The Course of True Love Never Did Run Smooth

by TheOtherCourse (kanevixen)

Summary

Before Tom Hiddleston became a Hollywood name, he treaded the boards of London’s West End theatre community, honing his craft and networking. On the eve of moving halfway around the world to star in his cinematic breakout role as Loki, he has no time for love or romance or heartbreak. But his best friend, a flamboyant gay man with his heart in the right place, has other plans and decides to play cupid. Sparks fly, words flow, and feelings erupt when Tom meets Kristiane Taylor, a Broadway actress, his intellectual and literary equal. In the words of Tom’s idol, Shakespeare, the course of true love never did run smooth.
The Course of True Love
Never Did Run Smooth

by theothercourse
Chapter 1

“Kristie-luv, how the fuck are you? When’s your flight?” My best friend’s voice screamed at me through my mobile phone. The damage was done, the ringing in my ear by reverberation.

Laughing heartedly, I asked, “Are you trying to bellow across the pond? Next time get closer to the coastline, and save the cell towers and your minutes. You are toeing the line of bursting my eardrum by decibel level.” Rolling my eyes, I swung the stage door open with a sturdy tug, squeezing my phone between my shoulder and my ear and trying to juggle my bag on my other side. Waving excitedly to the doorman, I scribbled my initials on the sign-in sheet for the stage manager before making my way upstairs.

Taking my cue, Terry exclaimed defensively, “I am on the coast! I can see water from my dressing room.”

“Honey, that’s the Thames, not the Atlantic.”

I could almost hear him rolling his eyes at me. “Cupcake, you know I don’t know anything about astronomy.”

“Or geography, apparently…” I trailed off in fits of giggles, my head bowed and my shoulders shaking from the effort. He was winding me up on purpose, and I loved the rapport we shared.

Terry laughed at me. “Anyways, I’m just fucking ecstatic that you are nearly here. Where are you now babe?”

Heaving myself up the steep theatre stairs up two floors to my dressing room, I sucked in a deep breath. “At the theatre, I have a few minutes before I have to go warm up. How’d the final dress go? Are you ready for opening?” I deposited my bag on the dressing table, turned the mirror lights on and flopped down on the pink futon.

Brushing me off, Terry said, “Oh, I’ll fill you in on everything tomorrow. When will you be in?”

I beamed proudly, “About 4pm your time. I’m staying at the Grand at Trafalgar Square.”

“Excellent! You’ll be in for the show and to be my plus one for the cast party tomorrow night?”

Terry had an uncanny ability to turn a statement into a question all in one breath. “Will you be conscious enough?”

Tilting my head and furrowing my brow, I said, “Terry, surely you’ve found yourself a man to wine and dine you.”

“Girl, you know it! This one needs some convincing he’s gay. I’m working on it.”

“No doubt in my mind. Are they rolling out the red carpet? How do Brits celebrate opening night?”

This was his first opening night in England. Considering the cast and crew were going to the Rake, a local pub that they’d been to nearly every night after rehearsals, this one would prove to be an informal party. “No. No red carpet. Probably more like grabbing a beer at the bar. Only it sounds more respectable as having a pint at the pub,” he said with an aristocratic British accent.
“I’ll be sure to have something suitable to wear in my suitcase,” mentally taking inventory of everything I tried to shove in there earlier. Did I leave my little black dress in or out?

Terry cut off my train of thought with, “Did you pack enough for six people to live on for three months without duplicating garments again?”

Bristling slightly, I said, “Damn straight. Pack light is not in my vocabulary. How the hell am I supposed to know what I want to wear ten days from now when I can’t decide when I’m standing in my closet with all possibilities in front of me? They’re lucky that I don’t lug my entire closet into England.”

“I remember how you were on tour with Pippin. You caused the stage manager more than three hissy fits,” Terry laughed at my typical behavior before turning sentimental, “I’ve missed you powerfully, babe,” he said suddenly.

“New York is not the same without you,” I mused. “Listen, I’ve got to go warm up. Tomorrow when I get in, I think I might need a nap and to clean up after the plane.”

Following my train of thought, Terry told me, “I’ll leave your ticket for you at the box office. It may be too crazy to meet up with you before the performance with it being opening night.”

“I figured, its okay. Thanks for getting me the ticket.”

“Will you have your phone with you?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I’ll call you. Go warm up. I’ll see you tomorrow. Travel safe. Love you.”

“Love you, too, Terry. See you tomorrow.”

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There is nothing like seeing a friend after a long absence. The feeling of jubilation and folly that accompanied being in my friend’s company again became my single-minded focus. The rest of the world fell away as I screamed excitedly, running across the square at full tilt. I flew into Terry’s open arms, jumped up wrapping my legs around his waist, and threw my arms around his neck. Releasing a whoop of laughter, Terry held me close. Happiness didn’t begin to explain my feeling of elation, or his by the sounds he made. We had been separated too long, since we had been in the transplant production of Pippin from first national tour to Broadway.

It was Thursday night after the opening performance of A Midsummer Night’s Dream. I had arrived in London from New York City earlier that afternoon to see my best friend own the stage as Puck at the Globe Theatre. I was more than proud and beyond thrilled to see him. He had come a long way since our days at Tisch studying musical theatre.

Terry and I held each other for a long time, laughing and screaming. Eventually Terry placed me back on my feet, hardly believing that I was standing before him. He reached out and touched my hair, caressed my cheek and held my hand to confirm I was there. His stunned, wide-eyed expression told me that he was humbled by my willingness to be there for his opening night. The airfare alone was a big expense, not to mention all of my vacation time. He’d been living in and loving London for the past year, and after being with him every day for 2 years prior, it was difficult being without him. I never once doubted that I meant as much to him; he was my very best friend and my soul mate.
I gushed, my voice registering at a higher octave than normal, “You were amazing, babe! Truly incredible!”

Terry smiled, squeezing my hand, “Do you mean it?”

I scoffed, my eyebrows rising in surprise. “Of course I mean it. This isn’t one of my theatre lies. You were amazing. I can’t wait to see it again.”

Trying for modest that never rang true, Terry said, “I think you’re biased. But I’ll take it anyways.” I winked at him, because we both knew how incredibly talented he was in nearly every way.

Hand in hand, we made our way to the local pub hosting the cast party without acknowledging direction. We easily fell in step with one another, our conversation coming fast and furious.

Tugging on his arm, I demanded, “Terry, tell me everything. I want to know all about the show and your castmates.”

Taking a deep breath, Terry explained, “The director is a tyrant. I’m sure that the entire cast has good taste, like me, and doesn’t appreciate belittling and insults. Everybody hates him with a fiery passion. Blessing that he made it to opening night alive.”

With sympathy, I offered some understanding. “Terry, I’m sorry. That isn’t easy.”

He shook his head. “But it’s not been all bad. The cast is amazing, incredibly talented and patient. Most of them are English, and put up with the brash American.” He gestured towards himself good-naturedly.

Laughing along with him, I said, “Good people. I’m not sure New York is prepared to have you back. They’re still reeling for the last go around.”

Playfully, Terry poked me in the ribs with his elbow. “Hey! Every city in the world loves me and certainly feels the loss of me when I’m not there.”

Brushing him off and our ribbing of one another, I asked, “So what’s the gossip? Who’s sleeping with whom? Have there been any feuds?”

Terry gave me quick rundown of the cast and crew, including characters and actor’s names. I was hoping Terry wouldn’t test me later, because I was terrible with names. I was warned to stay clear of someone named Luke, a bloke who’d slept his way through nearly all the females in the cast. Tom, Amelia and Madison were the people Terry was closest with. However the entire cast was close because the director was such an ass.

Terry finished his rundown as we arrived at a blue-colored storefront. The Rake was the smallest pub in London with an impressive array of beer, was a tiny blue building, with outdoor seating in the back. The cast had effectively taken over all of the back outdoor area with their raucous laughter and inappropriate chatter. Naturally the energy of the show infused them with excitement, and they wouldn’t be coming down for hours. The barmaids kept the beer flowing, increasing their tips and the ever growing tab. The party was well under way when we arrived.

Without ordering directly from a barmaid, Terry and I made our way to the outdoor seating area with a beer in each hand. We fell towards a round table with white chairs under taupe umbrella with three cast members I recognized instantly. All three stood to greet an enthusiastic Terry who greeted the two females with kisses on the cheek and the male with slaps on the back after placing one beer on the table.
The beautiful blonde who had played Hermia in the production introduced herself as Madison first. She offered her right hand to shake in my direction with a warm friendly smile. “Madison. You must be Kristiane. We’ve heard so much about you from Terrence.”

Terry exclaimed, “I was getting to introductions!”

I left one of my pints on the table, smiled and accepted the proffered hand, shaking it briefly. “So nice to meet you, Madison.” I repeated her name in an attempt to commit it to memory. “Please call me Kristie. My full name sounds so formal.”

Terry introduced me to Amelia, a quiet, shy brunette who had played Helena next. We shook hands and exchanged more pleasantries.

Terry then turned his attention to the man who had played Lysander, and introduced him as Tom. “Tom, this is my best friend, Kristie. Kristie, my British you, Tom.”

I looked up and smiled at the incredibly tall and impossibly gorgeous man. A huge boyish smile with straight white teeth was my reception. I am solid 5 foot 6 inches tall and measured just shy of this man’s chin. We were polar opposites, save the big blue eyes and obnoxiously wide, white-toothed smiles. Where he was pale with big bushy, curly blond hair, I was tanned with straight brown hair. His build was impressively wide, where mine is more on the average side. We shook hands, silently sizing each other up. Terry was common ground, yet we were strangers. That’s not to say, Terry hadn’t mentioned him, he had many times, but he wasn’t what I had pictured in my head.

Tom’s eyebrows raised and his eyes twinkled under the soft glow of the lanterns hanging around the tables. Tom addressed me in a very friendly manner, “Kristie, it’s an absolute pleasure to finally put a face to the name. Terrence has waxed poetic ad nauseum in your regard.”

I quipped, “I apologize in advance. I’m afraid I cannot live up to such praise.”

Terry threw an arm around my shoulders and interjected, “He didn’t say it was all good.”

All five of us laughed as we settled around the table to enjoy our drinks, with me sandwiched between the two men. I listened and watched the four friends talked animatedly about the rehearsal process and any off-stage pranks and mishaps while nursing my first beer. I didn’t feel like an outsider or uncomfortable, more of an observer, laughing along with the participants. As the conversation progressed, their stories were directed towards me, to which I commented or joked.

Madison was friendly and outgoing with a very dry wit. She didn’t seem as educated as the two other Brits at the table. She wasn’t at all stupid, just not as well-read. Amelia was very shy and reserved with a very quick sense of humor. Her quips always took everyone by surprise because of her timid nature, sending everyone into fits of giggles. Tom came across as well educated, endlessly patient and tirelessly polite, with a great appreciation with silliness. He almost embodied the very definition of British gentleman, without the stuffiness.

Eventually the candor turned to me. Tom curiously asked, “What would you like to accomplish while in London?”

Taking a deep swig to finish my beer (one down), I squinted my eyes, trying to remember all I added to my list I’d written on the plane. I thoughtfully considered before answering. “I want to see and experience everything. London is beautiful and it’s been four years since I was here last.”

Madison leaned in closer and inquired, “What did you see last time?”
I looked up, recalling my memories. “Tower of London, the Globe, St Paul’s, and Kensington Palace… I fell in love with Trafalgar Square. I was able to watch the big changing of the guard parade thing at Buckingham Palace too.”

Well into their second and third drinks, Amelia, Madison and Terry fell into a heated conversation about traffic patterns, or something equally as ridiculous as the night wore on and their alcohol consumption increased. Drunks had lofty ideas to save world issues, which were utter rubbish once the alcohol haze wore off. Tom asked me, “Terry tells me that you are an actress as well. Are you attached to something now?”

I was beyond proud of my accomplishments, and how my career had grown in recent months. Sometimes I couldn’t believe I’d gotten so far. I refrained from pinching myself as I confessed, “I’m in a new musical on Broadway. I’m understudying the female lead.”

Genuinely impressed, Tom enthusiastically exclaimed, “That’s fantastic! Have you performed the role yet?”

“Outside rehearsal, not yet. The production has only been open for a few months.”

He leaned forward and said, “You’ll get your chance, I’m sure.”

I smiled barely able to sit still, “I can’t wait. You know how there are some roles you take just to pay the bills or just merely for the experience, you don’t really care about the material?” Tom nodded, encouraging me to continue, completely engaged in my conversation. “This one I believe in and isn’t one of those jobs or just another job. I love the show, the music is incredibly moving, and the part is so dynamic. The score suits my range and I love my job.”

He kept his gaze on me, focusing all his attention on me. He gestured towards me to continue. “How long is your contract?”

“A year, or until the show closes, whichever comes first. I have the option to renew if the show survives.”

Furrowing his brow, he inquired, “Is there a danger of closing?”

Shaking my head, I said, “No, I don’t think so. We are in a smaller house and the grosses have been good. We’re a small cast and crew, so the running costs are relatively low…I think we’re okay.”

“I hope to get the opportunity to see it for myself.” To punctuate the end of that subject, I swallowed the last of my second beer (two down). A third beer found its way into my hand, and who am I to turn down a good beer? Tom changed the subject smoothly, “You are not what I had in mind when Terry spoke of you.”

I gave him a sideways look, wondering what he meant. “Do tell.”

He huffed something between a smile and a laugh, looking down at his hands briefly. “This might be outrageously silly, but I was expecting a female version of Terry.”

Taking another deep swig of the alcohol, I nodded. “I see. He’s got a little height on me, not to mention his killer dancer physique. And Terry’s got a much better ass than mine.”

“Your features are a lot softer than his. He’s got that prominent Italian nose.”

“I’d have a hell of a time trying to wear that with any conviction. There isn’t an ounce of Italian in my blood. But you aren’t exactly what I had in mind either, to be honest.”
“Go on. Tell me.” He gestured with his hands again to have me continue.

I shrugged. “I’m not sure. But if you are the British version of me, I expected better breasts. That’s for sure!”

Tom threw his head back, his entire body following in a full belly laugh. I laughed with him, watching his tongue stick out between his teeth. He slapped his leg once as he sat forward again, letting his laugh fade out. “I’m afraid I don’t have the proper equipment. I think Terry’s are better than mine.” He glanced casually at my cleavage. “But of the three of us, you win. There’s no contest, darling.” Mission accomplished, gorgeous man looked at my breasts and complimented them.

The drinks continued into the evening and the very early hours of the morning. The conversation continued to shift among the dynamics of five people at the table. Other cast members stopped by to say hello, share a beer or to introduce themselves to me (three and four down).

Last call was announced at 2am, beyond the bar’s regular close time. The bartender and bar maids agreed to stay open the extra three hours for the sake of the cast party. The five of us shared one last beer together (five down) before filing out into the streets of London. As I tried to stand to leave, I clumsily fell over my chair. Warm strong arms caught me from behind before I toppled to the ground in a heap of limbs. Bleary eyed, I directed my eyes to the owner of the muscular arms, and accused the chair of foul play. “Didya see that? It tried to trip me up! Totally unprokv-unplrov- unkrovped- oh, hell, um- I didn’t start it!”

Tom laughed, humoring me in my drunken state, setting me back to rights as much as he could in my uncoordination. “I did. I shall tell the owner and the offending piece of furniture will be properly reprimanded to be sure.” I was certainly feeling the effects of how many drinks and jet lag, and in an unfamiliar city, didn’t know how to find my hotel. My head spun and I had graduated to slurring my words, I’d also lost some of vocabulary to the effects of alcohol.

Terry hailed two cabs, one for Tom and I headed to the City of Westminster and one for himself and his two female costars. Madison lived in the same building as Terry and Amelia lived in a row house about three blocks from their building. Tom was renting a flat a few blocks from Trafalgar Square, where my hotel was located. In terms of sharing rides, the arrangement made the most sense.

I shivered from the cold of the London air. In the cozy atmosphere of the Rake’s outdoor patio felt warm and inviting, but once out in the streets it was colder. Tom wrapped his black leather jacket around my shoulders as he loaded me into the taxi. The smell of him nearly knocked me off my feet, masculine, earthy, strong, and absolutely delicious. And my lord was he wide! His blue shirt hugged his physique like a second skin, complimenting his eyes perfectly, and I’m pretty sure I huffed something in approval.

I couldn’t make much sense of my conversation with Tom in the cab; the alcohol had soaked into my brain. The talking was easy, but the ideas were in no way linear. Exclaiming wildly, I accused the driver through the plastic barrier of driving on the wrong side of the road. Tom calmed me, apologizing to the driver that I was visiting from out of town.

“You need to tell someone to fix your traffic thingys. They’re all broken,” I told him.

“Oh?” he asked.

“Red to yellow to green to yellow to red. They’ll kill someone! It should be Red to green to yellow to red. Make them fix it!”
Chuckling, he promised, “Tomorrow. I’ll get them to remedy it tomorrow.”

The driver navigated us through a roundabout at a faster speed than necessary, sending me across the seat ungracefully into Tom’s chest. Yes, thank you, physics is my friend! And damn, did he smell amazing up close! His jacket had smelled of him, but there was nothing like the man himself. With him so close, I looked up into his eyes and simply said, “Hi! Gosh, you’re pretty and lickable.”

He smiled as his expression visibly softened. “Oh, darling, I might have let you if you weren’t so far gone. Any further rants you’d like me to address?”

I heaved a huge sigh, sinking into him further. “This whole time difference thing… not working for me. I lost 19 hours or something flying here.” I was starting to feel drowsy, and about the only thing I wanted to do was sleep.

“You’ll earn them back when you fly back to the states. Isn’t that how that works?”

Tom was a gentleman when the cab arrived at the Grand. He climbed out of the cab first, and offered a hand to assist me out. “Thank you so much, Tom,” I slurred. “Tom, right?” He laughed, nodding in the affirmative. “That’s a diff- diff- oh, hell, it’s a really hard name.”

Humoring me in my drunken state, he said, “Three letters is absolutely outrageous, I agree.” I was lucky that he didn’t appear hurt that I was asking his name. Beer is not an enhancement for my remembering names problem. “I believe Terry would have my head if anything happened to you on my watch.” He winked, indicating he was joking and butterflies beat against the walls of my belly… or perhaps that was the alcohol trying to make reappearance. “Jet lag and alcohol in an unfamiliar city certainly don’t make for a safe journey to your hotel.”

He walked me up the stairs to the door to make sure my feet didn’t end up elsewhere than beneath me. I felt more like a ragdoll than a human with any kind of command over my limbs. I looked up at the daunting staircase and asked him, “Who put the hotel all the way up there?” It couldn’t have been any more than 12 steps, but the task seemed absolutely daunting in my condition. “Sleeping is good,” I slurred, focusing on the only activity I could think to do in that moment.

He laughed nearly pulling me up the stairs one by one. “Undoubtedly. I hope to see you again while you are in town.”

“Ask Terry. He owns me now.”

He smiled at my drunken phrasing, knowing that I probably meant something else. “Pleasure meeting you and drinking with you, darling. I wish you a very restful and restorative sleep.”

I smiled lopsidedly, “Yes. That. Night!” I waved over my shoulder as I stumbled towards the elevator that would take me up to my room.
Chapter 2

Waking up from the alcohol induced pass out was far from fun. My head pounded, my eyes burned with the effort of opening, and my limbs were heavy. I could barely swallow around the cotton or whatever had died in my mouth. Dragging each foot to the floor with great effort, I sat up and the bed spun with me in it. Or was that just me? Wicked! I ran a hand over my face and cursed my inability to handle liquor in any quantity. I, Kristiane Samantha Taylor, made another well-intentioned yet empty pledge to never partake in such over-indulgences of liquor… well, at least not again in the next week or so.

A hot shower, two bottles of water, and three Advils later made me feel almost human again. I thanked God in all Her wisdom and glory for not wracking my body with throwing up, as was the norm after nights of alcohol intoxication. I typed out a quick text to Terry to meet me at Victoria Station when I was dressed and ready to go. Terry’s response was a series of jumbled words and symbols that I understood as he was having a morning similar to mine and feeling very much the same. Basically the message was he would be there when he got there.

Late morning Victoria Station was a mass of energetic confusion when I, sucking down a Starbucks coffee to further counteract the effects of the hangover, arrived. Looking rough, Terry joined me shortly after amidst the smell of gas fumes and smog from the arriving and departing buses. Terry wore dark sunglasses despite the overcast skies and impending rain. As we clambered up the steps and into red unforgiving plastic seats on the second level of our double-decker bus, Terry groaned, “Never again. Beer is not my friend and there isn’t enough stage makeup in all of London to mask the dark circles.”

I remarked, “You always say that, but you always go back.”

Shaking his head and instantly regretting the choice, Terry shared a theory. “I’m swearing off beer. I think wine and champagne are for me.”

“Do you even know the difference between red and white wine?”

“Aside from the color, no, but I can learn.”

Terry and I spent the afternoon before his evening performance taking in the sights of the city from the relative comfort of the tour bus, nursing our hangovers. We sat mashed together towards the front of the bus, and tried to pay close attention to the narrative of the tour guide. He was desperately old, and spoke mostly in monotone, but he was knowledgeable. He droned on about the history of London, and how it had evolved to what it was now. He pointed out all the landmarks, announcing the stops along the way.

I linked my arm with Terry’s about half way through the tour. I genuinely smiled. “Thank you so much for making me take this trip.”

Terry leaned over and kissed my forehead. “You’re welcome. I knew you could do it alone,” he emphasized with a knowing glance and stressing the word alone. “How are things at home, petal? Do you need to talk?”

“Not just yet. I’m not ready. I’m on vacation…” I trailed off, keeping my issues buried. I knew that I couldn’t ignore it, but right now, right here I wanted to keep everything buried. I wanted to be in London, and immersed in all that meant.
Terry visibly softened again. “I love you, kitten.”

“Love you, babe.”

Terry and I spent the day sightseeing and people watching, as we would do in New York. Terry could’ve been a highly opinionated cast off of Project Runway, and kept up a breathless litany of those-boots-don’t-go-with-that-hat or something equally ridiculous.

We were lounging beside the fountains in Trafalgar Square, surrounded by non-English speaking tourists, passing time. As he was about to jump on another tirade of epic proportions in regards to yet another awful outfit, his iPhone sang to the sounds of Funky Town. Exasperated from the interruption, he yanked his cell from his jeans pocket. I watched as he unlocked and read the incoming message. Suddenly, he jumped up and announced that we had to go to the theatre. Pulling me by the hand to my feet, he started towards the traffic circle to try and hail a taxi, dragging me behind him.

Spluttering and clutching at my bag, I asked, “W-W-Where are we g-going?!”

