really, really like to. But I think since tonight is the first time, we should take it slowly my love.”

“Okay,” she said, though sounded a bit unsure.

“You wanted me to touch you, earlier,” he said. “I could do that now, if you want.”
She nodded moving a little in the bed to give him more space next to her. “Please,” she said.

He started simply, by tracing a finger up her arm, over her collarbone and down the other arm. She shuddered against his touch, inhaling sharply and he watched the rise of her bare chest with rapt interest.

“You can touch them,” she said, watching the line of his eyes to her chest. “I’d like that.” She spoke with the confidence of someone who didn’t know to be self conscious.

“Yeah?” Scott questioned, looking to her eyes.

She nodded with a smile and he moved to drag his fingers over each breast, circling the soft skin before taking them in his hands, kneading and exploring, listening to every sound she made as he touched her. With his hands still at her chest he leaned in and kissed her, moving himself so he was more overtop of her, parting her lips with his tongue as he ran a thumb over her nipple. He was met with the reward of her needy sounds vibrating against his lips. It was a rush and he found himself eagerly grinding against her, kissing down her jaw and neck.

Her breathing quickened and her hands ventured up his back to his shoulders pulling him down against her. “Oh,” she said, as his lips sucked against her pulse point. “Oh, that...that feels good. Can you keep doing that...kissing me...more...” she managed through laboured breaths.

“Can I kiss you here?” he asked, grazing his hand over her nipple.

She nodded, not able to imagine how that wouldn’t feel good, feeling so lit up by his touch that she felt there was very little he could ask she’d refuse. She’d offered herself up to him entirely. “Yes please, Scott.”

He kissed down her throat, over her sternum, studying her with his lips. Never in his life had Scott so desperately wanted to learn someone else’s body better than even his own. To understand all the ins and outs and what would best please it. But with Tessa, he wanted nothing more than to know how to make her feel good, to show her with his hands his mouth, and later while sheathed inside her, how much he loved her. He loved her so much. So completely. He loved her sweet innocence, her curiosity, her love for books, her voice, her eyes... just all of her. He especially loved the fierceness with which she loved him, her conviction in it. It revealed to him a fire that maybe even she didn’t know yet lived inside her. God he loved her. And would love her until the day he died and beyond.

He kissed her breasts, each one, tenderly before finding her nipple and sucking it into his mouth, circling it with his tongue until she was moaning beneath him, arching her back and clutching at his hair.

“Does that feel good?” he asked.

Her eyes were closed and breathing laboured when she nodded. “Yes. Yes. I like that very much.”

He smiled against her skin feeling a surge of pride.

Tessa, who for her part knew very little of what to expect from this whole experience, save for what her books told her—waxing poetic about being connected both body and soul, about making love, about throes of passion, and joining together—let Scott and her own body tell her what it wanted, let them guide her. She liked his lips on her own and liked them on her skin as he peppered kisses down the column of her throat, on her breasts and chest and back up the side of her neck again. She liked his hands where they were gripping tightly at her hips and as they explored the flat
expanse of her abdomen, crawling over her ribs and kneading her breasts, mapping out her body. But there was one place he hadn’t touched yet and she yearned for it. Her body was screaming to be touched there.

She was beginning to feel an ache at the apex of her thighs, the centre of her begging to be touched. She wondered if his kisses would feel as good there, imagined they would. She felt good when she’d touched herself there in the past learning the ins and outs of her own body. But it’d never been like this, she’d never felt so overcome by the feeling of wanting to be touched there. She was so consumed with need that she wanted to take his hand and put it right where she wanted it herself. But she didn’t, because of course, that wasn’t like her, reader, she’d never demand, although though she was getting close.

“Scott,” she said, a questioning lilt to her voice. “Scott, could you touch me?” she grabbed his hand and didn’t quite put it where she needed it but hovered it over her centre. “Please touch me here?”

“Tess,” he said, holding his hand still just above where she so desperately needed it, taking a deep breath in. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she nodded vigorously, close to begging, but then paused. “Is that’s okay? Is...that’s okay to want, right?”