“It was a text from Tom. The entire cast is at the theatre, and they’re all reading reviews.” He hailed a black taxi advertising Beefeater London Dry Gin, and bodily shoved me in the backseat. “The Globe Theatre please,” he shouted to the driver before turning his attention back to me. “According to Tom, the reviews are very complementary,” he said in his faux posh British accent.

“What did he say? Anything else?”

“Oh no, honey, I limited Tom in the amount of messaging he’s allowed to do to me. Ten words or less, and he’s met his quota for today.”

Scoffing, I asked, “Why does he have a quota?”

“Pumpkin, that man can go on and on if you give him the opportunity. Best nip it in the bud. The first time he sent me a message, it was a case of how much information could he cram into 250 characters. Who’s got time for that?”

“You’re terrible,” I told him, shaking my head.

When we arrived at the theatre, many members of the cast were milling around outside the stage door reading the positive reviews that had been posted that morning before going inside to get ready. Everyone was in high spirits and eager to take the stage again to perform for their next audience. Tom and Madison were standing side by side, reading from the same newspaper; they’d been waiting for Terry to arrive to disappear inside.

As we approached Tom and Madison, she was reading aloud, “Veterans of London theatre Tom Hiddleston (Lysander) and Madison Ellis (Hermia) aptly and convincingly portray the earnest lovers in the lavishly acted production.” She looked up to see us as she finished reading and greeted us with smiles and affectionate hugs. She exclaimed loudly, “Have you read the reviews? The critics love you, Terry!”

Tom pulled Terry into a huge manly bear hug for a job well done and slaps on the back before he turned to me. He landed a swift kiss on my cheek, enough to give me a good whiff of him. The earthy smell brought with it snapshots of the night before. I could feel the blood flooding in to the capillaries of my face, giving me a blush for sure, as a Polaroid of leaning into his chest flashed through my mind. Oh God! What did I do?

Terry, Tom and Madison all stared at me as I covered my vicious flush crimson. I giggled
nervously trying to remember how one moment led to another as the album played as a slideshow in my head. A golden pint of foamy beer clutched in my hand. My fist pressed against the plastic partition in a taxi. My looking up into Tom’s gorgeous blue eyes with no space between us. My feet on the sidewalk before a mountain of stairs. Face first when I passed out in my hotel room mattress. Reasoning with myself silently, I couldn’t be that bad off, I went to sleep alone, but I couldn’t explain being firmly places within that man’s personal bubble.

Horrified, I asked, “What the hell happened last night?” Translation: Did I hit on you?

Peeking out between my fingers, the tall, handsome actor winked at me. “Depends, how much do you remember?”

Still covering my mouth, I admitted slowly, “Unfortunately, my memory during nights of heavy drinking resembles my memory for names. Did I call you John?”

Laughing at my apparent shame, Tom backtracked, “No, no… you didn’t. Surprising as it may be, you remembered my name. Although you gave me hell for how long it is.”

I reached out and touched his arm gently. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I can get belligerent, just add alcohol.” I rolled my eyes dramatically. “My God! I’m so embarrassed.”

“I assure you, you were a perfect lady,” he teased with a twinkle in his eyes. Those blue eyes were so very expressive, with a perfect blend of playful and sincerity.

Throwing me a life raft, Madison interrupted by reading the sentence the reviewer had specifically written about Terry’s performance out loud for all four of us. “The surprising standout of the performance was Terrence Beck’s magnetic and impossibly mischievous turn as Puck (Robin Goodfellow).”

Unexpected but completely welcome, this turn in events, the glowing review for Terry, was going to be a big boost for his career, especially in London. I squeezed his hand, infinitely proud and only a little jealous.

As the conversation and excited chatter died down, Madison asked me, “Kristie, are you seeing the show again tonight?”

I shook my head in the negative. “I wasn’t planning on it.”

Appearing disappointed, Tom said, “Madison and I were going to dinner after the show. We would like to extend an invitation to you and Terry to join us.”

Terry shouted, “I’m in!”

Tom, sensing my hesitance, offered, “We can get you in backstage. Would you like to enjoy the show from the wings?” All three encouraged me to stay for the performance and have tea later on.

Reluctantly, I agreed. “On one condition… For the love of God, don’t let me drink.”

After smuggling me in backstage avoiding the stage manager, Pip, an ugly little troll of a woman that resembled a man, my friends took turns babysitting me. Terry and Tom took up residence on the wooden stage with half a dozen other actors to warm up. Madison came and occupied the seat next to me dead center in the theatre to help me admire the various yoga poses.

She sighed happily, watching with deep admiration, “They were both touched by angels, weren’t they? Have you ever witnessed anything so beautiful?”
I agreed, my gaze shifting between the two Adonis’s. “Damn near perfect, wouldn’t you say?” She nodded dumbly momentarily silenced as we witnessed the men stretching into the warrior pose. “Oh, that’s nice!” Madison squeaked at the gorgeous display.

After holding the pose, the men gracefully changed positions to stretching their legs that was equally as lovely. Madison whispered, “Oh, it got better!” I giggled nervously, thinking that I shouldn’t be gawking as I was. Muscles rippled and flexed, but damn that was hard to ignore.

As we continued watching as though the two actors were the next X Factor, I asked, “So tell me, are you with Tom? Any interest in that?”

Madison made a face before denying outright. “No, no, no… he may have been put together in God’s very own image, but I think he’s a bit intense for me. Astonishingly intelligent, crazy talented, boundless energy, hotter than sin and passionately dedicated to his craft, he may very well be perfect, with a touch of the playful kid.”

“So that seems like every reason to be with him, Madison, what’s up?”

She shrugged lightly, “I don’t know what it is, but he has his problems. Commitment and fear of rejection… you know, usual guy problems.”

“What about my Terry?”

“If only he wasn’t gay, I’d be attached to him at the hip… or other body parts.”

“WOO! Hello!” We laughed together loudly, causing everyone else in the theatre to shush us.

Madison straightened up quickly. “He’s hot, but I don’t think he can be attached to any one person. The only exception would be Tom.” After the yoga class, Madison found a little corner for me to stay in to keep out of the way of the build to places. She caught up on my career in New York as she hadn’t heard when I told Tom about it before going to change into her costume.

Like a relay race, when Madison disappeared, Terry then came out wearing about half his costume, his goat-like pants and nothing else. In very Terry-like fashion, he was raging about something missing from his dressing room. He’d probably taken with him last night, and forgot to bring it along with him for this performance. Tom, next in line for babysitting duty, came out nearly all dressed for the performance. The poet shirt left dangled open, showing a shadow of chest hair and a flat plane of skin. Before I drooled and flooded backstage, I quipped, “What is with the men in this cast and their various stages of undress?”

Tom smiled widely, “I’m afraid it’s my turn to watch you.”

“You do know that I’m probably not going to walk off with one of those wooden stalls.”

“Well, we can never be too careful, and it’s the probably that scares us.” He winked and disappeared again.

* * * * *

Feng Sushi fed us directly after the show because the location was within a ten minute walk of the theatre. The Japanese restaurant was brightly lit with modern décor and semi-community seating. There were long wooden top tables coupled with mismatched white and grey seats. The atmosphere was quiet, but welcoming and soothing.

The four of us sat at the end of one table, two per side, Tom and I across from Terry and Madison
on the other side. The chatter between us was lively, enthusiastic, and surrounded the play and the performance from that evening. All of us felt the excitement of a very receptive and engaging audience, the true meaning of live theatre. I had a similar internal elation as though I had been on stage with my three friends, being in the wings was exhilarating.

After we all ordered sushi was served, our conversations shifted to the pairs on each side of the table. I adjusted my seated position towards Tom to engage him. “I really enjoyed your performance, Tom. Thank you so much for getting me backstage. That was absolutely thrilling.”

Giving me the same attention I gave him, he turned towards me slightly, our knees and lower leg resting against each other. “Bless you for saying that, darling.” He took a deep drink of water to wash down a squid roll. “I find it to be a privilege to speak the words and portray such a complex character.”

Tom’s velvet voice had such a rich tone and timbre to it that I found other subjects for him to talk about so I could just listen to him talk, not to mention the British accent. I nodded and started a debate regarding Lysander and Demetrius and the differences between the characters.

Tom articulated his point, “Oberon’s potion certainly erases the character’s free will. Free will shapes who we are as human beings, informs our decisions and influences our choices.” His gloriously large hands with long slim fingers articulated his point with wild gestures. I had to quell the desire to see if he could be as eloquent in his speech if his hands were tied or immobile. He summed up with a profound statement about free will and humanity’s choices overall. My conversation with Madison ran through my mind once more.

Tom was fascinating to listen to, as he had such a passion for his craft and for the material. I inquired, “Have you preformed Shakespeare before? How much have you studied prior to this play?”

Tom filled me in on all the Shakespeare he’d studied and performed during his years at RADA. “I envy your background and familiarity with the material. Tisch has an excellent program with a concentration in Shakespeare, but not quite like yours. I liked studying the few plays we had in a classroom setting. There is much to be said of others’ interpretation and input on the writing.”

Tom nodded, swallowing some more of his dinner. “Theatre and literature becomes richer with varying readings and opinions; it’s a very collaborative art. Men and women, for instance, have wildly different views on the same text based on personal experience and understanding. I find the discussions when learning most beneficial.”

The actress within me curiously urged him to tell me more about his history. He’d learned some of mine the day before at the pub, and through Terry, but I knew so little about him. He regaled me, his hands still flying, with his voice work, some the television shows he’d appeared in, and the one independent movie he had done. I was impressed by his dedication to his craft, tirelessly building up his resume and experience. He had been blessed to work with a number of names in England that provided a little more weight to his resume as well.

Tom shared the fact that he’d been cast in a big budget American movie recently and was moving to Hollywood in just a few months to begin filming. “I was cast as Loki in the Marvel movie, Thor. I’m moving to Los Angeles or that area for a few months for shooting.”

Embarrassed by my lack of knowledge, I said, “I’m not good with the whole comic book universe… Is that the one with the hammer?”

Chuckling lightly, his tongue peeking between his teeth, he nodded. “Yes. That’s the one with the
“Sorry, I’ve been firmly in musical theatre since graduation. I’m not even sure I’ve seen any of those comic book movies.”

The busboy came to collect their plates as we all had finished our meals and were just talking. I was shocked by the amount of time that had passed without my acknowledging that Madison and Terry were still across the table. Enthralled with Tom’s voice and speech, I forgot everything else around me.

The waiter brought the check and the four of us split it in quarters, before heading back out into the London streets. Madison excused herself to head home, although Terry wouldn’t join her as he wasn’t ready to call it an evening. The three castmates had their first day off in nearly three weeks, from the rehearsals to the start of the run. Madison, eager to start her time off, disappeared into the tube station by London Bridge as Terry, Tom and I continued to walk along the Thames. I was sandwiched between the two very tall men, and felt like a munchkin.

Our stroll led us to the Millennium Bridge and we stopped at the midway point. We had been chatting up the pros and cons of the red bus tour, and my plans for the rest of my vacation. I sighed happily, reveling in the feel of the city, standing over the Thames River. Against the night sky and clouds, the lights twinkled and sparkled, the city was just electric. The old buildings surrounding us held a certain hold over me. In a moment I could feel the very history envelop me, draw me in. This was where I was meant to be at that time.

Tom leant on the railing next to me and asked, “Where would you like to see the most in London now that you’ve experienced the street tour?”

“I think I’d like to…”

Terry interrupted, leaning on the railing on the other side, “Why don’t I take you out to Hampton Court or Windsor Castle tomorrow?”

Leaning into Terry for rudely interrupting her, I agreed. “They are both outside the city, but I’d really like to see them.”

Tom added, “Windsor is absolutely lovely. London is so crowded, compact, and Windsor is drastically different, with expansive greens and English countryside that I’m so fond of. I spent a lot of time there in my youth as my school was in close proximity. Beautiful place.”

I nodded. “Sounds lovely. Let’s do that tomorrow,” I said, turning back to Terry.

Terry piped up, “Tom, would you take us?”

I gasped, “Terry! That’s rude. I’m sure Tom has plenty of better things to do than take two tourists to a tourist trap on his day off. You really are as subtle as an anvil to the face.”

Tom laughed out loud, used to Terry’s assuming nature. As obnoxious and overbearing as he was, I could see that Tom liked Terry’s grandiose personality. He was very likable in his brutal honesty. “If you don’t object and you would allow me, I’d be honored to take you there actually.”

I told him, “Please don’t feel pressured to do so.”

“Not at all, it would be my privilege,” Tom insisted.

I shook my head at Terry in disapproval before turning back to Tom. “Please let me extend a
proper invitation.”

Tom nodded once. “I accept wholeheartedly.”
Chapter 3

‘Tom Hiddleston: ‘It is the east, and Juliet is the sun. Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon’
Good morning. Outside your hotel – Tom’

Tom and I had exchanged mobile numbers in case of an emergency and to communicate our whereabouts for the morning. Because my hotel room was closer to Tom’s home, he planned to pick me up first on the way out of the city. I was applying my makeup when his text sounded in my tiny hotel room.

I tapped out a retort: ‘Kristie Taylor: ‘Some cupid kills with arrows, some with traps.’ Give me two minutes.’

I snickered at my own joke as I returned to the mirror in the bathroom. The scholarly man played the role of charming English gentleman well, quoting Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet at 9 in the morning. I called him out on his charm by quoting Shakespeare’s Much Ado About Nothing.

With makeup done and my long brown hair up in a loose pony tail, I took the elevator to the lobby and joined Tom outside. He was standing close to the passenger side of his car, waiting patiently for me to arrive. With gentlemanly grace, Tom greeted me with a beautiful wide smile, a soft kiss on the cheek, and opened the door to the car to allow me to step inside. As soon as all my limbs and extremities were safely inside, he closed the door behind me.

Folding his limbs into the driver side, he cheerfully greeted, “Good morning, darling!”

I fumbled with the seatbelt, feeling all thumbs. Seriously, strapping in from left to right felt like trying to play memory in the dark. I was a New Yorker and got around via subway or foot exclusively. I’d never been in the driver’s seat of a vehicle; I never got my driver’s license because I didn’t require one. Playfully I rolled my eyes, wagging a finger at him, “Oh no you don’t, Charming. Quoting Shakespeare so early in the morning before coffee is cruel and a bit unfair.”

His beautiful blue eyes sparkled at the challenge. “You stood your own, love. Is there a different poet you can grasp sans coffee?” Tom navigated his vehicle carefully into early morning traffic.

“Maybe Dr. Seuss.” Tom laughed heartily at my joke. “Before coffee, of course. We may be able to graduate to Roald Dahl once the caffeine has been ingested.”

“A fangirl of Dr. Seuss?”

“Hey, don’t knock him. After I read the Sneetches when I was seven, he was going to be my husband.”

“Where did it all go wrong?” he asked, humoring me.

I smiled. “We parted ways around There’s a Wocket in my Pocket, and Wesley from the Princess Bride came along and stole my heart.”

He nodded. “I was always partial to Buttercup myself. What happened with There’s a Wocket in my Pocket?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t know what a wocket was…”

Tom was giggling again. “But you knew what a Sneetch was?”
Incredulously, I exclaimed, “I was seven!” annunciating every syllable.

Laughing again, Tom smoothly changing the subject, he asked, “Shall I find a Starbucks to discover who else you can recite?”

I nodded, encouraging him enthusiastically. “And I don’t want to talk to Terry minus the caffeine this early in the morning. I don’t have a death wish.”

After a quick detour by Starbucks for coffee and muffins, we picked up Terry from his flat before making the drive out to Windsor. The first half of the car ride was tense, and a bit awkward. None of us knew what to say or how to start a conversation. One of us would comment on the weather, another would agree. Someone pointed out something interesting, another would agree.

Terry was always good with that kind of thing, and I was relying on him to break the ice. I suspected that it took about twenty minutes for the coffee to hit his brain, so he could form sentences. Ever the comedian, he said, “Come on, we’re all actors here. We can at least pretend to have something to talk about.” It was just the push that we needed to get beyond the stilted pleasantries and one word responses into conversation.

Tom asked, “How did you two meet?”

“Terry upstaged me at an audition for Guys and Dolls at school.”

Tom smiled, sensing there was a lot more to the story. “That doesn’t surprise me.”

Terry scoffed from the backseat. “That’s only because I can play Adelaide better than you can,” he joked.

Tom feigned agreement, trying not to laugh, “Killer role. I wouldn’t mind playing that part.”

Terry jumped right back in. “I would own that role.”

Tom chimed in, “Adds a whole new dynamic into the show that I never considered before.” I couldn’t keep my laughter from bubbling up out of my throat. Tom had quite a way with words and with dealing with Terry’s brash abrasiveness.

I had heard his rant many times before. Terry had an affinity for female roles, and would probably own it as if the strictly female roles were, in fact, written for a man. I interrupted before he got on his soapbox that every role should be written like Mary Sunshine in Chicago, “No doubt in my mind, Terry, but they’d already ‘typed’ you out. Casting according to type was commonplace in our school, to make the audition process a lot easier with so many in the department. It was my sixteen bars of music that you had chosen to make your point.”

“I was doing you a favor, kitten. You’re better suited for Sister Sarah Brown, as much as you hate to admit it, than Adelaide. You’re an ingénue, babe.”

“Nice try, Terr. It had nothing to do with me. Anyways, he’d decided to make a statement and audition for Adelaide while I was. Normally I’d be angry but I was butchering my audition. Because I’d been interrupted, I was given a second audition. I don’t think I would’ve been cast based on take one.”

“You’re welcome,” came from behind me. I chucked a wadded up Starbucks brown bag at him over my shoulder, hitting him square in the forehead. I still maintain that I am the mature one of us in the relationship.
“Somehow, miraculously, both of us had been cast and we started talking during rehearsals. Towards the end of the semester, we were practically living together. My roommate was barely around, some kind of academic overachiever who lived at the library and his was an asshole. Technically it was against school policy for co-ed rooms, but we had the R.A. look the other way in exchange for cigarettes.”

Tom asked, “Have you been friends ever since?”

Terry piped up, “Hell no. I tried to shake the bitch for a few years, but she caught up with me.”

Being the close friends that we were, we could be mean because it was out of pure affection. I retorted, “Not intentionally.” I continued the story of how Terry and I became reacquainted at a rehearsal dance space on 58th Street, open to anyone with an actor’s equity card. We had been fortunate to be cast in the same productions a number of times in the past 5 years. We spent time together everyday until Terry picked up and moved countries, which brought Tom up to speed.

When they parked outside the castle, I gathered the garbage left over from breakfast, including my makeshift weapon against Terry, as Tom opened my door for me. I tried not to be impressed by his good manners. His behavior was an old world custom to show respect for the lady that I had never seen from any man I had ever met. I was under the impression that this particular man was either incredibly attentive or playing the part of gentleman.

Pushing my doubt aside, I said, “Thank you, Tom.”

“Least I could do.”

I discarded the garbage in a nearby bin, as we made our way to the visitor’s desk. Terry and I split the entrance fee for three between us as a thank you for breakfast and the ride. Tom was genuinely touched by the unexpected reciprocation. With tickets and audio guides firmly in hand, we made our way up the Long Walk to the stone wall. I followed close behind my two male companions up the long grey asphalt drive that led up a small gradual incline to a gate into the castle courtyard. I tried to absorb and take it all in, memorizing every detail, every site, every smell. I was nearly overcome with emotion. In my life there had been so much doubt, so many dreams still unfulfilled. But this one, this one had come to fruition. The majestic expanse of the palace was incredibly impressive in size and architectural accomplishment.

Distractedly I listened to the exchange between Tom and Terry. Tom teased Terry for his colorful attire, “Did you get dressed in the dark again?”

Incredulously, Terry stated, “I got your attention, didn’t I?” Terry patted down his purple striped button up shirt over his terribly tight jeans.

Tom snickered, “You look like an extra out of Mamma Mia.”

“Damn, if I could be so lucky…”

As we arrived at the castle archway, Tom delicately lead me through by touching the small of my back. He made the brief reassuring gesture of caressing his thumb over my spine in that very spot to let me know that he understood what I was feeling. From the expression on my face, arriving at the castle was a grand achievement for me, and he proved sensitive to that.

The three of us leisurely explored the grounds, the state apartments, and St. George’s chapel. Tom was knowledgeable in some of the history of the palace and the surrounding area, and shared what he could with me. Terry announced grandly, “Right, I’ve hit my intake quota of useless
information today. I’m off to the gift shop.”

I was all too familiar with Terry’s low tolerance for education of any kind. I rolled my eyes in his general direction. “He’s got undiagnosed attention deficit disorder.”

Tom suggested, “With Terry, it appears to be more selective than that.” Tom adjusted his long stride to fall in step with me. He watched as I took in the architecture of the cathedral.

“I can’t disagree with that. You don’t suffer from that. Annoyingly, you are intelligent in nearly every subject. Are you a walking encyclopedia?”

He nodded sincerely, “Permanently installed. Bonus for earning a double first from Cambridge.”

“Oh, a Cambridge Man?”

“Indeed. Are you familiar with Cambridge?”

Quickly, I responded, nodding grandly, “Not in the slightest.” Tom laughed. “Alright, that’s unfair. I know that it’s one of those impressive British Universities that far exceeds any of ours.”

“True story. However, Mum paid extra to maintain my personality though,” he quipped.

We climbed the steps to the Lower Ward wall to view the town of Windsor and the River Thames to the north. I sighed at the beauty of the surrounding area, with the trees and the greenest, untouched planes she’d ever seen. “So, Tom, you’re an intelligent, good-looking, talented actor with a sense of humor. What did you leave for the rest of us mere mortals?”

Tom smirked at me. “I feel that I should apologize and thank you simultaneously.” He shook his head as if he was confused by something. Earnestly he said, “You are an inquisitive little creature with such a quick wit. You challenge me… keep me guessing what’ll come out of your mouth next.”

“What fun would I be if you knew what I’d do next?”

Tom and I continued our fast-paced ribbing of the other until Terry tracked us down to leave in late afternoon. We had talked of different high and low points in our careers, exchanged stories about nightmare directors, arrogant coworkers, and what we hoped to achieve in the future. He told me that he almost understood my intense friendship with Terry.

“I know that my being here for Terry was important to him,” I told him. “This is a huge step in his career. I had the vacation time to take and it meant so much to him. We’ve always been there for each other…” I trailed off, afraid that I might start spilling my selfish reasons for coming.

As we left the grounds of Windsor Castle, I linked my arms with both of my friends, Tom on my left and Terry on my right. “Seeing as I can barely find England on a map with ‘You are here’ in neon red, where are you taking me to dinner?”

Tom smiled down at me. “Saucy minx.”

“Terry doesn’t like when you call him that anymore. He prefers diva.”

After poking me in the ribs, Terry offered his flat with the promise of Chinese food and a movie. We all loaded back into Tom’s car, with him seeing to my door again. Terry’s flat was a spacious 1 bedroom with hardwood floors and long slim windows, ideal for him and his lifestyle. His place came fully furnished in a style that didn’t suit him since he’d left everything back in storage unit on
42nd Street in Manhattan. There was a big sectional in his living room, situated in front of a high-end television, that was very much Terry. We collapsed in a three person heap on the oversized cushions, groaning from the incredibly long day of walking.

My best friend whipped out his iPhone and placed a delivery order for enough Chinese food to feed 8 people before powering up the television with the black remote. He handed the clicker to Tom on his right, muttering, “You get British telly. Find something to watch. I’m going to get dishes and forks.”

When he got up, I swung my legs to the vacated spot, my feet landing in Tom’s lap. He patted my shin twice before letting his palm rest there as he concentrated on finding something to watch. I reclined backwards, melting into the overstuffed grey upholstery. Terry made a few trips between the living room and the kitchen, bringing plates, silverware, serving spoons, napkins, and three bottles of beer.

I groaned in protest, “No beer. You promised no more beer.”

“Clearing out the fridge, flower.”

“I deserve better than your rejections,” I pouted. Tom laughed at me and patted my leg again. Terry made one last trip from the kitchen with glasses for the unwanted beverages. He lifted my legs as he reclaimed his seat between me and Tom, landed heavily on the couch, and keeping my legs across his lap. The feel of solid thigh muscle was the floor beneath my feet on the other side of Terry’s lap. Yummy!

After partaking in far too much food and two beers, the three of us entered into a very loud and very angry match of hangman. And by very angry, I meant, Terry and me because we lost embarrassingly to one double first Cambridge graduate. He unfairly used macrocephalous and keraunophobia, which aren’t ever said by normal people. I personally would prefer to use big head and fear of thunder. Tom was insanely proud of himself, and grinned hugely in his victory.

Tom drove me back to the Grand after Terry kicked us out due to his being a sore loser. I, being the kind and forgiving, let him claim his triumph because of what he’d done for me that day. He’d helped in making one of my dreams come true, and I made a point of telling him. “You, Mr. Hiddleston, are a magnanimous soul.”

He furrowed his brow and oohed. “Impressive word. You might have taken the win with that one.”

“I’m trying to pay you a compliment for today, you snot… and I let you win!” While concentrating on the traffic ahead of his car, Tom laughed with his head thrown back a little. “Your large head word segued to large hearted.”

He reached over, squeezed my hand gently, and glanced over to me. “Thank you, darling. It was my sincere pleasure and both you and Terry did more than show me your gratitude, treating me to dinner and allowing me to win at hangman.” He winked at me before pulling the car in front of my hotel. As I reached for the door handle to get out of the car, he tapped my knee gently. “Allow me.”

He hopped out the driver’s seat, ran around the car to open the door for me. As I climbed out of the car, I thanked him again. “You may be a saint, sir. Taking Terry and I out to Windsor today, on your day off, was incredibly generous of you and then opening my door for me. Thank you sincerely.”

He asked while closing the door behind me, “Did you have fun? Was Windsor everything you
hoped it would be?” I nodded enthusiastically, biting my lower lip. He smiled broadly again, “Excellent. I’m so relieved. Absolutely worth the time, I wouldn’t have chosen to be anywhere else.”

He followed as I climbed the stairs to my hotel, I glanced at him sideways. He raised his eyebrows questioningly. “Are you for real? Are you always so positive, so complimentary?”

He laughed at the back of his throat. “Aren’t you?”

I rolled her eyes, “Not if I can help it.”

“For me, positivity is easier.”

“Clearly, you’re not a New Yorker.”

Shoving the credit card sized key within the slot on the door and watching the light flash from red to green, I entered my hotel room, recalling the events of the day. It had been a good day, probably the best in recent memory. Spending time with Terry always lifted my spirits and carried me through the rough patches, my bridge over troubled waters. In the past year I had seen my fair share of white crested waves, threatening to drown and suffocate me. But I had Terry now, and I had made a new friend in Tom too.

Dropping my purse on the solid mahogany desk in front of the mirror with a quiet flump, I surveyed the hotel room recently scrubbed and cleaned, the air laced with that stale hotel smell. Inexplicably, this space, this room, this place all felt more like home than my shared two bedroom apartment in Hell’s Kitchen in midtown Manhattan.

I turned the television on to keep me company as I stripped of my day clothes and found my nightgown. I made short work of washing my face, brushing my teeth, and turning the lights off. As I turned down the bed sheets and duvet, my phone, still tucked away in my purse, sounded with an incoming text. Huffing at my mixture of annoyance for forgetting to turn it off and grateful it hadn’t sounded later when I was in sleep mode, I fished the object from bag. I flopped back into the cold sheets, and unlocked the phone.

‘Tom Hiddleston: ‘You can’t stay in your corner of the forest waiting for others to come to you. You have to go to them sometimes.’ Glad you came to my forest, pleasure spending time with you. –Tom’

My heart fluttered briefly within my chest. I recognized the quotation as being from A.A. Milne’s Winnie the Pooh, and how appropriate considering our new found friendship. Choosing a perfect combination of glib and sweet as a response, I typed out another Winnie the Pooh quote.

‘Kristie Taylor: ‘It is more fun to talk with someone who doesn’t use long, difficult words but rather short easy words like ‘What about lunch?’ You catch more flies with honey, Mr. H – K’

Pun intended.
Chapter 4

Wanting to ease my snide and snarky text to Tom the night before, the first thing I did after wiping sleep from my eyes was send him another message. Choosing from my repertoire of literature, I chose an Oscar Wilde quote: ‘Kristie Taylor: ‘The smallest act of kindness is worth more than the grandest intention.’ Thanks for everything yesterday, truly meant a lot to me! – K’

My phone buzzed back with his response immediately. ‘Tom Hiddleston: A woman who knows Wilde, Shakespeare, Seuss and Dahl? There is no greater gift. ‘Can one desire too much of a good thing?’ – Tom’

I rolled my eyes, but smiled to myself, snuggling into the pillows behind me. Peeking at the red digital 9:14am readout on the wooden bedside table, I noted again that the charming man was quoting Shakespeare again at an ungodly hour, only this time As You Like It. I would hazard a guess that he was flirting with me. I’m not one to back down from the challenge. I stared up at the ceiling momentarily working out an appropriate reaction, suited to my personality and our situation. Speaking out loud, I said to my phone, “Ah! Gotcha!” as the quote formed in my head.

‘Kristie Taylor: ‘One should always play fairly when one has the winning cards.’ I call unfair advantage. No Shakespeare before noon or coffee! –K’

I shuffled in the bed slightly, expecting him to send another reply. Placing my mobile on the bed beside me, I stretched languidly, increasing my blood flow and awakening my limbs. Knuckles cracked and joints popped with the effort, the kinks leaving my body. I ran my fingers through my hair, just to get the strands out of my eyes before I shaved my head in irritation. I hesitated from leaving the comfort and warmth of the bed, I thought of the plan for the day ahead.

Tom’s text arrived, and I restrained from jumping on it or looking at it right away, to convince myself that I wasn’t waiting for his response. ‘Tom Hiddleston: Well remembered. You win by my abstention, this round. I rely upon my knowledge of Shakespeare and you have unmatched wisdom in Wilde. Till after noon… -Tom’

That was my cue to get up and begin my day. As much as I didn’t want to admit or acknowledge it, Tom had very much become a part of my day. The desire to text him again was ever present, but I had to meet Terry at 11am. The agenda for the day was more sightseeing and being terrible American tourists. I’m not going to lie though that I wanted Tom along; he was more suited to the tour guide than Terry, if only for his wealth of knowledge. Terry wasn’t patient enough to learn anything about his surroundings to share with others.

I motored through my morning ritual, grabbed a coffee from the hotel lobby and took the tube to Tower Hill, to meet Terry at the Tower of London. The weather was holding up for a pleasant change, warm summer air with light overcast and the sun burning through the white fluffy cover intermittently. The waft off the Thames smelled of a damp hint of rotten eggs and sulphur. After taking the guided tour with an overly friendly bearded Beefeater, we settled at the onsite café tables to partake in cucumber sandwiches and tea.

Terry looked at me intently, trying to gauge my mood. “Are you ready to talk yet, sweetpea?”

Eye contact was made as I took in a mouthful of tea with sugar and milk. I quickly looked around in an attempt to avoid the subject, then looking back at Terry’s concerned brown eyes. I set my teacup down and breathed deeply. “I’m not sure what to say, Terr, honestly.”
“I only want to know about you, pet. You’re my primary concern,” he said sincerely.

I sighed again. “Oh, I know that, babe. And I know you care… I just…” I shook my head, ducking the issue again, unsure how much to tell him. He lived over 3000 miles away, so there wasn’t much he could say or do to help. The problems were mine, and I had gotten myself into them. Talking wasn’t going to solve or even make it manageable. “I don’t want to tell you, Terr.”

Reaching across the expanse of the white round table, he took my hand and squeezed it tenderly. “Angel, talking about it may help you feel better, if for no other reason.”

I shrugged uncomfortably, “Three years is a long time, I think I’m immune to it.”

Terry objected, “But you’re not, panda bear. I can see that it’s getting to you… wearing you down. Are you hurt?”

I bit my lower lip briefly, feeling as though I was in a police interrogation room. Inwardly I squirmed in guilt, although psychologically I hadn’t done anything worthy of a conscience scolding. My situation at home was not completely my doing. “It’s not all bad, Terr. Sometimes it’s really, really good, and I remember how it was. That’s hard to let go of.”

“I thought you came here, to London? Are you running away, peach, or are you really here for me?” Terry appeared pained at the possibility that motives weren’t completely unselfish. I would’ve traveled to London to experience Terry’s performance at the Globe, my prevailing circumstances notwithstanding. For an actor, that particular accomplishment was astounding, and I respected Terry too much to miss the opportunity to see him.

Tears stung behind my eyes, as the emotion of the moment slapped me. The truth was probably closer to both. My need to get away from home for a little while was intense and I couldn’t lie to myself. The need to crawl out of my skin, run and hide was undeniable, and tried to make me pull free of his grip on my hand. His skin scorched mine from the intensity of conversation. With all the seriousness I could muster, I assured him, “Babe, you know I would’ve been here regardless. This was a milestone in your career and you mean more to me than I can express. You’ve been there for me-”

“Until now, blossom,” he interrupted.

I nodded sadly, knowing that much was true. I had been lonely and missing him since he moved, but this wasn’t about him. “Until now. But I’m okay… well, at least I will be. I have the Broadway community and the show, and I’m so proud of it and my performance in it, when I rehearse. I will be fine.” I said it knowing that I was trying to assure him as much as myself.

Terry reluctantly dropped the subject after my dismissal, allowing the tension to drain away from my shoulders again. I didn’t notice that I had clenched my arms to my side or my legs into my body, until I began to relax again. The relief of getting off the subject was palpable and very real, and worked its way down my limbs. My brain took to the reprieve like a chain smoker to nicotine after an 8 hour flight.

We took a much abbreviated run through the White Tower and the Jewel House after lunch, Terry having hit his wall of education rather early on. He had a performance that night, and appeared giddy as we walked out of the gate of the fort. He was bouncing on the balls of his feet and was nearly sprinting across Tower Bridge within the minutes after leaving. I was not as eager with no company to join me that evening and no plan before me. I managed to get him to slow down and talk to me about what was going on within that fascinating head of his.
“Whoa, babe, so eager to get rid of me?” Walking along the Thames Path, I got him to stop on the other side of Tower Bridge to enjoy the view of Tower of London back over the river.

He wrapped his arm around my shoulder pulling me close for a kiss on the top of my head. We leaned against the cool, rough stone wall beneath our elbows. “Oh no, my rose! I really enjoy my job!”

“You tell me straight. There’s more to this eager beaver shit than enjoying your job. You seem to forget that I’ve been in shows with you.”

“Confession time?”

“Confession time.” A motor boat whizzed by capturing our attention briefly and offering Terry some time to gather his thoughts.

His face adopted a look of seriousness that I was very rarely privy to. He ran his fingertips along the uneven surface of the wall, distractedly picking at one circular pinkish colored rock.

“Remember back in sophomore year when we first started living together, for lack of a better label?” He phrased his words like a question, but it was really more of a statement.

Like a slideshow within my imagination, nights curled up on a poor excuse of a bed with Terry avoiding a paper due in less than a week, scraping together the last of my quarters for a lunch of French fries in the cafeteria and pizzas delivered at 3am to enjoy another viewing of Grease flashed through my mind’s eye. Our friendship had a solid foot in the midst of our reliance on procrastination, our ability to burst into show tunes on the basis of one word at the same time and our tendency towards the inability to afford food because of dance lessons. I nodded to let him continue on.

“That was a confusing time for me. Although I knew I was gay and I had come out while in high school, I didn’t live by it until later. For a while, I was in love with you as ridiculous as that may seem.”

Terry tried for the joke, but it fell flat of the target. He didn’t feel it, reliving the painful part of his past, not to mention mine. In very many ways, the two of us would’ve been perfect together. Terry and I both crushed on each other, and we hadn’t tried to hide our affections. In a parallel universe, we were insanely happily married with twelve children. In this universe, we were perfectly matched as best friends.

“I kissed you that one night, and for that moment all my hopes were securely planted with you ‘fixing’ me. Back then gay was still broken or wrong, and because I had feelings for you, I could move forward with you and it would be good. We made out but a certain part of me wouldn’t jump that bandwagon- so to speak.”

I laughed with all humor removed. “A woman can’t hear that enough… that she can’t coax a man to get a boner…”

Terry pulled me into another affectionate hug, erasing the awful memory of our failed make out session. “I’m sorry, babycakes. I didn’t want to relive it. I’m not particularly proud of that time either. I didn’t do it to hurt you, you know that.”

I snuggled into him further. This wasn’t about us or me, so it was unfair for me to bring that up. Our friendship was beyond that point, and we had grown, healed from what we had done to each other back then. Embarrassed, I said, “I didn’t mean to beat that particular dead horse.”
Terry continued, holding me close, “There’s a point to all of this. I’ve gotten myself into a similar situation, I’m afraid.” He took a deep breath, centering himself and confessed, “I fell in love with Tom.” I balked internally, inclined to deny what he’d admitted. Terry stared off over the rippling water of the river, and stated, “I have already told you, only not in so many words, but I did. When I told you, I’d found someone to wine and dine me, he was the man. It’s silly, I know it, but I’ve fallen for Tom. We’ve spent so much time together over the past few months. I’ve really gotten to know him. He’s so beautiful in nearly every way.”

Mentally regulating my voice from the touch of hysteria I felt, I objected reasonably, “Terry, babe, he’s not gay.” My initial thought was of Terry’s impending broken heart, and I didn’t want that for him. We both experienced that when we didn’t work. In a miniscule way that I couldn’t identify, I felt deflated, off kilter. My butterflies fluttered forebodingly and a panic I didn’t understand choked off any other words of prudence.

“Oh, I know that. That’s what makes it so difficult. My feelings don’t make any sense. Once I became comfortable being gay, I’d never ever been attracted to a man who wasn’t gay. This is new for me, and I know I have to get over it. He’s just insanely good and kind in every way. Not my type, of course… but I can’t help it.”

Terry, in my recent memory, hadn’t been involved with anyone. He liked to blame his commitment on his career, but as confident he was in nearly aspect of his life, he was not comfortable in his love life. Voicing my thoughts as best I could, I said, “I think you are vulnerable to falling for the safe bet. Someone who can’t hurt you because you can’t completely dedicate yourself to it. It’s your defense mechanism.”

Terry looked at me pointedly and asked, “What’s yours?”

I pulled away from him, avoiding the discussion that Terry endeavored to resurrect. He was not steering this conversation back to me. I started walking in the direction of the Globe Theatre, walling off any further chat on that. My problem was bound to come to light, but I wasn’t ready yet.

* * * * * * * * * * *

I treated myself to a performance of Wicked at the Apollo Victoria Theatre to continue down my rabbit hole. It felt incredibly liberating to not have any place to be and the freedom to do whatever I imagined. There was no schedule to abide by or chores that needed to be done. Surprisingly, the rain had refrained from falling that day, so I walked back to my hotel room from the theatre after the show.

My phone sounded with an incoming text as I arrived on the northeast corner of Trafalgar Square, mere steps from my hotel. I dug the device from the bottom of bag and unlocked the screen. ‘Tom Hiddleston: You were missed this evening. Reluctant to brush up on your Shakespeare to keep up with me? – Tom’

Despite the late hour and the darkness, I sat on the steps in front of the National Gallery to type out a response. ‘Kristie Taylor: It is well after the appointed time, Mr. H. Where were you this afternoon when I needed the distraction? – K’

After hitting send, I looked around the nearly deserted square. Traffic still sped by at a fast clip, but there weren’t many other people around. I closed my eyes and just felt the city around me. I marveled again at my incredible need for a vacation, and this was fitting the bill so well. A cleansing and renewing of the spirit was an excellent way for me to regain my perspective and equilibrium. Before long, my phone squealed with Tom’s response: ‘Tom Hiddleston: Many
apologies, my lovely friend. I was detained with the mundane priorities of life. Are you all right? What’s the matter? – Tom’

Shaky breath in, shaky breath out. I wasn’t going to cry in public. Reviewing all that Terry and I had discussed was difficult enough, but I couldn’t let Tom in on all the trouble. First off, it wasn’t fair to lay it on him. Second, some of the secrets weren’t mine to share. We weren’t exactly close, so sharing seemed weird. Terry had to work through his issues, subscriptions, whatevers and I would work through my own. ‘Kristie Taylor: I’m fine. Some issues to work out with Terry. We’re okay, just some things that have come up. –K’

I lifted myself to my feet to walk the last few feet to my hotel, clutching my mobile as if it were a lifeline. In an inexplicable way, Tom was a balm for the chaotic emotions happening in the background. ‘Tom Hiddleston: What would you say to a little frivolity, some distraction from your holiday? – Tom’

Oh, he was a funny one, reminding me that I should be enjoying my vacation instead rehashing drama. He was absolutely right, considering I’d jumped the pond to escape mine. ‘Kristie Taylor: Reminder noted, Mr. H. I would absolutely welcome a distraction. What’s on your mind? – K’

I took the elevator up to my hotel room, throwing myself on my bed. My phone became my only focus. ‘Tom Hiddleston: A viewing party at my flat on Friday. I did a series for the BBC recently and I was given an advance copy. Having some friends over to watch. Would you attend? – Tom’

Lying on my back, I kicked off my shoes as I tapped out another message. ‘Kristie Taylor: So is this shameless self-promotion and a soiree to boost Tom’s ego? – K’

His answer came within moments, indicating that I had become the center of his attention. ‘Tom Hiddleston: I like to look at it as an event for my mates to shamelessly harass and take the piss out of something I’ve worked so hard on. I wanted to extend you an invitation myself although Terry said you don’t have a choice. - Tom’

‘Kristie Taylor: I guess I will be there then. Sounds like fun! – K’

We spent the next half hour texting back and forth. Conversing with Tom, even in this small way, was the perfect way to unwind after the huge dramatic conversations with Terry. For a little while, Tom allowed me to forget…
‘Tom Hiddleston: ‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? Thou art more lovely…’ Before noon and probably before coffee but I thought you might forgive me long enough for me to ask how you are. – Tom’

It was Tuesday morning, and I’d been awake for about an hour preparing for my day out with my best friend when my text notification sounded. Despite my warnings for using Shakespeare before the appropriate time, he was beginning to create a theme. He was stretching my creativity beyond my means when I should still be asleep. Should I feel flattered that he intimated that I was pretty?

Chuckling, I instead fired off the first Oscar Wilde quote I could think of, ‘Kristie Taylor: Ah, the Bard is awake. ‘Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.’ - K’

‘Tom Hiddleston: Oh, but my Wilde one is more than alert and kicking back. You deserve more credit than you give yourself. You are more than well equipped.’

‘Kristie Taylor: I have to be. You keep breaking my no Shakespeare before noon rule, and I have no coffee in exchange. Did mum pay extra for all the Shakespeare? – K’

‘Tom Hiddleston: How did you know? By the by, my Wilde one, it is gone noon yesterday… - Tom’

I could almost picture the teasing shit laughing at me on the other end. Why couldn’t I let the challenge go? My instinct was that I was out of my element, that his knowledge far exceeded my own. That didn’t stop me from trying to show him up in some capacity.

‘Kristie Taylor: ‘All human beings, as we meet them, are commingled out of good and evil: and you, alone, in the ranks of mankind, are pure evil.’ Bring on the musicals, Mr H, and I will best you. Level ground. – K’

I quoted The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde to get his attention and try to get the upper hand in this situation. How quickly things escalated between us, I mused. My original plan, in deference to Terry and his affection for Tom, was to strive to limit my contact with Tom. I was concerned that I might share the secret that Terry entrusted me to keep. I also didn’t want to enrage some kind of jealousy or envy within Terry, not that there was anything going on between Tom and me. My best friend was bound for a world of hurt, in love with a man who couldn’t love him in the same way. So far, my plan was unsuccessful.

‘Tom Hiddleston: Stevenson as well? You are a marvel. After noon, I promise. How are you, my Wilde one, aside from incensed with me? – Tom’

He was back to playing nice. I could play nice as well, but he was slowing me up with all the bickering. ‘Kristie Taylor: Going out with Terry in a little while. We should be okay. Don’t know if he’ll give me a hard time today. -K’

I set my phone aside to finish applying my makeup and packing my handbag for the day out, ignoring Tom’s reply at first. When I retrieved my mobile, his text was waiting for me. ‘Tom Hiddleston: If you need distraction or someone to talk with, you can text me. Give Terry the same hell you give me. –Tom’
Terry, feeling comfortable after sharing his secret with me, confided in me his love and affection for Tom along with his fears and concerns. With our distance and our limited contact in the months apart, Terry could finally unload everything. We’d been limited in our chatting to text messaging, Facebook and the occasional email. The five hour time difference made phone calls even scarcer, not to mention the amount of hours Terry logged in Tom’s company unable to speak frankly. Our togetherness and close proximity minus Tom allowed the freedom to share.

“Do you know what’s so amazing about Tom?” Terry asked rhetorically, weaving through the mobs of people. Because the rains to float Noah’s Ark had visited London on Tuesday, my best friend and I were driven to activities indoors. I’m lying, of course, the rain fell the normal amount for London, but we were looking for any excuse to go shopping. Apparently half of London and all of Scotland had taken shelter from the rain within the doors of Harrod’s department store. We indulged in retail therapy and too much chocolate to drown out our inability to enjoy the outdoors. Terry continued, reviewing the map on the wall for the next department to visit, “He always treated me as an equal. All those queens back at home. I love them and all, but there’s something about hanging with a man.”

“Terry, babe, you are one of those queens.”