“Yes,” he kissed her. “Yes, it’s okay. It’s good. It’s very good. And I want whatever you want love. It’s—“ he cut himself off, letting the word dangle there, but didn’t continue.

Scott rearranged his position on the bed so that he was beside her on his side while she lay on her back. He began running his fingers up the insides of her thighs, parting them slightly before very carefully finding where she yearned for his touch. His hands were still exploratory and not enough. She wanted his hands on her, but more... more pressure, more of him, more everything, though she wasn’t sure how to articulate what she needed. But then he began to press a little more firmly, listening to the sounds she made, studying her body and its reactions to help him find the right spot and pace and words became the furthest thing from her mind. And then his lips were on hers again, while he touched her and she was lost to anything else.

“Tess,” he said eventually, trying to pick up where he’d cut himself short before, nerves clear in the slight tremble to his normally steady voice. “Do you know, this is where we are to be joined, when we make love?”

Tessa shook her head, sucking in a sharp breath, she’d had some ideas, imaginings. He moved his finger downward to circle her opening, his touch light, sending shivers up through her entire body. He pressed himself against her and she felt something hard between his legs through his trousers. His manhood. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

He immediately stopped the movement of his hand, stilling it against her flesh. “Tess, my love, are you alright? We can stop any of this whenever you want, okay? I love you and I just want you to feel okay.”

She opened her eyes to look at him, meet his own eyes dead on, gazing up at how tenderly he looked at her, even through his own arousal. “I want you,” she whispered. “I want whatever it means to be fully with you. I love you.”

“I love you too,” he said, kissing her nose and both her cheeks before finding her lips again.

Reader, I am sure you can guess what happens next. Does the part of the story where our young
lovers consummate their union need to be written out? Or maybe it is, necessary to know, so that you, reader, can understand the depth of their love. Do you need to know how Scott parted her, gently, slipping one finger inside of her, watching her face closely for any signs of discomfort as he slowly began to move it within her, stroking against her inner walls, carefully adding a second finger when she keened and told him how good it felt to have a part of him in her, how she wanted more? How he put his lips back on her breasts, his breath ghosting over their peaks while he stroked her with the surety of a long time lover, seeming to instinctively know what she needed?

If we talk about that, you probably need to know the part where she asked tentatively if she could see him, touch him and he shucked off his shirt and removed his trousers, baring himself to her. And then is it worthy to note how her eyes widened at the sight of him, both in nervousness and curiosity? How curiosity and desire won over and she licked her lips as she reached to take him in her hand? How she first gently ran her fingers along the length of him, unsure what to do, but wanting to feel him under her touch?

He shuddered under the lightness of her touch, hips stuttering. Then she wrapped her hand around him feeling his girth, imagining it inside her as his fingers had been. She began to move her hand up his shaft, feeling the veins throbbing underneath her hand. By the time she reached the head, running her thumb over it he reached his own hand out to stop her. His breathing was laboured, his jaw clenched and Tessa looked at him, surprised.

“Does that not feel good for you? Like when you touch me? Did I do something wrong?” she’d asked, the questions spilling out of her in a rush.

“No,” he said, trying to regain control of his breathing. “No, it feels very good, Tess. Too good…I won’t…I won’t be able to last…I’ll spill into your hand before we even get a chance to make love if you keep touching me,” he said, bumbling over the words, trying to explain to her.

He did, reader, explain as much as he could to her before and Tessa took it all in, before kissing him and telling him it was time to stop talking and let their bodies do what they were meant to do. He didn’t hesitate after that, whispering in her ear for her to lay back against the mattress.

“I’ve got you, T,” he said. “No matter what we’re together and no matter what, I love you.”

With that he took her hand in his, intertwining their fingers and holding it next to her head on the pillow. With his other hand he lined himself up with her entrance. With all the care and gentleness he could muster through his body’s urges, he slowly pushed inside her. He paid attention to her face again, to her body, looking for any signs of discomfort.

He paused once he was buried fully inside her, watching as her face pinched ever so slightly and she closed her eyes.

“Tess?” he asked, reaching a hand up to stroke her cheek. “Are you alright? Did I hurt you?”