In his most flamboyant way, Terry did a rounded snap. “And proud of it!” He sobered quickly, and moved on. “I’m not sure if I can explain it well. But with Tom, I’m not the trophy gay friend or some kind of novelty. I was one of the guys and he accepted me from day one, no reservations. There were no preconceived notions or asking my levels of testosterone,” he said, picking up a brown soft leather ladies handbag.

I snatched the purse and handed him a leather wallet from the same collection. To divert the conversation away from Tom, I asked, scrunching my face in confusion, “Were you born with any testosterone at all?”

Pretending to ponder this question seriously, he finally said, “Whatever amount I had, I think I sang it out when I was in Hello, Dolly in high school.”

Terry guided the conversation back to serious again as we perused the seemingly unending departments in the maze they called Harrod’s. As the shoulder to cry on and understanding listener, I comforted as best I could. I hadn’t seen much of their dynamic, having only spent two nights and one full day in their company, but I still witnessed the genuine affection between them. Tom accepted and liked Terry for all his brutal honesty and sometimes overbearing ways. Tom was patient and understanding, and encouraged Terry to be himself.

Even considering the limited interactions between the two men, I could see their friendship was genuine. Tom’s acceptance of Terry’s bullying him into taking us out to Windsor was one such instance. Tom’s reaction had been so positive to Terry’s good reviews in the papers after opening night. I especially liked Tom ribbing my friend about his choice in wardrobe; I’d been saying the same thing for years.

I was supportive as I could be about Terry’s seemingly endless monologue about Tom, offering words of encouragement, and in a small way, this felt like Terry’s first steps in getting over Tom. Terry knew Tom wasn’t gay, so he knew nothing would come of his feelings. He was looking and foraging ahead to separating and eliminating the foolish crush and return to friendly affections.

I didn’t have to say much; I was merely the dumping ground and supportive voice of reason for
Terry to get it all out of his system. I was actually grateful that I didn’t have to say much, because for maybe the first time in my life I didn’t know what to say. Something irked me and I couldn’t identify what bothered me about the entire situation. But with it, all my smartassness and general sense of humor abandoned me to become some kind of silent imbecile.

On Wednesday, with the threat of another day of rain, Terry took me to the National Gallery to view the Botticelli collection that he was so enamored with. As we stared for another twenty minutes at Venus and Mars, my patience was beginning to wane. As a rule, I like my art to be performance based, singing, dancing, acting, even miming, I could stomach.

Terry commented on the piece as I began to admire the red walls of the gallery itself, “There’s something so peaceful and calming about this. The soft, muted-”

“Snoring, babe. I was asleep 15 hours ago when we first looked at this thing.”

He grabbed me by the arm impatiently and pulled me back by his side. “Just look at it. Take it all in.”

Hesitating, I looked at every inch of the painting once more, unable to will it to do something exciting. “I think you just like the little goat cherubs because you’re playing one on stage.”

Rolling his eyes so far in the back of his head he nearly fell over backwards, he scoffed. “I should’ve brought Tom with me today. He gets it.”

“He’s accommodating, babe. He humors you because you nag and beat people into submission.”

“Oh why can’t I get you to behave?” he sang at me. Pulling me into his arms to dance on the wooden gallery floor, he continued singing the beautiful strands of Cole Porter’s **Why Can’t You Behave** from the musical Kiss Me Kate. “Why can’t you be good? And do as you should?” With his arm secure around my waist and my hand in his, he guided me across the room from one end to the other, earning shushes and nasty looks in response.

I swatted him away playfully, trying to straighten up again. “I’m willful?” I reminded him good-naturedly. “So go on then… I know this was an excuse to get the conversation back on Tom.”

Terry launched into another dissertation of how sweet Tom was. “He helped me run lines, you know? He was absolutely knew this play better than I did, and helped me find the beats and intricacies. He made me examine every aspect, every line. He RADA’d me for sure. I think he’s actually made me a better actor, performer…” I let Terry gush, what more could I do?

I was relieved that the focus was off me and what brought me to England in the first place aside from Terry. But even that small reprieve couldn’t explain my confusion over Terry’s plight as he continued to unload all he felt for Tom. I’m not homophobic, never rolled that way, many of my friends gay men working on Broadway. They far outnumbered the straight men, and probably the women. I, at least knew that wasn’t the explanation, so I had to chuck it all up to my aversion to Terry’s impending hurt.

Terry’s confessions and working through everything he felt went on for two solid days as we visited other tourist traps in London. I reasoned that he required this to heal and move on, and I would put up with it, in hopes I could explain why it bothered me as well. I didn’t go back to the Globe or a Midsummer Night’s Dream either of those nights, choosing different activities instead.

My days were bookended by chatting with Tom by text, in the morning before the day started and at night right before sleep. Strange as it may be, our exchanges were the touch of normalcy I
needed, the perfect hideaway from my personal demons and a change of pace from Terry’s incessant rantings. Tom continued challenging me, trying to discover the depth of my education and familiarity with different literary and even musical references. Where his strengths were in Shakespeare and poetry, mine were rooted in Sondheim and Rogers and Hammerstein musicals and British novel authors.

“So what are you going to do… about this Tom thing?” I asked subtly. It was Thursday, and I had been in London for nearly a week. Terry and I were walking through the pungent and foul atmosphere of the London Zoo located in the north east corner of Regents Park. The ever present penetrating stink of sweating animals and feces was starting to make me anxious, and maybe a little nauseous. I blamed the smell but it could be my feeling of unease regarding the subject.

As a friend, I wanted to be emotionally available to my friend in need. He was suffering, and of course, I didn’t want him to feel that. But what was it about this subject that bothered me so much? My skin crawled, a bubble of hollowness sat in my belly, and the hair upon my head wanted to run for cover. Unpleasant and unwelcome as I felt about the conversation, Terry was the one in pain. I would be the best friend that he needed.

Terry shrugged, crinkling his nose in disgust. “I think, admitting how I feel to you has helped. My very own road to recovery… do you think there’s a twelve step program for unrequited love?”

I smiled as we paused to view the buffalo eating grass. As stimulating as zoos could be, my irritation was that I was convinced that the buffalo smelled better than I did. My pores and hair had sponged the acrid aroma, taken it in and recycled it, creating a whole new level of ick. “Yeah, babe, there is. It’s called alcoholism.”

“Oh! You’ve reminded me… I forgot.” He slapped the heel of his hand to his forehead and rolled his eyes, perfectly demonstrating his irritation in his own forgetfulness. “We’re going out tonight after the show. It’s Madison’s birthday.”

“She wanted me there?” I asked, genuinely surprised. We moved on from the bison pen, moving along the cement zoo walk with animal foot prints painted in the path and avoiding the numerous prams and whinging, crying children. “Am I expected to consume copious amounts of alcohol? You know what that does to me.”

“Oh, relax. You’ll be my buffer for Tom and when I start swooning. Help me down my twelve step program while we go karaoking.”

“Shit, babe! This is not going to be pretty. If I throw up this time, I’m blaming you.”

I insisted on taking a shower and changing after the awful smell of the zoo, if I was expected to be around any humans with noses. We didn’t have a lot of time between the zoo and Terry’s call time, so we made two stops: one to Marks and Spencer for emergency clothes shopping and Terry’s flat for showering. Because of the time crunch, I grabbed a plain pair dark jeans and a white v-neck shirt, concluding that if I was to get the new ensemble home I’d either have to ship it or wear two outfits home. My luggage was fit to bust before my arrival.

When we arrived at the theatre, Madison was outside the stage door with a big bear of a man. He was tall, broad with striking red hair and adorable freckles that softened his rugged appearance. Throwing her arms around both of us, she hugged us with affection. “Terrence, Kristiane, this is my friend, Michael.” We all shook hands in greeting; Michael was soft-spoken and the complete opposite that I expected. Madison explained, “He came out to celebrate with us tonight after the
show.” She turned to me and said, “I’m sneaking you in past Pip, so stick with me. Terry,” she looked at my best friend. “You and Tom will have to sneak Michael in past Pip.”

As if on cue, Tom appeared behind Terry and me. He had slung his arm around Terry jovially, while touching the small of my back to get our attention. My best friend pulled him into a huge hug as they laughed and slapped each other on the back, genuinely happy to see one another again. Tom then turned his attention back to me, “Well, my Wilde one has reappeared. It’s a pleasure to have you back, darling.” He leaned down and kissed me on the cheek.

“I had to come see the Bard tackle his own play,” I quipped, rolling my eyes. Tom quickly turned his attention to Madison and Michael to greet them.

Terry met my gaze with a cocked eyebrow, questioning silently the familiarity that seemed to exist between Tom and me. I’d neglected, up to this point, mention that we were communicating via text since our excursion out to Windsor. With Terry’s revelation, the subject never circled round to me again and I didn’t want to upset him. I naturally assumed that Tom might’ve mentioned it to Terry.

Madison called me over to her as she was ready to go inside. She pulled me to her, clutching my arm in hers, and whispered, “It’s yoga time, girl. Let’s go!” We left the three men behind us to fend for themselves to get beyond Pip, the angry bull of a woman.

When we settled into one of the wooden stalls, she asked about my holiday so far, while we waited for the men to appear. When Michael joined us, she said, “Kristie, I’m so chuffed you’ve decided to join in tonight. Terry, he’s so proud of you. We can’t wait to hear your singing this evening.”

I felt the blush color my cheeks. “It’s been awhile since I’ve done karaoke, I might be a little rusty.”

She enthusiastically slapped me knee as she sat forward, her attention fully on Terry and Tom on stage as they began their stretching. Distractedly she said, “It’s just like riding a bike…” Within seconds, we were thoroughly engrossed in the male form once more. I kind of considered it my engaging and bonding with Madison, our common ground.

Backstage during the performance, Tom found me sitting in my corner with quiet Michael. I’d been listening to the dialogue of the play, engrossed in the language. He whispered, “I’ve been told you are coming out with us tonight.”

“I can confirm that the nasty little rumor is true.”

He flashed me his pearly whites. “Brilliant!”

“How are the Bard’s karaoke skills?” I challenged.

“I can hold my own. Shall we wager on who does better?”

Ha, I thought to myself. The man had no idea what he was in for. I held out my hand to shake. “I will take that bet, Mr. H.”
Carefree. Rejuvenated. High. There is a universal truth for stage actors and the weightlessness that comes from a job well done. Theatre is not just about performing, acting or portraying a human condition. It is an active exchange of energy between audience and performers. The better reception from viewers always made for a better execution of the material, whether it is a song, dance, or play.

The audience was exceptionally grateful for A Midsummer Night’s Dream and this affected my friends. The smiles were wide, the stress and effort put into staging the piece worth the rewards. The euphoric high from a good performance was better than any drug. From my backstage perch, I could feel the buzz of vitality in the atmosphere of the theatre in the minutes after curtain call. My friends were all wide-eyed, full of excitement, thrilled and infused with a contagious pep.

We poured out of the stage door into the chilled London night air. The cold did nothing to damper the laughter, loud chatter or general good mood of us collectively. Terry tucked me under his arm as Amelia, Madison, Michael, Tom and three more of Madison’s friends from the cast crowded around us. Amelia, Michael and Tom led the way along the embankment to take us to the karaoke bar. Along the journey, Terry reached a moment of pure quiet introspection. I studied his profile, noting that his expression displayed little indication what he was pensive about. I squeezed him closer to me, feeling the toned muscles of his abdomen free of tension under my fingertips. To avoid drawing attention from the others, quietly I said, “Hey, what’s up? Talk to me.”

We were within steps of our destination, the Refinery. Madison’s parents owned the place, and had hired the karaoke machine for us to take over the back corner of the restaurant for the celebration. The building looked like an open industrial warehouse space with one wall of windows overlooking the Thames. Our room for the night was a small red box with pale hardwood floors lined with comfy booths and a chandelier glowing cozy hanging in the center. The room was snuggled in the back of the building near the toilets to avoid disrupting other patrons. Her parents had loaded a makeshift stage of black slab of wood about eight by ten feet, tucked against the far wall. One of the booths on the right side of the stage housed the karaoke machine and the thick bible of songs.

There were three tiny tables scattered throughout the rest of the room interspersed with oversized brown leather lounge chairs. The center table was already loaded with drinks for our arrival. As our companions loaded into our sanctuary for the night, gathering around the drinks, I stopped Terry to talk to me. “Tell me what’s going on in there.” I glanced up to his forehead, indicating his overactive head and where he’d disappeared to within the two minute walk. I tapped his temples gently, attempting to draw him out.

Terry opened his mouth to say something, although my instinct told me that he wasn’t going to be candid with me. He couldn’t share more about how he felt about Tom with him in such close proximity. Not here, not surrounded by all his friends. As he was about to voice something, Tom called to us, “Terry! Kristie! Come on!” He was waving us over madly, his hands flapping in a circular motion over his head to gesture us over.

Terry kissed me lightly on the lips, my chin between his thumb and forefinger. He took my hand to lead me to the center table and rejoined the rest of our group. Tom handed us plastic cups full of orange liquid over the black circular table that everyone was standing around. Madison was directly to my right and Terry to my left, stacked nearly shoulder to shoulder. Tom winked at me before glancing towards the stage, nodding once in indication of the spirited contest we shook
hands on earlier. My best friend noticed and I thought I could feel his stare on my profile, the weight of his brown eyes on me seemingly oppressive.

I didn’t have time to acknowledge Tom or Terry, saved by Eric, one of the tagalongs from the cast, as he toasted Madison on her 26th birthday. “We’re all here to celebrate this bird’s birthday. She’s old, but she’s provided us with alcohol for the evening. Can’t complain about that. Madison, many happy returns, luv. We all love you.”

All nine of us raised our plastic cups and made like we were clinking and chugged back a healthy swig of screwdriver, the birthday girl’s favorite drink. She turned and squealed, “Terry, start us off. You can get it going.”

Terry, swallowing the last of his drink, exclaimed, “You got it, doll! I’ve got the perfect song to get this gig started.” He made his way over to the corner of the room to look up his signature song, and I knew exactly what he was going for. I followed behind him like a shadow to see if we could quickly discuss his mood.

Flipping the book to the end of the alphabet, I wrapped my arms around his waist from behind. “Pulling a Joel Grey, babe?”

He took one of my hands, brought it to his mouth, and brushed a kiss across my knuckles. “You know me too well. I’ll need you to help me out on the chorus.”

I kissed his shoulder. He flipped a few more of the laminated pages full of song titles and 5 digit codes. “I got your back. Did you want to talk?”

“We’re golden, girly,” he claimed convincingly. He found his song, and whispered the code repeatedly to himself to program in. Facing me, he squeezed me affectionately and kissed the top of my head. Knowing him so well, he’d genuinely replaced the pensive with jovial, like a light switch in the matter of minutes. I was suspicious, but the quiet air had completely disappeared.

Terry took the stage, queued up his choice and spoke into the microphone, ignoring the silly video that displayed on the lyric television screen. “It’s my girl Madison’s day, and I know how much she loves Kander and Ebb.”

Stepping into the role of Emcee, Terry appropriately sang Willkommen, the opening number of the musical Cabaret. It was an abridged version of the song specifically for a solo, cutting out all the dialogue in the middle. Madison, Amelia and I jumped up to back Terry up on the chorus. I used the opportunity to warm up my voice as much as possible, in preparation for my faceoff with Tom.

The atmosphere of the room adopted that feeling from the good performance earlier and time flew, with each of us taking the stage in turn. Madison badly sang the Spice Girls glowing hit Wannabe. Bless her, she stood by the choice and it loosened everyone up even more.

Terry supplied me with my second drink as he loaded up ABBA’s Lay All Your Love On Me. It was our go-to song in New York City, one we sang with and to each other all the time. I was still warming up my vocal cords, knowing exactly what I was going to sing for my upcoming competition with the Bard. I tried slowing down on my alcohol intake in light of this fact, needing concentration for my breathing.

As I was on stage with Terry, I noticed Tom make his way over to the book of songs to make his selection. When Terry and I finished our duet, I bounded to the irritatingly tall actor. I poked him in the back. “I think it’s the Bard’s turn to take the stage. Do you have a song?”
He spun around to face me as Terry joined us to deliver his mic. “I do actually. Considering level ground,” he recalled my words to him via text. “If I know you as I think I do, you will choose a musical theatre song, so I have.”

“Ooh, do tell. Round one, Mr. H,” I called to him as he took the stage. “Round one!”

As his selection loaded, he said for the benefit of the room, “I have a friendly rivalry going with my friend from America. This is for my Wilde one, Kristiane.”

Tom, in his defense, performed Luck Be a Lady from Guys and Dolls well. He wasn’t terrible, but he wasn’t as stellar as his speaking voice indicated. I wasn’t disappointed and I wasn’t wowed either. All eyes were on him since he’d made it clear that we were competing for the room’s approval. Terry turned to me midway through Tom’s performance and insisted that I kick Tom’s ass.

“Are you doing what I think you’re doing?” He enthusiastically tore through the pages in the book to find my song. When he found what he suspected, he pointed to it. Grinning, I nodded eagerly, committing the code to memory to add to the playlist. Terry smiled with me. “He may cry when he’s defeated.” His tone took on his serious note as he stared into my eyes. “Do it. For me.”

He was telling me something much deeper than this silly game was intended. Limited in my thought capacity given the late hour and the amount of vodka thrumming through me already, I couldn’t figure out what it was. I cupped his face between my cool hands. “That’s the idea.” I kissed him before turning to the stage. Tom had completed his selection and was met with a modest amount of applause.

In my many years of auditioning for musicals, I’d had my fair share of songs in my wheelhouse. I had to have the best in my repertoire that showed my range, belting ability, and the general tone of my voice. I’d stolen an arrangement of a song originally written for a man reworked as a powerful belter for a woman from my heroine Linda Eder. Man of La Mancha had been my audition song for my current employment, and I was terribly proud of how well it suited my voice.

As I stepped to the center of the black stage, the regal trumpets started playing through the unworthy speakers. With the trill of the trumpets as the intro of the song, nearly all attention in the room focused in on me. Centering myself, I committed to concentrating on my breath and my diaphragm in order to perform the song well, recalling my years of voice lessons. Three minutes later, after a high note that nearly shattered the wall of windows on the other side of the restaurant, the room erupted in applause. There’s a difference between my pop voice and my Broadway voice, and I’d used the latter to put Tom to shame. I was the clear winner. I curtsied gracefully and walked off the stage, handing off the microphone to Madison.

I found my competition after hugs and handshakes from everyone else in the room. He was sitting at the table watching me closely, both of us finishing our third drink of the party as I joined him. He was leaning forward, resting his elbows on his widespread knees and staring at me, in amazement? Wonderment? I was unsure what his expression was exactly.

Tipping my head back, I downed the deliciously sweet concoction of orange juice and vodka, letting the sour slide over my lazy tongue. With all the liquid drained from this plastic cup, I deposited it on the table with an empty echoing slap.

Lifting his eyebrows in question, he smiled and asked, “Another? I suppose I owe you another after being properly shamed with that display. I didn’t know you could do that.”

I winked. “I was just returning the favor of all those Shakespeare texts before noon.”
He smiled inwardly, his expression absolutely unreadable as he looked down at his cup in his hands between his knees. Mimicking the way he was sitting in his chair, I leaned closer to him, mischief tinting my expression and my voice. I reached out and ran my index fingers along his accentuated cheekbones, his most prominent facial feature, from ear to nose once. His skin was surprisingly smooth against the pads of my digits. "So these," I said, ignoring his question for another screwdriver. "Do you get these polished and sharpened?"

Looking up into my eyes, he chuckled in the back of his throat. His blue eyes sparkled at my tease. I sat back and regained my position of mirroring his, wondering if my feminine decorum had disappeared with drink one or two of the evening. "Weekly, on my way to Tesco’s…”

“So if this acting thing doesn’t pan out, are you taking up cutting glass as a career option?"

Quickly, he responded, his tone matching my teasing cadence, “Polishing diamonds actually.”

As I was nodding and trying to keep from laughing obnoxiously, Terry called from across the room, “Kitten, drink? Tom?"

“Yes, please!” I called, maybe a little too eagerly.

My table mate waved to my best friend to bring more. “I’ll have another, Terry. Thank you very much.” Tom turned his attention back to me. “His pet names for you… I can’t keep up. You were pumpkin not twenty minutes ago.”

Terry’s trademark. He loved his pet names, but I’m not sure he was aware of the ingrained habit anymore. It was just his form of communication, attention grabber.

Casually, I promised, “Aw, kitten, you don’t need to be jealous.” I stroked my finger down the bridge of his long British nose before poking the tip lightly. “We like you just fine.”

Terry flitted in and out while we continued our conversation about our careers. Tom was genuinely interested in my years of training with vocal coaches to get my voice prepared for eight shows a week on Broadway. He wasn’t surprised when I told him that I still had singing lessons in New York. Tom confessed that he sometimes reviewed his books from school to see if in his maturity another approach to a role might benefit him. “The life upon the wicked stage,” I mused, recalling a song from Show Boat.

Tom Shakespeared me with a grin, “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.”

I kicked it right back, quoting As You Like it, “They have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts.”

His face lit up warmly, clearly impressed that I could continue from where he had left off. Tom gently stroked my arm twice, “You’ve been reserving that.”

Maturely, I stuck my tongue out at him. “For just the right time, Shakespeare.”

Eric and Madison were monopolizing the karaoke machine quite heavily as the night marched on. Their drunken, slurred butchering of Sweet Dreams are Made of These so atrocious I thought my ears might actually bleed. I excused myself from Tom and Terry to review the song book again to see if I could perform another song.

After polishing off girly drink number four, I sat heavily in the booth beside the tucked away karaoke machine, reviewing the pages. When did they make books with moving letters? I shook
my head to try and clear it, hoping the sober brain would reappear. Squinting at the pages, I Heard it Through the Grapevine merged with I Wanna Dance With Somebody and became I Wanna Dance with the Grapevine Through Somebody. Time for another drink to clear my head, I thought struggling to my feet.

Weaving through swirling and sometimes invisible chairs, I passed Terry and Tom talking at a table in the middle of the room. Terry called to me, “Hey, Lush, it might be time for you to slowdown.” My head whipped too quickly to shoot him a dirty look that the movement unbalanced me in my delicate state. I teetered over my feet, toppled over, landing squarely upon Tom’s lap. He managed, his reflexes clearer than mine under the influence of yummy screwdrivers, to catch me mid-fall with his hands around my waist, my landing softer than gravity intended.

My ass and upper legs were pressed against Tom’s deliciously firm thighs. I was not enjoying this, but I was not in a rush to get up either. And I didn’t get a shock of electricity from Tom’s strong protective arm around my waist; that was a necessity because I was not steady on my feet or my ass, as I nearly spilled off his lap.

Tom’s hand burned hot through the cotton of my white t-shirt where his hand rested on my waist, warming my blood and raising my awareness of how close we were. His other hand held the outside of my thigh anchoring me in place on his legs. The men were laughing at me, irritatingly so. Tom reminded, good-naturedly, “You know that you don’t have to drink all of the alcohol. You are allowed to leave some in England.”

“Says you.” I poked his chest with my pointer finger. I was so aware of every inch of my body touching his.

Terry interrupted, “Dude, I have an audition on Wednesday next week in the morning. Can you babysit this one for me?” He pulled my hair spiritedly to indicate he was referring to me. I slapped Terry’s hand away, missing all four of the hands invading my space.

“I don’t need watching,” I protested loudly. “I haven’t been a child for at least a year.”

Tom teased me, “I’ll take you for an ice cream.”

I’m not sure when it happened, but the slur had started about half way down this cup. I suddenly realized that I had skipped dinner, and it could account for my low tolerance. I turned to my human chair, “Your last name is coplix.” I was shooting for either complicated or complex and came up with the drunken version of both.

“We back on my name again?” He was laughing again.

“It’s diffipulk. Hiddson, Sliddeon, Niddlebaum… I just don’t know.”

Terry was damn near peeing himself on the other side of the table, and I’m not sure what he was laughing at. He was bent in half, his elbow on the table and his forehead planted on his arm. His shoulders shaking as he silently laughed. Tom looked amused and adjusted me on his lap. “It’s Hiddleston, actually.”

“Yeah! That’s what I said. It takes like four years to say.”

“Last time it was my first name. Now you have a problem with my surname. Can we address Kristiane?”

I swatted his arm draped across my lap. “This isn’t about me, unless you want to admit my vitcoy over you in the kar- karo- oh hell, singing.”
Terry regained his breath and wiped the tears from his eyes. He stood from his lounge chair and stepped around the table to take my hands. The two men helped me to my feet. “Cupcake, I’m cutting you off. Time for you to sleep this off. I need to get you to your hotel.”

Tom volunteered, “I’ll take her. She’s on the way to my flat.”

My two men spoke over the top of my head, as if I wasn’t there. I didn’t know what was happening, but they were silent for what felt like long moments. The room started to spin, taking my feet with it. Both men steadied me before I collapsed to the floor, and the room righted itself again.

As the world spun under my feet, my friends nearly carried me to the taxi. When had my brain been replaced with cotton balls? I shivered in the cold breeze whipping off the muddy brown water of the rippling river. Tom wrapped his arm around me, rubbing my arm to calm the gooseflesh that had raised there.

Terry kissed me soundly on the cheek as I sat heavily into the cracked leather of the taxi. The damaged material whined under my ass, and I giggled at the sound that met my ears. Terry grasped my cheeks, forcing me to focus on his face as Tom walked to the other side of the vehicle. Vehemently, he whispered, “Behave yourself and give him hell for me.”

I saluted as he closed the door, confused by his words. I wasn’t lucid enough to work out what he was telling me. The cabby flipped the meter, and Tom asked, “Are you still cold, my Wilde one?”

I nodded, the vodka sloshing through my head. In the absence of his jacket, he pulled me to him to wrap his arm around me once more. Heat spread quickly from his lazy strokes along the skin of my arms. I slumped into him, resting my head on his collarbone, breathing in the lovely smell of him. We were silent for most of the journey to my hotel, his very presence warming me everywhere. I placed my hand on his thigh to sit up, but in my inabilities, my hand slid instead of my body sitting up further. His thigh muscle clenched in response to the unexpected stroke.

Quietly, I informed him, “I believe you’ve let me down, Shakespeare.”

He cleared his throat at my unexpected statement. “How so?”

“Traffic is still going in the wrong direction, and don’t even get me started on the lights.”

He chuckled lightly, pulling me in closer. “A slight glitch in the system, I’ll see to it.” His voice rumbled and vibrated in his chest against my ear soothing me into near sleep.

When we arrived at the hotel, Tom asked the driver to keep the meter running and that there’d be another stop. He assisted me out the car and up the mountain of stairs. “Alright, darling, you’re sorted. Do you need me to take you any further?”

I smiled up at him brightly and sleepily. “I got this.”

“That’s my girl. You were magnificent this evening. Thank you for that performance.”

I tried to do the victory pose with my arms above my head, but my coordination wasn’t what I expected. Tom caught me before I fell over, like the sloppy drunk I was. “I win!”

“Absolutely.” He looked at me for a long moment, something within his gaze that I couldn’t identify. He finally leaned into me, his hot thin lips against my cheek. My skin seared with the sensation, as a blush crept up to meet it. The kiss lingered. My hands reached out and touched the muscles of his abdomen to steady myself from my knees wobbling under me. I couldn’t tell if it
was the attention of the man or the effects of the alcohol pumping in my system. The dormant butterflies that resided in my belly reawakened and took flight.

As he pulled away, his eyes flashed with regret so quickly that I wasn’t sure I saw that emotion at all. I sighed, wondering if the lingering kiss was misplaced. He shooed me inside. “See you tomorrow, my Wilde one. Terry wanted me to remind you that he’ll collect you at eleven.”
Chapter 7

Like the obnoxious siren of New York City fire truck responding to a call, the alarm sounded in my room precisely at ten. The rattling shrill broke through my cranium like a spear to the frontal lobe, piercing the soft tissue that was left of my brain. Wincing from the stabbing, throbbing echo bouncing around the cavity of my skull, I threw my arm at the bedside table, aiming in the general direction of the offending object. No way was I going to subject myself to anymore spinning, if what was going on behind my eyelids was any indication.

My hand slapped like a fish out of water until the blaring sound ceased, my groan replacing the sound in the small room. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, the cavern drier than the Sahara, not that I’d ever been. I’d love to say that vodka treated me better than the beer, but in that moment, I highly doubted it.

Rolling onto my back, I attempted to regain some of my equilibrium in the face of yet another hangover. I was beginning to think that I was still drunk, rather than hung over. Breathing deeply through my nose, I steeled myself for opening my eyes. I would swear to it, but my eyelids creaked when I finally managed to pry them open.

The action of sitting up and getting to my feet was relatively easy after that. Staying on my feet, however, was not. The floor swirled beneath me, sending my ass back into the mattress. Around attempt number three, I was able to will the floor to stay in place and I marched myself straight into the shower, swallowing down a warm bottle of water on the way.

Repeating my regime from my last bout with alcohol, I took three Advil with another bottle of water before checking my mobile. I had a text from both Terry and Tom within minutes of each other as I was reviving in the shower. Terry was already on his way to collect me for the day. Tom wanted to check if I was alive and kicking.

Tapping out a quick response to Tom: ‘Kristie Taylor: I apparently had a boxing match with a mean bottle of vodka. – K’

Tom’s response: ‘Tom Hiddleston: Did you win? – Tom’

‘Kristie Taylor: You may have to tune in for the sports scores later. The referee is still… um, refereeing. – K’

‘Tom Hiddleston: Don’t forfeit. I’m sure you’ll get the upper hand. If the referee judges against you, kick his arse. – Tom’

I was smiling like a loon, a certifiably insane, crazy person. For once, I let him have the last word. Tom, as I’d come to learn, was a genuine good guy, and I’d never met anyone quite like him. I couldn’t figure out how he made me feel amazing about myself, even when he was shaming me with his endless knowledge of Shakespeare.

Terry wasn’t carrying his ass around like a duffle bag as I was, but he didn’t consume as much as I did either. He was outside the hotel when I rolled down those imposing stairs, looking happy and chipper, damn him. “Good morning, precious! How goes the hangover?”

“Migraine’s about an eight. How the hell are you so alive?” I snarled at him. My growl is much worse than my bite, which isn’t fearsome in the least.
Terry patted my head affectionately. “Ah! I’m not the lush. I left that title for you, beautiful. Between you and Madison, I don’t think there was enough alcohol for the rest of us to get drunk.”

“But you let me. Buy me a carafe of coffee or four to make it up to me.” I hooked my arm through his and turned to Trafalgar to hit the Tesco Express on the corner for caffeine and croissants.

Terry reminded me with a twinkle in his eye, “I’m just the enabler. Do you have no self-control of your own?”

Making our way through the tourists and late morning Londoners with our coffee, we walked in the direction of Big Ben. Our plan was to do the touristic thing with Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey before heading to Tom’s place for the viewing party. Terry slyly asked, “So how much do you remember of last night, my little one?”

“Why? Did we go to Paris or something?” I sucked down my coffee hoping to find my memory at the bottom of the sixteen ounce cup. I had flashes, tiny moments of memory, but I didn’t know how the evening flowed.

“We stayed local, I assure you-”

I gasped suddenly, “Wait! You were going to tell me something. I remember when you got to the restaurant you got quiet. Tell me about that.” I watched his expression morph from surprise to pensive to pained to determined. Terry can be terribly internal if I allowed him, but I had to get all of that out. I tugged his arm, drawing his attention back to the conversation instead of what was going on in his head. “Talk to me. You’ve got till we get to Westminster Abbey.” We were closing in on the Houses of Parliament, and the old cathedral was tucked in right behind it.

“This isn’t just about me, babe. Are you ready to talk as well?”

I squirmed uncomfortably; I was the kitten that didn’t want to be held. I dropped his arm, the physical contact making me feel even more cornered. The past few days I’d been allowed to hide from the truth. My reasoning was if I gave him something, Terry might give me something. Reluctantly, I admitted, “I think it’ll get better. I have to be patient.” The angry, condescending voice rattling around in my head told me differently, but I had to believe that, with time, things would improve.

“Kitten, you’ve been patient and it’s only gotten worse.”

Edging on exasperation that he was pushing me again, I puffed out a breath through my lips. I wasn’t ready to make any decisions. “I’m not ready to give up.”

“That’s only because you’re scared. You’re better than that. You deserve better than that.” He tucked me under his arm protectively, kissing the part on top of my head.

I tried to push back, but Terry held me firmly to his side. Reacting verbally, I reminded, “My issue isn’t why you got quiet, you little manipulator. Now spill!”

My best friend casually shrugged. “If you aren’t ready to talk, then I’m not either.”

“How is that a thing?”

He looked at me the same way he did last night when the quiet sank in. “Correlation, my dear heart. Correlation.”

I was honestly confused by what he was saying, or rather, not saying. I huffed a small giggle,
keeping the mood light, “What the hell does that mean?”

In all seriousness, Terry said simply, “You aren’t ready. I hate to sound so clichéd, because it’s not a good color on me, but denial ain’t just a river in Brazil.”

I couldn’t help the eruption of laughter. Terry’s lack of patience carried over into the details of clichés. Ignoring for the moment the topic of my denial because I was clueless, I blurted, “A river in Egypt, babe.”

He dismissed me with a wave of the hand that wasn’t around my shoulders. “I told you. Arithmetic ain’t my strong point.”

My Terry is not as dumb as he sometimes likes to suggest. This was his way of lightening the mood between us as we had gotten serious. He was purposefully softening me for the blow of what I was in denial about. I answered, “Arithmetic is math and geography is the where things are… So what am I not facing? And what does that have to do with your whole silent man routine last night?”

We were standing in the courtyard of Westminster Abbey, trying to avoid collision with the countless other tourists around. Midday was not the best time to visit to avoid the lines, but I was nursing a hangover. Terry faced me seriously and scanned my face for something. His eyes circled my features, searching out truth, I can only assume. “Tell me something. How do you feel about Tom?”

Locking me in place with a hand on either of my shoulders, I was forced to look at him. I was caught a little off-guard by the question. I glanced away from Terry’s eyes that were burning into my very retinas. That familiar nauseous sensation returned in full force, that unpleasantness that I couldn’t identify. My hand flew to my stomach with the shock of the question and an attempt to settle what was happening within. I tried to force a giggle, but the tone even sounded empty and fake to my own ears. Planting my feet in place, I shrugged uncomfortably. “It doesn’t matter how I feel about him.”

“Kristie-luv, you know I love you dearly, but you are deep in it.”

I spluttered defensively. “I-I-I… you were the one to bring him up. He’s your friend, your present, your life here now, Ter. This doesn’t have anything to do with how I feel about him. This is about you getting over him.” I tried shifting under his interrogation, but he wouldn’t let me go.

He smiled at me in a way to soothe my agitation. “It’s okay to admit that you like him, sweetheart. I’m not going to be angry with you.”

Incredulous and defiant, I denied it again. Shaking my head, I said, “No. I’m friendly with him because you’re friends with him.”

“Babygirl, there’s no shame in it-“

“Terry, no! I can’t and I won’t!”

Eyebrows raised in surprise, he looked at me skeptically. A sideways look, a curl of the lip, and a slight sneer of his nose all showed me that he didn’t believe me. I was frustrated by that, angry even. Tom was his problem, not mine, but Terry had made him so. He released me from the prison of his hands and stare. Resignedly, he sighed. “And this is why we can’t talk about it.”

I watched as Terry started to walk away from me, dodging through the crowd. My head thumped, the tension of our conversation thumped through me and made me feel uneasy. He was transferring his affections on me, in order to blame me for what? I didn’t know. I rubbed my eyes
in irritation, trying to brush off the entire debate.

Drawing oxygen into my lungs, expanding my chest and releasing it, I chased after Terry. There was no way that I was going to let this ruin my time in London. If Terry could brush it off so easily, I could also. And for the next few hours, we did, reminiscing about our days in school.

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“See something you like?” Tom’s smooth melodic voice asked softly. In surprise, I closed the book suddenly and held it against my chest.

Like a beacon I’d been drawn to the dauntingly impressive collection of books that covered one entire wall of his living room. Terry and I had been the last to arrive to his viewing party. Because our argument/discussion/conversation/whatever, we’d arrived after five members of the Midsummer cast and three of Tom’s actor friends.

I was unceremoniously introduced as Terry’s best friend from America to Benedict Cumberbatch (really? How British is that?), Eddie Redmayne and Sian Clifford. I’d successfully learned that Madison was crushing on Tom’s friend, Benedict, informed him that she was still the birthday girl, and got them to sit together amongst the mismatched furniture of Tom’s living room. Sian was quiet and stand-offish, Eddie was excitable and energetic, and Benedict was well… with a name like that, he was embodying it, masculine and blessed.

I’d also managed to concern Tom, I could tell. Upon Terry and my arrival, I was hesitant after the earlier exchange with my best friend, I didn’t want to stir that pot again. Because I almost winced at that tiny gesture of a kiss on the cheek from the subject of our heated words, Tom furrowed his brow at me for an instant as he pulled away again. I felt awful for Terry, for Tom, for me, and I didn’t know how to fix it.

A sense of dread had settled in the very base of my neck and wouldn’t release no matter what I did. In the back of the taxi on the way over, I rolled my shoulders and kneaded the tight muscles in my shoulders. My conversation with Terry was still front and center in my mind. All I wanted to do was hide, and I didn’t even know why. Tom and I were friendly, but there wasn’t anything deeper going on. I had nothing to feel guilty or worried or upset about. Someone tell the stress building within me to fuck off, I wanted none of it.

Tom’s bookcase called to me to review. My curiosity got the better of me, and I wandered over to the shelves. I was jealous of the amount and wanted a collection to compete with it. In New York City, my two bedroom shared apartment was the size of a soup can. I couldn’t keep a collection like this. Running my hand along the spines, I noticed that Tom was anal about keeping authors in alphabetical order, with books in further alpha order. Bless.

Carefully I picked out an Arthur Conan Doyle (beside Charles Dickens) to flip through and that’s when Tom caught up to me. “Would it be considered over-indulgent to say all of it?”

Grinning, he said, “Not at all. I think the entire collection is an indulgence actually. I cannot reject adding a book to it really.”

“Impressive. But I think you’re holding something back…”

Blankly, he asked, “Oh? I don’t believe to be withholding any.”

“Where are the picture books? This is the collection you roll out for when you have company.”

He laughed in his signature way, with his tongue pushed between his teeth. “Where’s Waldo?
hiding out. Don’t look behind Mary Shelley.”

“I’m sure there’s a joke in there about Waldo and the monster, but I think I’m all dried up today. Quite literally,” hinting at my run-in with the bottle last night.

“How are you feeling now? Is the referee still refereeing?” I watched as his long slender fingers reached to gently run strands of my hair between his fingertips. I’m not sure if there was something nestled in there or if he was being expected touchy-feely Tom.

“You know those oversized tractor trailer trucks?” He nodded, trying to figure where my mind had wondered off to. “Yeah, those… big, huge, crushing, heavy… I was run over by about eight of them in a row. It appears that’s what alcohol does to me.” He was laughing again at my unexpected joke, and God love him, it wasn’t even that funny. “Twice.” I held up my fingers in the universal for two.

“Are you the intended target? Are they just circling around to get you?”

“To me, it seems like a conspiracy and annoyingly deliberate. But then that could just be the paranoia talking.”

Taking my cue and dishing it back, Tom offered, “Can I get you a paracetamol or nine?”

Puzzled, I said, “God bless you?” Throwing foreign words at me only leads to confusion and I mistake it for sneezing.

This gave Tom pause, as he read the confusion on my face. Suddenly he was giggling again. “Forgive me. I went a little English on you.”

“Do I need to remind you that I’m American? Even worse, I’m a New Yorker. I haven’t spoken a day of English in my entire life.” A smattering of laughter sounded behind me, and I suddenly remembered Tom and I weren’t alone. How did he always grab my attention and not let go. A glanced behind me and Terry seemed to be studying me intently. I gave him a wide-eyed look, suggesting my question of what? He smiled lightly, shook his head, and looked away.

Tom drew my attention back. “Paracetamol is acetaminophen.”

“So for minor aches and pains… stuff like that?” Tom nodded in answer to my question. “I did say eight trucks, right? Does that suggest minor to you? I was looking for something a little stronger, horse tranquilizer, Prozac, whatever Sleeping Beauty was having…”

The rest of the afternoon was filled to the brim of innuendos, all out sarcasm, and offensive joking, and that was from me. I was cranky from not enough sleep and Terry’s pestering and prodding. We were treated to a viewing of Tom in a romantic period piece called Return to Cranford. An editor friend slipped him a copy of his scenes on DVD well before the scheduled airdate, and we were treated to idealism of young William Buxton.

Eddie called out Tom, “So clearly, the hair and makeup department didn’t know what to do with your hair either, huh?”

Tom hung his head in mock shame, tangling his fingers deep in the wild mop of hair. His curls protested madly and returned to their original position. I reached over and gently pulled at two errant curls along his prominent cheekbone. The strands straightened under the pressure, but recoiled and curly cued back to their original form. “I like your hair.” I smiled sweetly.

He turned his head to peek at me, and beamed in response.
Watching Tom portray his character in Cranford, though romantic and plucked at the heartstrings, was, for me, no different than watching him live in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. I was glad for the experience, but I preferred the Shakespeare, despite the crumb cake porn. Without researching it, I knew that scene was created by a woman.

I excused myself when the DVD ended to return to my hotel for a nap. The Advil I’d taken that morning were wearing thin and I needed more. Madison, Terry and Tom all tried to convince me to watch the show again that night with Sian, Ben and Eddie, but I bowed out gracefully. I wanted to grab a sandwich from Tesco’s and curl up in my hotel with a pay-per-view movie.

Tom called me a taxi to take me back to the Grand as they all piled in another car for the Globe. I hated missing out but the migraine would’ve made my night miserable. I was not meant to be around company, feeling the way I did.

Sure enough, I did exactly that. A stale cardboard tasting ham and cheese, another healthy dose of Advil, and a half a bottle of flat Sprite was my dinner. My date for the evening was Confessions of a Shopaholic. I was having a serious love affair with Hugh Dancy in my head, so there was no other choice for me.

Right before what would be curtain time for my friends, I got a text from Tom. ‘Tom Hiddleston: Thank you for today. I sincerely hope you are feeling better and are able to get some rest. Till next time, my Wilde one. – Tom’

‘Kristie Taylor: Don’t have too much fun without me tonight. Break legs! All of you are fab. Hugs and kisses to you all. Give Terry a kiss for me. – K’

Snickering, I sent my phone aside and snuggled into the stiff, clean sheets for my lovely date with Hugh. Terry would murderize me if he knew I’d included that message. I must’ve drifted off because the next thing I was aware of was an incessant ringing in my ears. I sat up with a start, trying to get my bearings on where I was and what I was doing.

The phone! The forgotten and unused hotel phone was begging for attention. Groggily, I picked it up and croaked a tired “hello?” into the dreaded thing.

A frantic and panicking Terry exclaimed, “Oh my God, Kristiane! Oh my God!! I kissed Tom!”
With some effort, I fought valiantly against the forest of grogginess of my flustered and sleepy brain. I held the phone to my ear with one hand and rubbed drowsiness from my eyes with the other. Terry’s words tripped out of his mouth and over the wires at me at a rapid rate, but I couldn’t hear them through my hazy fog. Trudging back through the cave of lethargy was slow but every moment Terry’s voice grew louder, closer and less muffled. “Kristiane, what am I going to do? What can I do? You need to help me! I messed up, Kristiane!”

Kristiane. I heard him say my name, my full name, multiple times. In the years of our friendship, Terry had never used my full name. This was significant, and I swiped at the cobwebs to be there for him.

I croaked, my voice heavy with slumber, “Babe, babe, slow down… slow down.”

This seemed to irritate him more and he practically screamed at me. “Fuck, Kristiane, I need you right now. Wake up please! I’m having a crisis and I need my best friend!” The pleading, desperate tone struck me directly to the heart. I never heard Terry so rocked, so torn up, and begging for my help. There were always overly dramatic fits, like the bread was stuck in the toaster or there was a spider staring at him from the windowsill or he had a crush on another dancer in his spin class. From the panic in his voice, I knew this was genuine terror and concern.

“Well, I’m awake. What’s going on?” My heart pounded with the rush of adrenaline his voice caused within me. My best friend needed me and I couldn’t let him down, that’s what this trip to London was all about.

“I’m having a crisis! I told Tom everything and then I kissed him.”

Those last three words hurdlesed me into full-on awake mode. When the words actually sunk in to my tired and achy brain, my stomach dropped. Terry kissed Tom. For a moment, I held my breath, unable to speak. Every pore, every muscle, every bone, every fiber of my being rejected the very thought of it. My skin burned as the icy fingers of tension worked through my neck and shoulders. The muscles hardened and knotted, as the blood in my veins ran with acid. This couldn’t be happening. My fingers grasped and flexed against the linen sheet, trying to wring some kind of stability, some kind of respite from the truth.

Clutching the hard, unforgiving plastic of the phone in my other hand, I forced hollow words from my gritted teeth and clenched jaw, my tongue tasting of metallic. “Tell me what happened, Terry. From the beginning.” To my own ears, I sounded calm and in control but a lump had formed in my throat.