She shook her head. “No, you could never. It’s just…a lot,” she wrapped her arms around him and pulled him in closer. “But I like it. I like feeling this close to you,” she was a bit out of breath, trying hard to finish what she set out to say. “Can we move slowly?”

Scott nodded and with slow, controlled thrusts, he worked them both up to the edge, only picking up pace to push them both over. He came inside her with a shout, the moment her body began to tense around him, every muscle in her body tightening, before releasing, leaving her feeling liquid.

He kissed her softly as he rolled away to lay next to her and she placed her hand gently right above his heart.
“I love you,” she said. “I love you so, so much.”

He smiled at her, placing his hand over hers on his chest. “I love you too.”

“Can we do this every night?” she asked, a bashful smile spreading across her lips, further reddening her still flushed cheeks.

He laughed and kissed her forehead. “Yes, whenever you like.”

They did continue to make love every evening that followed. Being teenagers and newly in love—though, reader, you must understand their bond ran deeper than anything you could imagine, carved in the stones of fate—their appetites for each other were insatiable. Like before, Scott came to her in the early evening, just as the sun was sinking in the sky and left in the morning, so as not to be caught by the witch if she came to visit Tessa.

They would talk and read, but mostly enjoyed the pleasures of each other’s bodies. Tessa did eventually ask Scott if he would put his mouth between her legs and kiss her there, just to see if it felt as good as she thought it might. He happily obliged her request and it felt even better than she’d imagined. She’d returned the favour, exploring him with her mouth and if the sounds he made and the way he gripped at her hair said anything, he really enjoyed the experience.

They continued to learn the ins and outs of each others bodies but with their distraction conversations on how and when to get Tessa out of the tower and when were often cut short. They knew they needed a long enough length of rope or ladder for her to climb down on, though Scott had yet to find anything that would work. Tessa was also unsure whether or not the witch had cast any spells or curses preventing her from leaving.

But she wasn’t worried yet, as much as she wanted to leave and be by Scott’s side during the day and not just in the evenings when he came to her, she thought they had time.

And they did have time, a few weeks and then a month and more past them by. Until Tessa started feeling ill. It was nothing terribly bad, she didn’t feel feverish, just sluggish and her stomach refused to settle. After the fourth day that she awoke nauseated Scott began to worry.

“I will ask my mother about it tonight,” he said, voice laced with concern, running a thumb along the apple of her cheek. “She knows all the illnesses and all the remedies. If it doesn’t resolve maybe we should try to get you out of here soon, my love. My mom will look after you.”

“Do you think she’d remember me?” Tessa asked, biting her lip to hold the nausea at bay.

“I think she will,” he smiled. “Magic has nothing on Alma’s love.”

Tessa smiled at him before tucking herself back into the pillows to rest some more. She was asleep when Scott left and it was her turn to worry when he did not return that evening. Or the next.

It was on the third morning since Scott had left, vowing to get her out of the tower that the witch came to visit Tessa. Tessa was still feeling ill, her cheeks flushed, but she knew that the feeling would pass as the day went on, she felt tired and there was a tightening in her lower stomach but otherwise she felt perfectly fine and thought that though Scott’s concern was admirable it was unfounded. All she needed was for him to be there with her.

The witch climbed her vines, as usual, but by the time she hooked her fingers over the ledge of the window and hauled herself over Tessa was winded from the effort of maintaining her vines, and feeling ill again.
“Are you sick, child?” the witch asked, observing Tessa’s pallor.

Tessa nodded. “The past week or so, I haven’t been feeling myself, but I’m sure it will pass.”

The witch cocked her head, looking more closely at Tessa, noticing how her dress was pulled tight across her chest and stomach, the fairness of her skin and flush in her cheeks.

“Have you had someone here with you?” she asked, voice eerily steady. “Has a man come to visit you?”

Tessa sucked in a deep breath, she didn’t want to hide her love for Scott and Tessa did not lie but memories of the night she was brought to the tower flooded her and she was suddenly aware that the witch would never understand her and Scott’s love. The witch wouldn’t let her go. So she shook her head.

“You’re a liar,” the witch said, her pitch increasing. “The evidence of your lie is inside your belly.”

“No,” she said, her voice carried more force than she thought it could.

“Liar!” the witch shouted. “You’ve ruined everything! Seventeen years and you’ve ruined it all for a boy. You let him take your virtue, for what?”

“He didn’t take it, I gave it to him! He loves me!” Tessa’s ferocity marched the witch’s. “I love him!”

“He doesn’t love you, stupid child. You gave him what he desired without a thought.”

“He does love me, and it was what I wanted!”

The witch’s face had turned a shade of crimson, anger radiating off her in warm waves. “You’ve ruined yourself Tessa. And now you are no good to me. You’re no longer pure.”

You see, reader, the witch really never intended to raise Tessa as her own daughter. She never loved her or wanted her, she just wanted what Tessa could offer her: her beauty, her purity, her life—eternal youth. The flowers from the beginning of our story, the ones that looked remarkably similar to the ones to sprout from Tessa’s hair, the ones with vines that had slithered and snaked up Jim Virtue’s body threatening to squeeze the life out of him, were not just plants.

Once, long, long ago those plants had been girls just like Tessa. Beautiful young women with vines that grew from the ends of their long hair. Sweet girls, more innocent than most—though none so much as Tessa. The witch had lured these girls to her once she found them, and putting them in a trance so they laid down in the dirt and were planted just like seeds. Their flowers blossomed for a decade or two before the next girl had to be found. The flowers that bloomed amongst the vines sustained the witch’s youth, kept her alive...but she needed to consume them frequently or else she began to feel her body failing her, her great age catching up to her. But she knew right from the start that Tessa would be different, she would be the one to give the witch eternal life, not tied to drinking tea made from flowers.

Tessa, born in mid May when the flowers were at their purest, sweetest, with a heart as light as unfiltered rays of sun would have been her key to living forever. The heart of the purest soul, carved out and planted in hallowed ground on the eve of her eighteenth year, with the pure white petals of her hair will sprout a single flower that if consumed will provide eternal youth, incomparable beauty.
But now, having given herself to a man, the witch believed her to be impure, mistaking purity of heart with virginity. But Tessa and Scott’s union was that of true love and she was still just as pure of heart and soul. Luckily for Tessa and the child that now lived in her womb, the witch didn’t see it that way.

“I love him,” was all Tessa was able to manage through the tears streaming down her cheeks, choked out through sobs. “I love him and I know he loves me.”

“He doesn’t love you,” the witch snarled. “If he loves you why isn’t he here? Does he only come at night? Just to fuck you? He just wanted what you could give him.”

“He’ll be back, he promised,” she sobbed, falling to her knees. It had been nearly three days since she’d seen him, but she knew he’d come back for her. “He promised. He promised. He’ll be back.” She repeated like a mantra, making herself believe it to be true.

Scott would return, reader, but it would be too late. You see, he had been away so long because he’d been coming up with a way to get Tessa safely from the tower. As soon as Scott had spoken to his mother, asked about the symptoms of his “friend” he’d figured out what was ailing Tessa. She was with child, his child. At this realization Scott knew he had no time to waste freeing his love from the witch. Scott could find no rope long enough for Tessa to climb down, so he’d spent the last two and a half days fashioning one. He’d told his mother everything and promised to bring Tessa straight to the farm where his mother could help care for her and eventually help deliver their child. Scott had a plan, but he was too late.

“You stupid, naive child,” the witch said, prying Tessa’s hands from where they covered her face, catching her tears. “He doesn’t want you anymore,” she laughed in Tessa’s face wanting to inflict as much pain as she could into the girl she felt betrayed her. “You are with child, dear. You’re no good to him anymore. He won’t come back for you, you’re spoiled and he doesn’t want you. He never loved you.”

Tessa’s hands instinctively went to cover her stomach as she sucked in a sharp breath. She was going to have a baby. Scott’s baby. A child that they created with love. She wanted to cry all over again, tears of both fear and overwhelming happiness. But the witch was still standing over her, and the hatred in her eyes consumed Tessa.

“He loves me,” was all Tessa managed, her voice shaky but still full of conviction. “He loves me and he will love our child.”