He cursed again harshly to himself in my ear before taking a deep breath. “This happened after the performance tonight. We were simply talking, strolling together on the way to the tube, like every night. Everyone else had gone… Ben, Madison, Eddie, Sian…” He took a moment to compose himself, heaving a noticeable sigh. “Truly, Kristiane, I knew I had to get over this thing, these feelings for him. I knew that! And I was trying…”

I could almost hear the gears reeling in Terry’s head, his mood morphing from panic to melancholy. Over the past few days, Terry displayed more tempers about Tom and what he felt for Tom that I knew we were on a down swing of the pendulum. Calmly I urged him on, “I know you were, Terr.” Trying to calm my visceral reaction and Terry’s agitated state, I trained my voice to sound unfazed, “What else happened? After everyone left…”

Chapter 8
Through the phone, I heard Terry sit down heavily, in a physical way of trying to unload the weight of his mistake. From the atmospheric noises, I could tell that he was outside. “I blame London, this fucking romantic city. I don’t know what came over me, but in my way to exorcise this crush, I told him. From the moment we met to this point, and how much his friendship has meant to me. All the nights spent pouring over the script, dunking back pint after pint, I fell for him. And I just told him. Once I started, I couldn’t stop.”

As if on cue, my cell phone sounded, making me jump, stealing my attention from Terry momentarily. I grabbed the device, unlocked the screen and read silently. ‘Tom Hiddleston: I hope you’re feeling better. If you haven’t yet fallen asleep, I could use your help. I’m worried about Terry and I didn’t know where to turn. - Tom’

Seeing his name on the display was oddly calming and reassuring, and I held tight to the mobile phone. Tom, with his patient nature, thoughtful responses and chipper disposition, was exactly the grounding, solid companion I needed and craved with Terry’s world falling in around his ears. I had to keep him calm from flying off the handle, and I knew I could easily get caught up in the drama of it. I yearned for the sanity that Tom easily provided, an escape from my own demons that I was hiding. I would be there for Terry, talk him through the calamity, and I was there for Tom as much as he was for me.

Pinching the hotel phone between my ear and my shoulder, I listened to Terry work through all the wonderful things about Tom and what he had told him face to face. Using my free hands, I tapped a quick reply to the subject of Terry’s rant. ‘Kristie Taylor: I’ve heard. I’ve got Terry on the line. How are you? – K’

Into Terry’s side of the conversation, I asked, juggling both friends, “So then what happened?”

Terry’s mood was turning the corner from stressed to perturbed, he sounded saner than he had a few minutes before. “I finished my diatribe, and the man looked positively flattered, understanding, accepting – perfect, utterly perfect! Jesus, I even sound like him… I told a straight man that I was in love with him and he didn’t judge me! As he was thanking me- thanking me!! Who does that? – I pulled him into a kiss.”

My cell sounded again with another incoming message from Tom: ‘Tom Hiddleston: I’m concerned for Terry. He left before we could discuss everything. Do you know where I can find him? – T’

“Terr, babe, I’m not sure which to ask first: why or what happened after that? So you tell me what you want to tell me,” I said as patiently as I could, though a little corner of my brain wanted to ask how. How did it feel to have Tom’s lips pressed…? I suppressed the fleeting daydream, as that was forbidden territory for me. I couldn’t be ensnared in the drama that was going on between my best friend and his best friend.

I sent another text off on my phone to the other man: “Kristie Taylor: I’m trying to wrangle him in and get him to either tell me or come here. How far are you from my hotel? – K’

Terry’s voice was muffled when he spoke again after taking a few more centering breaths. I imagined he had his face buried his hands, wishing back the clock, wishing back what he’d done, wishing back ever meeting Tom. “I ran… I ran away from him. I took off, scared shitless, terrified… Forget all the confessions, all I said, I think this might be the breaking point, the point of no return, the one where he tells me I’ve gone too far.”

“Oh, Terry, I don’t think Tom’s all that concerned. That one small indiscretion, one moment of weakness, or strength as I see it, would determine the course of your friendship. It’s one moment,
babe, one little moment amongst many.”

My cell phone vibrated in my hand again: ‘Tom Hiddleston: I can be there in ten minutes time. Will you have me? Is it alright? Are you up for it? – T’ Pleasant bastard, but he was certainly charming.

I responded: ‘Kristie Taylor: Of course. We have to fix Terry. This might take both of us. – K’

Terry’s voice, no longer altered by his hands, sounded defeated, “Kristiane, I kissed a straight man.”

“I know, Terry, but it’s not the end of the world. You two are friends first, waters are a little murky right now, but it’s not the end.”

“How can he forgive me? “Terry, there’s nothing to forgive. Tom’s not one for burning bridges or laying blame, he loves you in his way,” I said sensibly, trying to bring him back from the quicksand of despair he was sinking. Terry suffered from bouts of self-loathing and self-doubt, which I always accounted for his denying his sexuality for so long. Loving someone unattainable was also a sign of that, easier in a way, so he didn’t have to face the truth.

His voice broke over, “Kristiane…”

My full name poured from his lips again and it pulled at my heart. He was in so much pain, thinking that he’d made a mess of his friendship with Tom. Terry was nothing without his friends, devoting so much of himself to finding good people. He was one of those rare individuals that was always putting himself in the midst by a ton of people, all of whom loved him to pieces and would do anything for him. He would sacrifice, maim, kill, destroy and die for any one of his friends. His friends, those he surrounded himself with, were his family, more so than the ones that raised him and were blood relations.

When he came out as homosexual to his family, he was cast out and disowned, abandoned. A religious catholic from the suburbs didn’t fully grasp that being gay was not a choice, and Terry had a tough time, knowing that they wouldn’t accept him once he came out. He clung to his friends and relied on them as family because he didn’t have his true family to turn.

“Babe, where are you?” I didn’t want to tell him that Tom was headed for my hotel. I was trying to manipulate the situation so I could be the mediator between the two friends. They needed to hash all this out between them, and Terry was going to drown in regret, avoid Tom as long as possible out of shame. “Can you come to my hotel room? We can talk all this out.”

Suddenly, he said softly, “I did it for you, Kristiane.”

“What did you do for me?”

“You have to hear me out. You have to listen this time.”

I sat back against the pillows to hear him out, the urgency in his tone made me take notice. He had my full and undivided attention. “I’m listening, Terry. What did you do for me?”

“I was giving him to you, Kristiane. I was giving you Tom.”

Without thinking about it, I laughed out loud at the lunacy of such a statement. “Terrence, that man is not a possession of yours to give away.”
But then he spoke again and I could feel the tension through the phone. He wasn’t joking around, as we usually did. “Kristiane, you have to hear me out and I know that you don’t want to hear it. Whatever is going on back at home, you need to get out of it because it’s killing your spirit, your light. I can see it, I can hear it… you’ve come back to life here.”

I closed my eyes, fighting off the panic and bile that threatened to exit my body. In the light of the newest drama, I’d been able to forget about my problems, my own chaotic life back at home. It felt good to forget about what plagued me, but Terry kept bringing it back, not letting me keep it back in the States. Resignedly because Terry was right, I meekly, weakly asked, “What does this have to do with you and Tom?”

“No more denials, Kristie, no more refusals or rebuttals… hear me out. I was giving you Tom the other night at Madison’s party. I know he’s not gay and he’s not for me, and I’ll get over it, but he’s for you.”

I opened my eyes bewildered by what he was telling me, and there was no way I could stay quiet with all this. I started to object haughtily, “Terry, babe… Terry-“

“No! You stop and hear me out, Kristie, you have to hear this. I won’t let you waste any more time on Scott, you need to get out of that situation. You need to face your feelings for Tom. He fancies you a lot, I know he does, and you care for him. You don’t want to tell me, I know that and I understand that. Tom is for you, right for you, would treat you like the princess you are.”

“Terry…”

“No! I’m not going to let you live in denial anymore. I saw how you were together, at the Globe, at Madison’s party, and today. There’s something happening between you and you deserve a good man like Tom. You may not want to face it, but I’m going to tell you how it is.”

Confused and astonished by the turn in the conversation, I asked puzzled, “So if you were quote-unquote ‘giving him to me’, why did you kiss him?”

“A momentary lack in judgment, I guess. I knew I had to get over this crush, so this was my way of closure on this chapter of it.”

“Terry, I have to say I’m relieved you are moving on from this, truly… but this idea… that you’ve cooked up…”

“Kristie, don’t you dare deny it. How long have you and Tom been in contact? Since that day we went to Windsor? You’ve not told me, so I think you are in it so deep, I’m going to yank you out. Give yourself permission to be happy, to like someone other than Scott.”

There was a knock at my door, and I knew it that it was Tom. I wasn’t ready to face him or process the information that Terry had unloaded on me. We all needed to get all of this out in the open and be honest, but I still didn’t truly want to put to words what was going on at home. That part of my life was unspoken, unacknowledged, and if I gave it a voice it would be all too real, all too fresh.

Taking a deep breath, I asked, “Terry, won’t you come to my hotel? I’d come to you, but you know I don’t know my way around well enough. Please come. We can talk all this out when you get here.

“Only if you agree to be completely honest…”

To get him off the phone, so I could answer the door, I said quickly, “Yes, Terry… just come. Let’s talk this all out when you get here.”
He seemed in better spirits than when he first called, so I felt comfortable letting him hang up the phone. “I’ll be there in fifteen.”

I threw the phone in the cradle and raced to the door to let Tom in. Seeing him after all that Terry had said was a bit unnerving. My mind went blank unsure what to say or do with him. I couldn’t forget we were friends, Tom and I, and maybe if I was in a better place emotionally I could admit that I liked him more than friends. He was sweet, intelligent, patient, accepting, funny, and I’d seen it all in practice with the few nights I’d spent in his company.

Tom drew me into his arms after a moment of standing there, staring at each other. He held me close, almost, it seemed to me, to gain some equilibrium back from what had happened between him and Terry. I think his world was rocked by Terry’s admission and the kiss, as much as he tried to remain as calm and collected as he always seemed to be. He sighed my name into my hair and something shifted within me.

Like sitting all day in the dark without a clock not knowing the time or what time of day it was, pulling back the curtain and discovering it was daylight. That fluttering from the night before returned and I stepped out of the darkness.

As Tom and I pulled apart, there was a pause, a moment, a crackle of awareness between us. He looked into my big blue eyes, I looked into his gorgeous blue eyes. His eyes slid to my lips, back to my eyes, and again, and once more. I held my breath, unable to breathe through that look. There was a pull between us that was undeniable, and I suddenly knew Terry was right. Something was happening between Tom and me, denying it didn’t falsify it.

But I wasn’t free to pursue my heart and whatever it was doing, as much as I tried to deny, I couldn’t fool myself that my problems magically disappeared because I liked Tom. With great effort I looked away from him, and invited him into my hotel room. “Are you alright, Tom?”

Stepping in, I closed the door behind him and led him in. My hotel room was embarrassingly small, so the only place to sit was the edge of the bed. He sat with a heavy sigh, “I’m worried that I didn’t handle things with Terry the way I should’ve.” He combed his hand through his hair and ruffled it again, an anxious gesture. I reached for his hand and wrapped mine in his in a show of comfort. He looked at me seriously and said with sincerity, “I worried what it meant for our friendship, Kristiane.”
The earnestness and honesty of those collection of words and the raw emotion on Tom’s face, eyebrows raised with hope, blue orbs wide with sincerity, lips pressed together in a fine line afraid to say more, took me by surprise. I was never especially attached to my name, but from his mouth, in his accent, inflection and intonation, it was the sweetest musical ear worm I’d ever heard. My primary motivation from that moment became to hear it again and again, to provoke the man to say my name until he lost his voice from saying it so often.

Stealing a moment to catch the breath that took flight from his statement, I looked down to see my hand engulfed in his, watched as our fingers slowly interlaced. My pulse fluttered in my chest, my head went slightly lightheaded, and I involuntarily sighed at the feel of it. He was warm, inviting, and completely intoxicating in the heady sensation, not the drunk way. A thrill inched from the base of my spine upwards, adding to my giddiness.

Panic swooped in as quickly and as easily as the flood of warmth in my belly at his confession. Without meaning to, I pulled my hand free of him and rubbed it along my jeans in a nervous motion. Chuckling nervously, my voice sounding airy and reedy, I brushed off his concern, “I-I-I’m alright. We’re still friends, of course. I don’t blame you for not putting up with Terry,” my poor attempt to make a joke didn’t even earn a polite laugh.

Daring a glance at his face, I quickly dodged the look of confusion mixed with a splash of hurt painted over Tom’s face. He couldn’t know my reservations, insecurities or the present I was hiding from back in New York and I really didn’t want to cause him any pain. If I was honest with myself, as Terry insisted I should be, I liked Tom. He didn’t deserve to get tangled up in my life or my troubles, and all at once he was without knowing it. “Terry’s on his way now. I didn’t tell him that you were here or on your way. We can fix this mess that he created together, once we have him cornered,” I said quietly, wanting nothing more than to take his hand again.

Wistfully, he breathed out, “Kristiane.” I paused in my fidgeting to level my gaze on him again, finding it impossible to not look. He said my name again, and my insides turned to jelly once more, my heartbeat echoing in my ears. A stillness enveloped us, claiming us for an endless moment, our eyes locked together. The pull to be close to him was definite, obvious, and almost irresistible — almost.

My mind raced to the will he, won’t he kiss me question. In good conscience, I couldn’t and the rational side of my brain knew that. But the flirtatious girl armed with a mobile phone and years of education desperately wanted him to, she liked him, I liked him. I craved any attention he paid me. He was handsome, polite, interesting, and smart and I was attracted to him.

Tom sensed my reluctance and hesitation, but he knew his voice had an effect on me. He smiled to break the tension that had grown between us, a small offering to ease my nerves. He reached up and gently caressed my cheek with his thumb, extending an intimation that he did fancy me, but he wasn’t going to rush into whatever was going on between us. I returned his smile, bowing my head coquettishly and blushing furiously.

“Terry mentioned the night he kissed you at university,” he said, successfully averting the moment away from what almost happened between me and him.

“You know, it’s not every day a girl can confirm for a man that he’s gay with how undesirable she is, and how ineffectual her kiss is,” I told him with a roll of my eyes.
“You’re looking at it all wrong, my Wilde one,” he teased.

“Oh? How am I supposed to view it?”

“As the saying goes, you have to kiss a certain number of wrong men to find your prince. He was making sure that you enjoyed at least one of those on your way to the right one.”

I met his blue eyes again, and there was a sparkle that connected us. I reminded myself silently that this couldn’t happen; there was too much baggage, too much distance between his life and mine. I tucked my hair behind my ear and shrugged nervously, “Maybe. Or Terry just has a nasty habit of kissing those he shouldn’t.” Shifting my position, I stood quickly folded my left leg under me and sat back down on the bed beside Tom again. “Are you alright with all this, by the way?”

“Oh, yes, absolutely! I am genuinely concerned for Terry,” a heavy silence hung there for a full minute, understanding passing from him to me. He was concerned about our friendship, relationship and the impact of Terry’s mistake would have on the dynamic that I shared with himself. Sighing deeply, he admitted, “I enjoy the company of both of you, independently and together. I wouldn’t want to jeopardize that.”

“I’ll feel better once I can put my arms around him,” I stated revealing my concern for Terry and how he was handling the situation.

“To choke him?”

“How did you know?” We shared a small laugh, “Terry tends toward the dramatic and he can take things really seriously. I can’t help by worry about him.”

Tom read my face closely, seeing the history that Terry and I shared, the relationship we had. “Your dynamic is quite amazing; I envy it truly. I’ve never been as close with someone as you two appear to be.”

“I don’t know what I would do without him... come to think of it, I don’t know how I am without him in New York. I miss running to him when my hair isn’t behaving, having sleepovers, watching all the chick flicks I can find on Netflix, sharing a banana split with him, even yoga isn’t the same anymore. Even when we were in different productions, we were on the exact same schedule and used to go window shopping on Fifth Avenue or down to Macy’s. It’s incredible how much I relied on him and he relied on me really. It was quite a shock when he relocated here. There was no question in my mind when he told me he was going to be debuting at the Globe. No doubt that I had to be here for him, something so monumental!”

“It’s that important to you? Friendships?” Tom asked, conveying true interest.

“Yes! Well, his. Terry doesn’t have family to support him, and I’m the closest he’s got to a sister. I love him.”

“And your family?”

I shook my head, my lip curling slightly. “I’m not close with my family either. My mother always thought I should be a quiet housewife, knocked up by the time I was twenty, popping out a kid every two years like clockwork. My father thought I should be a part of the family bakery. I love baking, but only because I don’t do every day. I don’t have any siblings, Terry’s my sibling. Mom and Dad never approved of my choice in profession, and I haven’t talked to them in years.”

Tom lifted his eyebrows in surprise and somberly apologized, “I’m so sorry for you. That’s got to be difficult.”
I waved off his apologies, “I’m good, Tom, really. I did all the voice, acting and dance lessons on my own. I put myself through school via scholarships and working very long hours at the specialized diner in Times Square.”

“A specialized diner? Tell me about that.”

“Nothing outrageous, I assure you!” I smiled at the memories of singing and dancing around the cramped space of Ellen’s Stardust, tapping out a number on the backs of the booths, screaming out songs from Rocky Horror until I was sick of them, reeking of grease. “Ellen’s Stardust, home of the singing wait staff.” Tom was smiling with me. “The owner hired struggling actors and actresses, pursuing a Broadway career. He had built in servers and entertainers, really quite genius. Centrally located in midtown Manhattan, John let us come and go, let us audition, and take whatever classes we needed, as long as we did shifts when we weren’t employed. So much fun!”

“Sounds it. Hope to-” My ears pricked to the sound of shuffling in the hallway, and I shushed Tom. If it was Terry in the hallway, I couldn’t alert him that Tom was with me until I trapped him with us. I listened intently to the sounds getting closer and closer outside my hotel room door.

I whispered conspiratorially, “I think that’s Terry!” I got up from the bed, took Tom’s hands and led him to the corner. I positioned him, with a hand on either one of his shoulders, his back to the closet, hidden from view of the door if and when I allowed Terry in. We stood staring into one another’s eyes, waiting, listening, and holding our breath collectively.

The all too familiar attraction and pull ensnared Tom and me while we stood in such close proximity. His hand slid up my arm in a gentle, tender caress all the way to my cheek where he repeated that touch with his thumb from a few minutes earlier. Before I could stop it, eyelids slid closed, all sounds faded to silence, all disappeared but him, and he led me into a kiss, a soft brush of his lips on mine. He was gentle, the fleeting endearment the very definition of sweet and compassionate.

It lasted no more than a few seconds, a few heartbeats, and interrupted by a loud tap at the door. Tom and I stared into each other’s eyes for a moment longer before I turned to answer the door. I floated on clouds, smitten with my best friend’s best friend, to Terry, lost in the fog of a magical kiss, unable to shake the haze.

As soon as I opened the door, Terry swallowed me up in a huge bear hug, seeking comfort and acceptance in one form or another. I held him to me, still dazed and delirious by the feel of Tom’s lips on mine. “Kristiane, what am I going to do?”

I clapped him on the back a few times and told him, “We’ll work through it. Get inside.”

I almost body-checked him into the room, slamming and chaining the door behind us. I rotated around in time to see Terry register that Tom was in the room, exclaiming, “Oh, hell no!”

He rushed at me trying to get to the exit again as Tom called for him, “Terry, please!”

I plastered myself against the only escape, unwilling to let Terry get out of this. I shook my head as he tried to bodily pick me up out of the way. Tom stopped him with a hold on his arm, and pulled him back into the room. The commotion and ruckus the three of us caused screaming, yelling, talking over each other, limbs all tangled. All three of us fell across the mattress in a pile of arms and legs, the arguments quickly morphing into guffaws of laughter. It all happened so fast that I couldn’t know how I ended up between the two men.

As the laughter began to die away, I took stock of how we landed. I was on my back, my arms held
prisoner under either man. Tom, on my right, had crashed into the bed with his arm around my waist, cushioning my touchdown and defending me against Terry’s attack. Terry would never hurt me intentionally, but he could tweak my nose or give me noogies or tickles to punish me. His legs were tangled with mine, laying almost diagonally.

“Shit, woman, you got me! I was trying to avoid him!” Terry said as his giggles waned and dwindled, to huffs of air.

“I know! That’s why I did, you crazy stubborn ass!” I said, trying to catch my breath.

Tom splayed his hand over my belly, in no rush to separate from the heap. He peeked over me to Terry and said, “Terry, I’m not angry with you. I’m flattered. I sought Kristiane’s help to get to you. Be annoyed with me, not her. She’s an innocent bystander.”

“How are you for real?” Terry asked on the verge of impatience at Tom’s civility.

I chided, “Terry!”

“No, he should be pissed as hell at me, pumpkin. I took advantage of our friendship, and he’s fucking flattered!”

“Babe!” I berated again. “Be a human for once. Apologize and we can all move on from this.”

Terry sat up on the bed and mustered heartfelt atonement, “Tom, I’m very sorry.” Tom sat up to meet Terry’s gaze over the top of me. “I know you cannot return my affection and I will get over this. You don’t have to feel uncomfortable around me. I promise from here on, I will keep my hands – and my lips – to myself. I didn’t mean to put our friendship in danger.”

Tom shook his head. “No apologies necessary, Terrence. You know I love you in my own way, man. If I were gay, I’d be a very lucky man. Truly a compliment to have sentiment from you, sincerely. Thank you.”

I caught Terry giving Tom a sideways look, about to argue Tom’s graciousness. I sat up between them, Tom supporting the small of my back. I spoke up before Terry could stick his foot in his mouth again, “Babe, say thank you!”

My best friend sucked in a mouthful of air, released it slowly, and said, “Thank you, Tom.”

“Ah, see… hardly needed me in all of this. Now hug it out, both of you… hug it out.” The men clambered out of the bed and obeyed as I commanded of them. After their back-slapping, manly man masculine hug, both leaned into me and planted a kiss, one on either cheek. I’m not going to lie, Tom’s kiss left my skin tingling nearly all over.

After the small kiss we shared, that’s all I could think about, how aware I was of his presence, how my skin alighted in gooseflesh, how the fluttering in my belly kicked up a notch, how much I wanted him to do it again. Even that simplest of touches, it was the sweetest and most intimate kiss I had ever experienced. I was in trouble.

“Who’s buying me pizza?” I asked the two men as I adjusted my sitting position on the bed, back to the headboard.

Tom barked out a laugh as Terry curled up next to me, head on my chest, arm coiled around my waist. I held him close, knowing that he needed a sense of home after the drama. “I got this.” Tom pulled out his mobile and ordered two pizzas before sitting heavily on the other side of me.
He took up the remote for the television and hit the power button. “So what were we watching this evening?”

“I’ll have you know that you two disturbed my very hot, very passionate date with Hugh Dancy.”

Terry giggled, “Are you still crushing on him?”

“Tell me you’re not.”

“That’s not the point, dear heart.”

Tom cut in, “How do you two talk so fast?”

At once, both Terry and I answered, “Talent!”

The three of us fell into another comfortable night of joking, tales of theatre, and adventures that both Terry and I had or Terry and Tom had. We gorged out on pizza until about two in the morning, with another showing of Confessions of a Shopaholic displayed on the television.

As the evening wore on, Tom’s hand inched ever closer and closer to mine, before he finally gave in and wrapped his fingers around mine. I’m not sure how we managed to keep it from Terry, but we did. Mercifully Terry fell asleep, his back to me, leaving Tom and me alone again.

I murmured to Tom as the credits rolled on the screen, “I don’t want to wake him. I’ll keep him here with me tonight. Do you want to stay?”

“It’s crowded in this bed as it is,” he whispered.

“I think you mean comfy. You should stay.”

“I’ll stay.”

He lifted himself from the bed deliberately, taking his time so as not to disturb Terry on the other side of me. He turned off the power for the lights and the television. I maneuvered down carefully, trying not to disrupt slumbering Terry. Tom returned and got back into the bed, lowering himself with great care.

My body was very aware of his, and my nerves began to sing with him being so near. My heartbeat accelerated in my chest, and I could feel my breathing become shallower. The blood warmed and I thought I could feel it flowing through me. I turned into Terry, giving Tom more room to get comfortable. He sandwiched me between him and Terry, resting his arm around my middle.

Nervous, oh God, I was so nervous and he made me feel that way, but he didn’t make a move. All he did was whisper in my ear, “Love is merely a madness, my Wilde one.”

I whispered back over my shoulder, “As you like it, Shakespeare.” The quote was from that Shakespeare play, and the title fit as a response to him in that moment. His lips made contact with my temple, and seared my skin, that touch passionate and delicate all at once. He stole my breath away, and I had a difficult time finding sleep that night. I knew I was desperately and hopelessly in trouble.
Chapter 10

Inevitably, with the light of day, the doubts and the fear and all the questions I lived with, carried, burdened through, came rushing in. A tide of panic and the ‘oh my God what have I done’s flooded my mind, because I didn’t try to decline Tom’s advances. If anything, I’d encouraged them and I was in no position to do that. I should be doing all I could to avert his attention.

Waking up with him, his arm around my middle as we’d fallen asleep, was warm, fuzzy and intimate. I couldn’t handle that, not with everything I was already dealing with back at home. The apprehension came because I liked waking up surrounded by him, the smell of him, the presence of him, and the calm he offered. I found another Terry half a world away, a Terry with the added bonus of being attracted to him, something I couldn’t have with my best friend. A vacation romance was not the best idea for me, as I tend to latch on, and never let go, the very complication I was hiding from. I couldn’t let go.

Terry’s confession to me over the phone that he’d done this for me played over and over in my head. He loved me and he wanted what was best for me, I knew that. Was Tom something or perhaps someone best for me? Terry loved him, so he could very easily be someone I could care for too.

Terry and I had a tradition. We loved trying out new restaurants and new foods. About every other month, we’d pick a different restaurant to try in New York City. If we were out on tour together, we’d go through the yellow pages together and pick out something obscure to try. I was adventurous enough to order something new, something different, but not to follow through and taste the dish first, I left that for Terry. Was my best friend now sampling men for me to try out, to see if I would like them?

Terry was still snoring when I woke, but Tom was already awake. Listening to my breathing, he knew when I regained consciousness. He slid his hand into mine and squeezed, his fingers sliding between mine. His voice, one of his most attractive features to me, was lower, sexier and directly in my ear, causing my insides to liquefy and flitter simultaneously. Keeping his voice low to let me best friend sleep on, he greeted, “Good morning, Kristiane.”

Fighting back the alarm that the light of day brought, I whispered, “Morning.” I didn’t want there to be awkwardness between us, but after even the small kiss, one that made my lips tingle twelve hours later, I feared it would be. I was feeling shy and reserved, like I’d already shared too much. In addition to the complication of the kiss, I asked him to stay the night, sleep in the same bed with Terry – with me.

I’m not a shy person with the bonus of years of acting classes behind me. If I felt compromised or uncomfortable, I can fake my way out of it. I rolled onto my back to find Tom propped up on his elbow, smiling down at me. “No cracks about my bed head or bad breath, or you’ll be met with a very cranky New Yorker.”

He huffed a small laugh that lived in the back of his throat, insanely sexy sound that became my second favorite sound from him, my name remaining as champion. “I wouldn’t dream of it, my Wilde one. You’ve already taken the mickey for the Shakespeare, my education, my name, my surname and my country. I’m not going to put anything else to chance.”

“Testing what you’re made of… I think you can take it.” He nodded and winked, giving my insides another jolt of warm goo from the flirty man. “So, Shakespeare, two show day for you and Terry… what time’s your call?”
“Sign in by one. Are you coming to the shows today?” I thought I heard hope in his question, but I couldn’t be sure if that was him or my projecting it on him.

“No, I don’t think so. When Terry wakes, I’ll see if he needs me, and then I’ll make my plan based on him. I want to make sure he’s okay after last night’s trauma.”

We fell into silence once more as we both relived the events of the night before, caught up in the moment that we shared a kiss. Breaking the quiet, Tom asked in hushed tones, respecting the dreamland Terry, “What if I need you?”

My eyes darted to his, searching for the meaning in the question, if there was a deeper meaning, if he would actually ask. His blue eyes, those expressive orbs, shifted back and forth over mine, digging through my façade to discover what I felt for him.

A full beat passed, and I held my breath for the duration, scouring for the most appropriate response. The woman desperately attracted to him wanted to wrap her arms around him and submit to whatever he needed from me. The sensible woman screamed to do something, anything to discourage and scorn this from escalating any further. They were both alive and well inside my head, warring for supremacy.

Naturally I wanted to be friends, remain friends with him. I couldn’t very well reject him if he needed me. He was witness to what I do for my friends, by being in England for Terry, but this felt like a smooth ploy to charm me. “We are friends, Tom, of course. If you need me…” To move off the subject onto more stable ground for me, I asked, “What time is it now?”

I lifted our clasped hands up, untangled my fingers from the Englishman and turned his wrist over to view the face of the watch he sported. The hands read as just after ten, but I barely took notice because the watch itself captured my attention.

The entire thing was made of silver, the band, the face and the hands with only gold slivers as the minute markers. It was nothing especially remarkable about the timekeeper, sat nicely on his wrist, not too big, not too small, only that it looked old, well-loved and well worn.

Tom, noting my fascination, said, “A Hiddleston family heirloom, you could call it.”

“I was going to ask if you got it passed down from Shakespeare himself.”

The actor smiled again and shook his head. I twisted and turned the timepiece, caressed the face, touching and seeing the dullness of the shine, the imperfections, the dings, and the scuffs. “The next generation, I’m afraid.”

I rolled my eyes at him, “Don’t try to out sass me, Shakespeare. I’ll bring you to tears.”

That sexy low pitched laugh erupted from him and held up his hand in defeat. “Please forgive me. You win.”

Taking hold of his wrist again and holding it a little higher, I instructed, “Tell me about this then.”

“Got it from my dad when I was twelve. He got it from his da when he was twelve. It’s been a tradition thing, spent the afternoon in Greenock, Scotland, hiking, spending time together. I’d like to do the same and give it to my son, God willing, when he turns twelve.”

“Any significance to it?”

“Other than family, not that I was told. Personally for me, it was the last great gift from my dad and
the last great father-son bonding I had before he and my mum split up.”

I whispered, in deference to him and not wanting to break up his speech, “I’m sorry.”

Taking back control of his wrist from me, he patted my belly lightly before letting his hand rest there. “No worries, Wilde one. I assure you after all this time I’m well-adjusted after that.” Despite his denial, I could see the crinkles along his eyes and the worry lines around a frown turning the corners of his lips down. There was more to his parents’ divorce than he was letting on, the brush off and the effected upbeat voice.

Tom went on quickly so as not to draw attention, and get back to the topic at hand, quite literally, “It was difficult then, as I was a growing boy, separated by many miles from them. I was off at boarding school, and it was a challenge to not be concerned with what was going on back at home.”

He took a deep breath and let his gaze wander the perimeter of the room, recalling that part of his past. “In a very real sense, this watch became something tangible to hang onto, a slice of home, a slice of comfort. I’ve worn it on my person – not necessarily here on my wrist, but somewhere on my person. When I first read for Loki, my next big part, I was wearing it. When I got the call, that Marvel was willing to take the chance on a no name for their big film, I was wearing it. I haven’t taken it off since then, except on stage or filming depending on the period. My own personal rabbit’s foot or good luck charm or what have you now.”

The honesty and sincerity on his face and in his voice left me speechless for a long time. He looked wistful and far away after getting through his story. I wanted to reach out and touch him, offer some sort of human contact. Where he had something to hold onto, I had someone, Terry. My best friend was my good luck charm and my family.

My family snorted and woke with a start next to me, stretching, yawning, and rolling over to rest his head on my chest. The sleep laced voice greeted us in a nonsensical grumble. Terry became human once I added caffeine and sugar. I held the newly awake my best friend securely against me to Tom’s smiling face.

I giggled, “I have this insane urge to sing ‘Good Morning, Baltimore’ from the musical Hairspray.”

Terry grumbled a cranky response, “Kitten, you do that, Tom’s putting you back on the first flight back to New York.”

Tom came to my defense, “I’d like to hear it.”

Terry covered my mouth with his hand, lifted his head, and assured him, “No, you really don’t!”

I bit his fingers to get him to let go and get off of me. Terry yowled and poked my ribs, scrambling up off the mattress to the bathroom. “It’s a really obnoxious song. Ear worm from hell. You get the melody stuck in there and you’ll be singing it for the next four years.”

“Four?” Tom asked.

“Give or take, and Terry’s got musical snobbery about Shaiman and Wittman-”

We heard a muffled Terry from the bathroom scream, cutting off my complaint “Music, Shaiman and Wittman do not belong in the same sentence.”

Tom laughed, helping me sit up in the bed without my best friend to wake up or disturb next me. He whispered, “Is it that bad?”
Terry announced, “Yes!”

I shook my head, avoiding the wrath of my best friend, avoiding his soapbox regarding musical theatre etiquette. “Ignore him. ‘Good Morning, Baltimore’ may be obnoxious but I think ‘Without Love’ is genius.”

Tom’s shot up on his forehead, his face brightening. “I’m terribly intimidated by the musical theatre references, I’m afraid.”

As I climbed from the bed, bouncing off the end to my feet, I said, “We’ll try to keep it to a minimum.”

When Terry reemerged from the bathroom, I took my turn, followed by Tom. The plan was to hit up breakfast somewhere before Tom and Terry went back to their flats for a quick shower and wash to get to the theatre by call time. Terry was in much better spirits than the night before. The air between him and Tom was only a little tentative and awkward, but they both relaxed with me around to be a buffer. I could crack a joke or talk back to keep Terry out of his head, worrying about what he’d done.

Exiting the hotel, on the sidewalk, Terry’s phone sounded with an incoming text message, Tom leading us to food. The three of us walked to the nearest Starbucks for required coffee and breakfast. My best friend read his message out loud since it was invitation for all of us. “Madison’s not done celebrating her birthday. She wants all of us to join her for movie night tomorrow after the matinee performance.”

Tom agreed instantly without a moment’s hesitation. “I’ve been without my weekly Friday night cinema ritual with the rehearsals and now the performances.”

Terry looked to me for my yes or no. “Peach, it’s up to you. If you want to do something more London related, we can bow out.”

I took a few moments to consider before agreeing, “It’ll be fun. Vacation may be about doing touristy things, but I’ve never been an intelligent traveler.”

“I won’t have to tell me, your suitcase told me so.” Terry typed a text response to Madison as our RSVP.

I stuck with my boys up until call time, and actually got peer pressured into staying for the matinee performance, hanging around backstage with my friends instead of going out into London alone. Tom and Terry promised to take me out before the matinee performance the next day and made a significant plan for Monday and Tuesday.

I got to talk to Terry privately during one of the scenes that he wasn’t in. I needed to be sure that he was feeling better after the night before, I didn’t want him to feel as though we couldn’t talk at all. Tom was hanging around a lot, and it wasn’t completely fair of me to not let Terry decompress. “Babe, take a minute and talk to me. Are you okay after yesterday?”

He nodded letting me see the vulnerability he’d been keeping at bay. “I’ll be fine, sweetness. You did the right thing in making me face this, face Tom and my feelings for him right away. I would’ve avoided him like a vampire to sunlight.”

I hissed at him to keep the lighthearted atmosphere between us. “I thought it was the right thing, and I knew you’d be mad right off. But you wouldn’t be happy hiding from Tom. This,” I said, gesturing to the theatre around us, “Would’ve been tense and awful. Better to move on and work
through it."

Terry wrapped his arms around me and kissed my forehead with deep affection. “Thank you for being here. Not just for my career stuff, as exciting as that is, but personally. I’m not sure how I would’ve been able to handle all this Tom stuff if you weren’t here.”

“Terry, you’re an idiot for pulling this, but I’m on your side. Always, no matter how stupid you get.”

He laughed at my insult, letting our dynamic keeping the ease between us. He cupped my face gently, “I’d love to see you pursue something with Tom, button.”

“I’m not there yet, Terry, you know that.”

He pet my hair pleadingly, “I know that, but I want to get you there. You have to let go of the bad and embrace the good.”

“I’m not completely convinced that Tom is for the good. I know you know him best and you love him as your best friend – as you do me – that doesn’t exactly make us compatible. I’m more worried about you.”

Stepping back from me a little, he took a moment to collect himself. “In all seriousness, falling for Tom has matured me in a very strange way. I think it’s actually another step closer to falling for someone right for me.” He smiled widely and winked, “Tom’s someone who genuinely cares for me. Sure, it’s not in the right way, but I know he loves me in his way. So maybe, I’m not all that bad after all.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you. I love you just the way you are, and if it were up to me, I wouldn’t change any part of you.”

He furrowed his brow, looked down at the floor, and coughed a smile laugh with so little humor in it. “I still wish that you were a gay man or I was a straight man. We’d be set and not worrying about either of our love lives. We’d have each other and be perfect.”

No truer words had ever been spoken. I didn’t want to worry about his love life – or mine.

Tom managed to corner me during one of his free scenes. “It’s after noon, my Wilde one and I made sure you got coffee.”

I smiled coyly, “I’m still on New York time.”

“You’re insufferable.”

“You’re describing yourself, Shakespeare. Perhaps it’s time for some new material.”

Tom promised, “I’m going to get you to recite with me. I know you’re just hiding it away from me.”

I chuckled, “I’ll take up that challenge.”

The glint and glimmer of mischief in his eyes was undeniable, and I got that irrepressible feeling that I was in trouble. Only this time, I didn’t want an escape. Tom made me smile if nothing else, and that was something I needed.
Chapter 11

‘Tom Hiddleston: ‘When you see a guy reach for stars in the sky, you can bet that he’s doing it for some doll.’ Looking forward to spending the day with you and Terry. – Tom’

I gasped happily Monday morning when the text arrived from Tom. I wasn’t expecting him to contact me at all since Sunday night at the cinema hadn’t gone so well for anyone involved. I certainly wasn’t expecting him to be quoting Guys and Dolls for me. Where was the Shakespeare?

Movie night turned out to be a colossal mess, with everyone inviting someone else as a hookup and not in a subtle way. Terry brought me, obviously, and kept hoisting me off on Tom. Tom brought Benedict at my insistence for Madison. Madison brought Michael for Terry. Everyone seemed to sense what everyone else was up to, and it made the evening awkward. At dinner, a round of musical chairs ensued that would embarrass a fifth grader. At the movie theatre, it was another burst of confusion and it was just a general disaster. The only ones particularly keen on the group date were Madison and Benedict. They hit it off right away.

I flopped down on the bed, smiling happily at my phone in my hand, half dressed for my day out. Tom and Terry were off for the day, so today was dedicated to our everything British tour of London. I checked the time, noting that Tom and Terry were supposed to meet me in the lobby of my hotel in less than an hour. ‘Kristie Taylor: I believe that you are meant to meet the lost girl in a half hour. Did you think it would be fun to let me wander alone? - K’

‘Tom Hiddleston: Fear not, my Wilde one, I wouldn’t miss today for the world. Stepping out the door now to fetch you. - Tom’

‘Kristie Taylor: Charming, Shakespeare. Very charming. Now leave me be. I need to finish getting dressed. - K’

‘Tom Hiddleston: Then I shall continue… - Tom’

‘Kristie Taylor: Ah, but Terry’s very uncomfortable with lady parts, tends to squirm. - K’

‘Tom Hiddleston: I fail to see the downside to this. - Tom’

I rolled my eyes and set back on getting myself presentable, doing my best to stamp down the panicky weakness I was carrying for this new man in my life. I liked him, I really liked him, and that wasn’t the best for me. Tying my hair back in a messy ponytail, I finished dressing and applying the barest of makeup. My men arrived before I was ready, but waited patiently in the lobby for me.

Tom was absolutely in his element. He loved his hometown and he loved sharing it with others that were less knowledgeable. This included another walk over Tower Bridge with a quick tour inside, a ride on London Eye, a quick spin on a boat ride along the Thames, and then a ride through some of London’s more famous neighborhoods with Tom at the wheel as I rode shotgun.

As luck would have it, our tour guide had a buddy that worked in the production office at Royal Albert Hall and he was able to get us in right after visiting hours. The orchestra rehearsing were packing up their instruments when we arrived. I was given the opportunity to sing in the beautiful acoustics in that theatre, an amazing experience.

Standing in the impressive expanse of Royal Albert Hall was surreal, to put it mildly. I’d seen so many concerts on DVD that had been filmed within the cavernous auditorium, Les Miserables, The
Phantom of the Opera, Chess, anything musical theatre related. Andrew Lloyd Weber, Schonberg and Andersson/Ulvaeus were all composers within my repertoire, songs that I knew so well that I could sing them for a short notice or last minute audition. Terry knew my emotional connection to anything theatre related and took my hand for a squeeze.

Awestruck, my voice sounded airy and light when I spoke, “It’s incredible.” I looked around, spinning around in a slow circle, admiring the red velvet seats of the audience, the opulence of the walls and archways. “Isn’t it, Ter? How many times did we watch Idina Menzel sing Heaven Help My Heart?”

Terry agreed, “She rocks my world. I’m going to be her when I grow up.”

“So never then?”

Tom chimed in, “Heaven Help My Heart? From Chess?”

I looked to him and nodded, impressed that he knew the musical, at least that much. “So you only know British musicals?” I teased. “Americans do produce good ones, you know… Kander and Ebb, Rodgers and Hammerstein, the Gershwins…”

“I apologize unreservedly,” he grinned flirtatiously. He knew that I was pulling his leg because musical theatre was the world that Terry and I came from, spewed out, and kept us coming back for more. “My concentration in school and university was solely literature and drama,” he confessed.

Terry added, “Mine was Bernadette Peters and Patti Lupone.”

The Englishman poked fun at my best friend, “That doesn’t surprise me in the slightest.”

“Listen, honey,” Terry rounded on Tom.

I stepped between them, cutting short a shouting match before it escalated to a cataclysmic Terry sized tantrum. “We know, Ter. A blind man could see your flare for the divas. Let it go.”

“You’re one too, panda bear.”

“Stop it,” I tried to brush him off.

Tom asked, interrupting our banter, “Can you sing Heaven Help My Heart?”

Terry exclaimed enthusiastically, “Better than anyone else I’ve ever heard. She kills it!” He turned back to me, “Sing it, button!”

I started to decline, not wanting to take time away from our afternoon together and whatever Tom had planned for us. Tom inquired, “Do you need music?”

Terry burst in with, “She absolutely doesn’t. She sings it acapella for auditions and perfectly on pitch. It’s a song for an alto, she’s a soprano with a killer belt.”

“I remember how she kicked my arse at karaoke the other night. Those were some killer notes.” He looked at me with a wide eyed innocent imploring expression. “Won’t you sing it for us? Please? You’ve got the chance to sing it in Royal Albert Hall.”

I smiled again widely, tempted, wanting to fulfill one of my dreams, one of my goals. True, it wasn’t a professional setting, but this was the next best thing without the added pressure to perform well. The informal was not unattractive. I finally nodded, grinning. I positioned myself in the
center of the open floor in the middle of the hall, mentally playing the opening bars in my head, grasping the right key, hearing the notes in my ear. I wasn’t warmed up, but this ballad was something I warmed up to, when I didn’t have time to do proper scales.

I began in dulcet tones, singing directly to Terry, “If it were love I would give that love every second I had and I do. Did I know where he’d lead me to? Did I plan doing all of this for the love of a man?” Somehow it fit where I was in my life at that given moment, and Terry was at the heart of it. He understood, took my hand again and kissed it.

I sang on, listening to my voice and how it sounded in the hall. I continued turning in slow circles from that center point, committing every moment to memory to recall later. It was a dream come true and I was moved by it. I looked at Tom, overwhelmed with gratitude to this man again. I sang directly to him for the last part of the lyrics, “Maybe it’s best to love a stranger. Well that’s what I’ve done — heaven help my heart. Heaven help my heart.”

When I finished, I knew it was what I felt. The music, the location, the company helped me see the truth of it. Neither Tom nor Terry said anything for a long time, as we let the honesty sink in. I held my breath, unsure if any of us truly understood what happened. Finally, Tom pulled me into a huge hug and kissed the top of my head. The only response he could manage in light of what had become a confession of sorts, “That was beautiful.”

There was nothing more to say or do, and the profundity of the moment faded. We quickly became the three friends again, touring London.

* 

Tom topped off the afternoon with a deliciously fulfilling dinner of steak and kidney pie at a pub with a pint. After shopping for cheap souvenirs in Piccadilly Circus and spending entirely too much money, we ducked into a café for pudding and tea. Tom surprised me with a gift while we waited for desserts to be brought to the table. He looked at me sincerely, “I know your time in London is growing short, so before the mad dash to complete as much as you’d hoped to accomplish, I bought you a present.”

Terry asked, “Hey, where’s mine, man?”

Slyly, Tom replied, “Go home to New York, I’ll get you something.” I giggled into my napkin, enjoying how he dealt with my entitled Terry.

Terry flashed me a withering look across the small round table, rolling his eyes. I held up my hands defensively, not wanting to start any trouble, “That’s what happens when you spin things from about me to about you. It’s my spotlight, babe.”

“She’ll share with me anyways. She hasn’t got a selfish bone in her body.”

Tom winked at me conspiratorially, setting off the thrill of flirtation skidding along my spine. “Kristiane, I forbid you to share, although I don’t know how you would.” He looked a little sheepish as he pulled his gift for me from his pocket. He placed the offering on the table and smiled winningly. There upon the table top was a yellow rubber duck wearing a Union Jack flag on its body. It may have been the cutest thing I’d ever seen, and it matched the Big Ben rubber duck that I’d bought with the loads of other purchases.

Terry spoke up, “I don’t want it!”