The witch struck her across the face, leaving Tessa’s cheek red and raw, her lip bleeding where the witch’s long nail had caught on it.

“You will never see him again,” the witch said through gritted teeth. “He will die for what he’s done, for ruining you for me, and you too, my dear flower, will pay for what you’ve taken from me.”

Tessa ran to her bed, burying her face in the pillows, allowing her sobs to overtake her while the witch paced the room, until exhaustion overtook her and she’d fallen asleep.

While Tessa was sleeping, her prince returned to her, as she’d known he would. Tessa’s vines sensed his presence at the base of the tower and began growing and creeping toward him of their own accord, drawn to him. The witch watched the vines slither across the floor and out the window, and when she peered out she saw Scott, waiting patiently for them to reach him to climb into the tower.
Anger and hatred filled her, bubbling up inside, too much to contain. She believed Tessa to belong to her, and this man climbing up to greet her had stolen what was hers. She reached for the hilt of the dagger she kept tucked away around her hip as Scott ascended. She watched him climb with the surety of someone who had done this countless times and the witch wondered how long he’d been coming to Tessa. How long it took for Tessa to give this boy herself. She wondered briefly if she’d taught the girl more, if she hadn’t allowed all the fairytales and romances to fill up her head and her heart if Tessa would have sent the boy away.

As soon as Scott reached the ledge of the window, but while his hands were still gripping sleeping Tessa’s vines, the witch took her dagger and sliced cleanly through the tops of the vines, right where they met Tessa’s dark hair.

Tessa awoke with a scream of agony as her vines were so violently separated from her. She gasped for air as she sat up in her bed.

Just before Scott began plummeting towards the ground below he heard Tessa scream. The sound pierced his heart and made his blood run cold, so afraid for the safety of his love he hardly registered he was falling until he was halfway to the ground.

“Tessa!” he managed to call out to her before the blinding sting of thorns pierced him. His hands were tangled in the thick vines that fell with him and he was unable to shield his face. As he fell through the thick bushes of thorns they pierced his eyes, the poison on them burning and blinding him.

Blood poured from his eyes, dripped from his skin, but he was alive. Barely.

“Tessa!” Scott called again, using all the strength he had left to scramble out of the thorns, but without being able to see he couldn’t orient himself. “Tessa! Tessa! Tessa!” he called and called spinning circles, moving further and further into the woods, away from where Tessa withered in pain and shock at the loss of her vines, a living growing part of herself, connected to her soul.

Tessa’s screams filled the tower and she did not hear Scott calling for her. She never knew he’d come back for her, that he’d realized she was pregnant and was planning for their family, that he was trying to save her from her fate.

The witch took her dagger and raised it over Tessa’s heart, wanting her to pay for what had been taking from her, for the eternal youth the witch would never have Tessa, she believed, still owed her life.

**

Pregnant, lost and alone, seventeen-year-old Tessa stumbled through the forest, heading forever eastward in hopes of finding the farm she thought she’d once upon a time seen from her window in the tower.

You see, reader, as the witch held her dagger aloft over Tessa, she couldn’t bring herself to plunge it into the girl’s heart. Seventeen years of caring for her—in her own way—of watching her grow and the pleading look in Tessa’s deep green eyes all stopped her. She couldn’t do it. Instead the witch cast Tessa out, to let the elements claim her. She believed that Tessa wouldn’t be able to survive the night alone in the woods.

But Tessa was clever, and determined for the life growing inside her to thrive and for that she needed to find help. After what felt like days she finally did. Tessa stumbled into the farm, bordered by vines, on which grew flowers that looked so similar to those that used to grow on her
own vines. Her hands reached out to touch where they had once been, now just crudely cut strands of thick, dark hair.

Tessa continued to where she saw a house and barn, clutching at her abdomen. By the time that Tessa reached the door of the house and rapped her hand three times on the door, exhaustion had overtaken her and she fell into the arms of the woman who opened it.

Kate Virtue opened her front door to be greeted by who she thought must be an apparition, until the girl collapsed into her arms. The girl began to sob, clutching at Kate’s dress, trying desperately to catch her breath. She was a little more slight, not as tall as her elder daughter, but the girl in her arms looked so strikingly similar to her sister, that Kate knew immediately, this was her baby. Her Tessa.

“Tessa,” she breathed in her daughter, the baby she never got to hold. “You came back to me, my baby.”

Kate guided Tessa inside, not letting go. It wasn’t until they were sitting and Tessa’s sobs had abated that she looked up at Kate, taking her in. As soon as their eyes met, Tessa knew, she was overcome with memories that didn’t belong to her.

“You’re my mom,” she said, her voice quiet but sure.

Kate nodded, tears staining her own cheeks. She took in the sight of her daughter, cheek still stained red and lip swollen and split open where the witch had struck her, her hair matted and cut, her nightdress torn and stained with dirt and her heart ached.

Through tears Tessa told Kate about the tower, about the boy who she fell in love with and vowed herself to and the baby that was growing in her stomach. How she didn’t know where Scott was, what had happened to him, but how she still had faith he’d find her and their baby.

Kate held her close and told her of the guilt she felt the last seventeen years after letting Tessa go to the witch. How it had eaten at her everyday. She told Tessa that Jim, her father, had died years ago, an accident while he was trying to trim back the vines at the end of the property. She told Tessa of her siblings and their lives.

Tessa forgave Kate for giving her to the witch all those years ago, telling her she understood she had no choice.

Kate cared for Tessa and when it came time to deliver her baby, she was there along with Tessa’s older sister Jordan, helping her through labour, holding her hand, delivering a healthy baby girl.

When it came to naming the child Tessa picked the name Hazel, after the colour of her father’s eyes.

Tessa wished every night, just as she had in the tower for Scott to find them. Every night when she looked up at the stars she thought of Scott and their vows and she wished for him to find them.

Tessa sang and read to their daughter, the same songs and stories that had once been Scott’s favourites.

As for poor Scott, he spent two years blindly searching for Tessa. He wandered the woods for days before being found by one of his brothers. Alma nursed him back to health and then he set off to find Tessa. His brother came with him to find the tower but Tessa was not there. He searched the woods and couldn’t find her.
It wasn’t until one day when Scott heard it, a familiar song on the wind, being carried right into his heart. Scott let the sound guide him through the woods, woods that he’d searched so often that he could navigate them even without his eyes.

He knew she was here, even though he couldn’t see her.

Tessa was sitting on a stump, just on the edge of the forest next to the farm, Hazel on her knee. Hazel, who had recently begun walking, had fallen and scraped her knee. Tessa was singing to soothe her, one of the songs she knew had been Scott’s favourite and had quickly become their daughter’s as well.

“Tessa!” Scott called as she continued to follow her voice to where she sat.

Tessa’s head shot up, just as Scott sank to his knees in front of her.

“Tessa,” he said, his voice wrapping around each letter like he’d been waiting to say each and every one of them for years. “It’s you.”

“Scott, my prince,” Tessa answered, reaching the hand she wasn’t using to hold Hazel to cup his cheek. “I knew you’d find us. I wished for it.”

“Us?” Scott asked, his voice hopeful.

“Us,” Tessa said, reaching for his hand to place it gently on top of their daughter’s small head.

Scott sobbed and dropped his forehead against Tessa’s. Tessa reached up and ran her thumb under each of his eyes, scarred and fused shut. She found she didn’t have to ask him what happened, touching him she could see his memories as if they were her own.

Tears began to well in her eyes and she pulled him in closer.

“I love you,” she whispered, holding him in one arm, pulling his head against her chest, so he could listen to the steady beating of her heart. With her other arm she still gripped tightly to their daughter—who was looking between the two with curiosity. “I love you.”

As she held him her tears dripped onto his face, rolling over his eyes. And then something truly magical happened. You see, reader, when the witch cut her vines it did not rid Tessa of her magic, just placed all of it inside her. Tessa’s tears healed Scott’s eyes and when he looked up to see the woman he loved, holding their child, he gasped.

“I love you,” he said. “Both of you.”

And, reader, as you can guess they all lived happily ever after.

_The End_

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