I leveled my gaze at him and bid him, “Shove it, babe!” I swept my gaze back to Tom and the gift
he presented me. “Thank you, Tom. It’s silly and inane and perfect.” I picked the duck up and held it in the palm of my hand. “It’ll sit happily in my bedroom and remind me of my time here.”

“You’ll visit again, won’t you?”

I shrugged honestly, unsure what my life back in New York would be like after this trip. “I’d like to, of course… really, really like to, but I’m not sure. I have my job that I love. Maybe you’ll both come visit me.”

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“I love you. I’ve always loved you,” my best friend delivered smoothly, his large brown eyes rounded with earnestness. He froze in the moment, struck by the honesty of the moment after so much broken communication, so much deception, and so much history. I shuffled uncomfortably from foot to foot, avoiding his gaze, taking in my surroundings rather than looking directly into his eyes. “Won’t you say anything?”

My belly flopped sickeningly with dread and panic, unsure of where to turn or what to say. I placed my hand on my abdomen as a self-soothing expression, grounding myself in the moment, maintaining my presence there. I gasped lightly, air rushing into my lungs and my diaphragm, expanding the muscles under my hand. My other hand crossed over my chest to try and calm my rapidly beating heart in my chest. I needed something, anything to turn to, to get away from the pressure of the confession.

Breaking the moment, Tom came up from behind me, placed his hands on my hips, and asked, “May I?”

It was Tuesday afternoon and Terry and I were reading over the audition scene he had for the next day, something about a ‘breeder play’ as he called it. Translation of this, of course, being a melodramatic love story between a man and a woman, in which Terry was auditioning for the male lead. I was standing as the scorned lover, trying to get him to focus on his masculine energy. Dumbly, looking up over my shoulder, the moment with Terry’s character fading away with the interruption, I nodded. There were little smile crinkle lines along the corners of his eyes, and I wanted to reach up and touch them.

Tom adjusted my stance, my bare feet gliding over the blades of grass of Hyde Park easily, and the bright English sun shining above as it rarely did. The air was fresh and clean, crisp and invigorating. Our guide for all things London, Tom suggested the park to review the scene, talk it out, and share in a picnic lunch. Although his version of picnic lunch was fried fish and chips, with tons of tartar sauce, vinegar, gravy, ketchup and just about every condiment known to man.

Lunch was messy and fun, the laughter hysterical and almost constant between the three of us. Tom took up the responsibility of introducing Terry and I to everything British in the time I had remaining in London. The fact that I was flying away from two people I cared about in two days’ time back to my present was sad and heartbreaking, doing all I could not to dwell on that fact. I have my career if nothing else…

Tom rested his chin on my shoulder, looking directly at Terry, assisting in getting him to focus on the scene. “This woman,” he said against my ear, meaning and reverence setting his tone lower. “This woman is your light, your savior, your very life.” His thumbs caressed over the cotton of my shirt, under my rib cage, robbing me of the ability to concentrate on the actual scene work. “This woman is the embodiment of salvation according to the script. Try it again with that in mind, at the forefront, never forget that part of it.”
Terry tsked at him and rolled his eyes, “Good God, you breeders are dramatic.”

I scoffed loudly, Terry’s snark breaking through Tom’s claim for my attention. “If we’re the dramatic ones, what do you call your calling me at five in the morning, screaming that you can’t find your favorite highlighter or Patti Lupone’s latest CD?”

“Practical!”

“From an ocean away, babe? Really?”

“You always know where shit is, cupcake.”

Tom and I shared a laugh together at Terry’s defensive outburst, and we all turned our focus back to the scripts, Terry to his in his hand, my pages in mine. Tom read over my shoulder, wrapped his arm around my waist and reached around to point out something at the top of the page. “Can you start it back from here? Let’s give him time to get into the scene a bit.”

I nodded agreeably, trying to ignore his arm around my body. The heat of him was flooded through me, warming every inch of my skin. I could almost swear he could feel the butterflies beating around inside my belly at his touch and his proximity. Choosing his words carefully, Tom directed Terry, “You’ve done very well, truly excellent work. I think just a bit more conviction on the love story perhaps, might just nail it.”

Terry pulled a face, one that told me he was speaking in layers again, “I was certainly going for the love story.”

I matched his expression with a wide-eyed exasperated look, telling him to butt out of whatever I had going on with Tom and me. It was hard to classify, because there was most definitely flirting and long drawn out conversations about our schooling or other jobs or approaches to material. Nothing more happened after my admission through song, but we always had Terry with us.

Our texts continued morning and night before and after we spent the day in each other’s company, but nothing truly personal was said. I was surrounded by him, and I found myself thinking about him when I first woke in the morning and he was the last thought at night. I was terrified of all that meant and how to handle the implications of my feelings for him. I knew he felt something for me, he’d made that much clear, but he never said anything verbally.

Taking a deep breath, pushing aside my internal ramblings, I centered myself back into character. Terry and I read through the scene another three times, before Tom announced that he was absolutely pleased. He stepped away from me to talk it over with my best friend in depth. I watched how passionate Tom was about scene work and it was rubbing off on Terry, the enthusiasm infused from one man to the other. It was truly inspirational how much my best friend had changed in the time he’d been living in London, being in Tom’s company.

Terry’s focus was always dancing, the fluid gracefulness of controlled movements. I saw it in his performance in the play, after seeing it so many times that he’d developed a passion and exuberance for the acting too. I felt like a proud mama bear.

And then there was Tom. I felt like a woman in love with a man I couldn’t have in my life. Not now.
Chapter 12

‘Tom Hiddleston: ‘Find the prettiest girl, give her a whirl… Come on, follow me, you’ll be happy to be there.’ I’m taking the advice of one Stephen Schwartz for today. – Tom’

Wednesday morning, I woke to the sound of my phone vibrating against the cherry hardwood tabletop of the nightstand, feeling well rested and absolutely ready to face this day, my last full day in London. Terry was off to his audition for the play that Tom and I had been helping read lines for, and left Tom to show me around. My best friend said he would catch up with us as soon as he finished and “won the part.” His words.

I was nervous being left alone with Tom, because I didn’t trust myself with him. I liked him, but I wasn’t free to pursue what my heart wanted, I was leaving. He fancied me, I could tell that from how he touched me, how he talked with me, his eyes watching me. Although all these hints innocently held a whisper for something more, there was a promise of something deeper behind each one. The texts we shared were lighthearted and flirty, but could hold a more emotionally charged meaning. We weren’t able to explore if there was truly a connection happening between us, since we hadn’t been without Terry since that night, that night he kissed me.

In my quietest moments, my mind relived that moment, that moment when we kissed, when we were the only two people in the world. It became the single best instant of my entire vacation, the ease of that touch, the tenderness, the sensitivity.

Keeping my excitement under wraps at seeing his name pop up on my cell phone display, I quipped back: ‘Kristie Taylor: Oh? What’s the plan? - K’

‘Tom Hiddleston: Found the prettiest girl, and I plan to take her for a whirl through London today. – Tom’

‘Kristie Taylor: Charming and surprising. I didn’t know that you knew Wicked so well that you could quote it. – K’

‘Tom Hiddleston: I don’t. Would you judge me harshly if I told you that I used a search engine to try to impress you? – Tom’

‘Kristie Taylor: Search engines don’t impress me, but quote by an American composer from Shakespeare himself is monumental. How did you know I would recognize it? – K’

‘Tom Hiddleston: Evidence suggests you are a walking iPod completely dedicated to musical theatre. And… I listen when Terry speaks. He said you went while you were in town. – Tom’

‘Kristie Taylor: That makes one of us. ;-) What made you choose Dancing through Life to quote from? – K’

‘Tom Hiddleston: I like dancing. I’m leaving my flat now. Breakfast? – Tom’

‘Kristie Taylor: Lovely! See you soon. By the way, I didn’t know Charlize Theron would be joining us today. – K’

‘Tom Hiddleston: As stunning as Ms Theron is, she hasn’t got anything on you, darling. – Tom’

There was no misunderstanding that or spinning that to mean anything else other than what he said. I set my phone aside, controlling the giddy shaking that started in my hands by dismissing what he
texted. To ensure that I couldn’t, Tom himself (or fate playing with me through Tom) sent another text to concrete it for me.

‘Tom Hiddleston: You’re the prettiest girl, my Wilde one. – Tom’

The Englishman turned the charm up to ten, and I knew I couldn’t trust myself around him. What happened to cynical, suspicious and disbelieving Kristie that began this British adventure two weeks ago? I barely recognized myself, my insides turned to silly puddy because of a text from a man, stars in my eyes, permanent silly grin upon my face.

Tom arrived promptly at our agreed upon time, and I was surprisingly and nervously ready, with my brain rebelling and my heart pounding restlessly. I wanted to be with him to see what we were like without Terry, but I also didn’t want to be with him, my life back in New York quickly creeping back into my reality. He greeted me with his signature kiss on the cheek and wide smile, looking completely handsome, irresistible and tall. Dressed in dark jeans and a beautifully contrasting stark white v-neck t-shirt, he looked dapper, yet relaxed and casual.

To cover my nerves, I admitted, “I feel like bursting into song on a morning like this.” The sun shone above and there was a nice easy breeze, the summer day smelled crisp and clean.

“Every morning seems to strike you musically,” he said, offering his arm to walk to wherever he decided to take me for breakfast.

“Occupational hazard,” I quipped, lacing my arm through his and falling easily into step with him. I noticed gratefully that he shortened his strides to slow up for me and my short stature. “Rather strange, I am not a morning person.”

“What’s this morning’s selection?”

“Ironically, Morning Person from Shrek the Musical,” I stated, rolling my eyes.

“I shouldn’t be surprised they’ve made that into a musical, but I am.”

“I auditioned roughly 691 times to play Princess Fiona, but ultimately lost out to a legendary Broadway diva – oh, sorry, the legendary Broadway diva, and I curse her for being perfect. I love her dearly, but damn, she keeps stealing my parts.”

Tom chuckled beside me. “I’ve got a couple of them here in London. We chase each other around for the same roles, and are always in competition.”

“Have you turned it into a game yet?” I looked up to see him shake his head, furrowing his brow in confusion. “We lay odds on who will score this role, based on who shows up. We’ve gotten really good at guessing who’ll get cast by who comes to the auditions and eliminating who is already employed.”

“That’s one way to combat the negativity that can be companion to auditioning.”

“Sometimes these girls make the entire process easier to deal with, and I look forward to catching up with them. We get together and swap auditions/calls and anything helpful. On occasion we go together!”

The foot traffic through London was light for the morning, and we didn’t have to walk far to the café Tom had chosen for breakfast. My companion took the liberty to order two full English breakfasts, one for each of us, as we settled into another conversation. “When’s the last time you went for a straight play, no singing?” Tom asked, going for nonchalant.
Giving him a sideways look, I answered carefully enunciated, “About fourteen months ago, a Miller play.”

“And Shakespeare?”

“Ha! I knew it!” I giggled quietly, pointing at him. He smiled over a shrug, his hands splayed before him in a matching gesture. “Ulterior motives with you…”

He called over his shoulder to the waitress, “May we please have some coffee for the lady? At your earliest convenience, if you please.”

I stole a glance at my watch to see the time, only half past ten. “I’ve still got an hour and a half and I’m not reciting with you.”

Like a predator, he grinned, “I respectfully disagree. I have my ways.” He winked as we both sat back for the waitress to pour two steaming cups of coffee.

“The last time I performed Shakespeare?” He nodded. I looked up, searching my memory banks for the production, humming softly to try to recall. “Um, gosh… maybe five years, Romeo and Juliet and it was only a workshop. I’m really quite rusty.”

“Fair enough. So tell me, my Wilde one, what is this aversion to the Bard?”

“Too fantastical and farfetched… I prefer realism. I love the language and the themes, the emotions. But some of it is truly out there.”

I could see him struggling to keep his defensive argument behind his practiced straight face. “Coming from the woman that lives in musicals. I think you’re looking in the wrong place for realism.” I stuck my tongue out at him in self-defense. “Alright then, Shakespeare - Convince me,” he challenged.

“The Tempest. Prospero and Miranda were exiled to an island for twelve years. Someone conveniently gave them food supply for those years on the island. I don’t know about you, but I’m not eating food that’s been sitting around on a boat for five months, let alone five years, ten years. Nope, sorry, it’s not going near my mouth.”

Tom laughed out loud with his head thrown back, his hand holding his belly. “This is the part you focused on?”

“Come on, Shakespeare! Even you have to admit that it gets a little hokey with the guy stuck in the tree and a deformed monster and all the magic tricks. I’m supposed to wade through all this shit to get to the moral of the story: Prospero wants to marry his daughter off. Although after twelve years of her whining, I’d be drowning myself or her or trying to marry her off too.”

Casually, Tom fluidly spoke Prospero’s line from Act One, “Knowing I loved my book, he furnish’d me from mind own library with volumes that I prized about my dukedom.”

“That’s more Tom. I’ve seen your bookshelves. The language is beautiful but you won’t convince me that it’s one of the better ones.”

When our food was served, we discussed several others, of which I shot down Twelfth Night and shortened Henry the IV parts one and two and Henry the V into one play. Tom, to my relief, didn’t seem to mind and laughed at my straight-edging his favorite parts of literature. I think he was impressed that I knew them well enough to rip them apart, even blown away when I told him that some were still my favorite plays.
As we stood to leave and Tom left notes on the table to cover the bill, I asked covertly, “Where are you taking me now, Shakespeare?”

He slipped his hand in mine, sending butterflies loose in my belly and thrilling licks of excitement along my skin, and led me back into the day. “That would be telling, Kristiane. It’s a surprise, but I think you’ll enjoy despite your protestations to the contrary,” he said with a wink and a knowing glance. He looked at his family heirloom upon his wrist to get the time before lifting his arm to flag a taxi. “I’m not sure how long Terry will be – he hasn’t phoned yet - so I want to make sure we fit this in.”

“Fit what in?”

“Your surprise.”

“Which is?”

He laughed again, opening the car door to the taxi that stopped before us, helping me inside. He spoke to the driver discreetly, ensuring my surprise remained just that before joining me in the back. When we eased into traffic, I asked, “Are you going to tell me now?”

He shook his head, smiling in a very intimate way, his gorgeous blue eyes roving my face. He reached up, combing a strand of hair behind my ear in a slow and tender manner. His eyes focused on my lips and his thumb brushed over them gently. My heartbeat echoed in my ears, holding my breath as the air crackled around us. The energy and the attraction ever present between us vying for attention, refusing to let us out of this trance we were stuck in.

Tom was the one to break free with a few blinks of his eyes and cleared his throat, sitting straighter in his seat. “You won’t get me to say before we get there.”

“How far is it?” Feeling the electrified tension falling and easing away, I breathed in deeply, clinging to the change in subject for my sanity. He was jockeying for a handle on this thing happening between us too, wanting it, but no wanting it at the same time.

“You’re getting nothing from me, you sneak.” I watched his chest rise and fall with a silent sigh. “If I asked you to sing for me when we get there, would you?”

“Yes, of course, I will. Did you have something in mind? Chess again? Or something else?”

“Whatever you feel comfortable with, really. I’m at your mercy.”

I began scanning through my staples in the playbook in my head for something suitable, that I didn’t need to warm up before singing. I knew to avoid belting, and stick to my lower range so I didn’t hurt myself for trying. Tom and I fell into a comfortable silence, each of us watching the city go past the windows of the taxi. We avoided touching, keeping temptation just out of reach.

I was swimming through all the things I’d said and done with Tom in my time in London, feeling the melancholy move into my head with my imminent departure the next day. I loved my job back at home, my apartment, my friends and my routine, for the most part, but I suddenly feared going back. London was a dream, vibrant in its mixture of modern and historical, my best friend and an equally handsome, sweet and successful man who liked me as much as I liked him. Our texts, our banter, our jokes, even our competitions were all light and fun, easy. I felt that I could be myself with him, and he would accept me that way, like he had with Terry.

How could I leave Terry again? We genuinely were reconnecting and falling into our old routine, and life without him specifically was a little duller. I missed him and I wanted him back in New
York with me. Terry was my rock, even as unstable as he was, the steady in my life. With him doing so well in London, I didn’t see him coming back to Manhattan and the Great White Way anytime soon. How could I say goodbye to him again?

The car arrived at our destination, and the stop pulled me from the steady stream of emotions going through my head. Tom came around, opened my door for me, and helped me from the car. Tom brought me to the familiar square that colored most of my time in London. I gazed up at the beloved circular white wall with the thatched roof and stated, “You brought me back to the Globe.”

Quite proudly, Tom nodded once and stated, “I did!”

“Don’t know if you’ve missed it, but I’ve been here.”

“I know you have, but not like this.”

“I love it here, you know, and I don’t want to appear ungrateful. But couldn’t we have gone to something I haven’t seen yet? I think I’ve seen every inch of this place.”

Tom took my hand, interlocked fingers with me and squeezed. “Not like this you haven’t, my Wilde one. Trust me.” He led me to the backstage door, guarded by Pip, the stage manager, after brushing a kiss to the back of my hand in his. I shivered slightly with the effects of his lips upon my skin. Tom shook her hand stoically and thanked her for her assistance, escorting me inside. Pip closed the door behind us, heading towards the lobby as Tom and I walked onto the stage.

Placing me center stage, he stepped back and let me take in the space. He was right in telling me that I hadn’t seen the theatre like this, as a performer facing the empty audience. Overwhelmed and overcome, my voice caught in my throat, feeling the same emotions as I had standing in Royal Albert Hall. These were places I knew on my television and in my dreams, and Tom presented me the opportunity to stand in them, to feel what it would be like to perform there for real. In a very real way, he was making my dreams come true and I was stunned, touched.

I stood downstage center as far as I could without falling into the pit, and stared at the seating, all the wood, all the straight edges in the round space. I wanted to be there with a full house in front of me, so I closed my eyes to imagine it. The magic of the stage, of the atmosphere, of every nook and cranny, took hold of me and I felt the spirit of the place, the authenticity, the history, the connection.

After a few minutes of reflection, I turned to Tom standing upstage just watching me and my reaction. With all the sincerity I felt, I said wistfully, “Thank you. This is magnificent… I’m speechless.”

He grinned, “This may be the first time Kristiane is without words. Mission accomplished.” He held out his watch to show me the face, and said, “It’s just gone noon and I’ve seen to your coffee. What do you say? Will you recite with me? Please.”

I couldn’t say no, as much as I’d denied him this entire vacation. I huffed dramatically for his benefit, teasing him with my indignation, “Fine. But go easy on me, I’m out of practice.”

He was like a kid on the playground, with other kids his age and all his favorite toys. I could feel his excitement, his joie de vivre, his zest for the material before he began to speak. Easily, he intoned, “As daylight doth a lamp; her eyes in heaven

Would through the airy region stream so bright
That birds would sing and think it were not night.
See, how she leans her cheek upon her hand!
O, that I were a glove upon that hand,
That I might touch that cheek!

Incredulously, I ogled him, ribbing for his choice, “Romeo and Juliet, Tom, really?”

He laughed, anticipating my reaction. “Humor me please.”

“So clichéd now, but alright.” With a roll of my eyes, I stated Juliet’s line blankly, “Ay me.”

“She speaks:
O, speak again, bright angel! for thou art
As glorious to this night, being o’er my head
As is a winged messenger of heaven
Unto the white-upturned wondering eyes
Of mortals that fall back to gaze on him
When he bestrides the lazy-pacing clouds
And sails upon the bosom of the air.”

Clearing my throat, still staring him down with my New York City attitude, I spoke Juliet’s words,
“O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I’ll no longer be a Capulet.”

He was chuckling again at my reading without feeling. As though making up for my lack of emotion, he answered over the top melodramatically, “Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?”

The game began from that line, who could outdo the other with overwrought emotion while speaking the dialogue. I surprised myself by remembering most of it, Tom only had to prompt me twice when I fumbled the line. The world beyond the walls of the Globe didn’t exist while we were on that stage, reciting those words, enjoying each other’s company. Eventually we dropped the overdone and faded into the text and the words of the lovers, morphing into an actual scene. It seemed so natural with him, as a peer to another peer. We infused emotion into the words, and the scene fell into place.

Tom’s eyes changed when he was acting, play acting, and when he was himself. I was mesmerized by the very subtle changes. When he was himself, his eyes were a light blue with a passion clearly and inexplicably Tom, playful and joyful. The play acting his eyes became a steel, cold blue, unassociated with the words, striving for a laugh, rounded comically wide. Acting Tom brought a deep intense blue, working with and around the words like a snake. He could wring every shred of truth from every syllable, without a thought. He lived it, and it was amazing to witness.

We recited through to the end of the scene, and as soon as it was over, I realized how much fun it was to be his scene partner. He was thrilled that I agreed to do it, and took it seriously after some coaxing. He hugged me close, and I couldn’t help but wrap my arms around him too. “I have no idea why you resisted so strongly, but that was amazing!”

The warmth of his hand on the small of my back was enough to send me reeling, but then he touched bare arm and I was lost. He was sensual, erotic and arousing without knowing it, and my body buzzed with awareness. He was pressed against the front of my body and I wanted to stay in that embrace forever. His rich, sharp, masculine smell permeated my nose, evoking the memory of being pressed to him in the back of the taxi, wearing his leather jacket. The muscles of his back under my hands were strong and lean, speaking of controlled strength and complete command of
his being.

Reluctantly we separated again, I said, “I’m terribly out of practice. I’m afraid my iambic pentameter has been neglected in favor of singing, dancing and acting lessons.”

“All those realistic musicals you’ve been singing?”

“As realistic as that magic potion in your play, Lysander.”

“Touche,” he said with another smile. “Would you indulge me with another song please? I’d love to hear your voice in this space.”

I nodded, focusing on the notes in my head to match my pitch. Turning back downstage, I started ‘Unusual Way’ from Yeston’s musical, Nine, “In a very unusual way one time I needed you. In a very unusual way you were my friend. Maybe it lasted a day, maybe it lasted an hour. But, somehow it will never end. In a very unusual way I think I’m in love with you.” I tried not to look at him while I sang, my heart giving way to how I felt for him. I wanted to fight it, afraid of the consequences, terrified of the complications, fearing the implications. I was tired of fighting, living in denial as Terry said.

The acoustics in the Globe didn’t lend itself to singing. The sound was swallowed up in the open air in the middle, and I couldn’t hear my voice echo back to me, unbalancing my concentration. Throwing caution to the wind, I circled back to look at him and sing to him, “Special to me in my life, Since the first day that I met you.” I couldn’t read Tom’s expression, but he stepped closer, intently listening to the melody and the lyrics. “How could I ever forget you, Once you had touched my soul?” He continued to advance on me, his eyes on mine, his expression still undistinguishable.

As I sang the last line, he had closed the distance between us and was standing before me. I titled my head back, and I modulated my voice to sing softly. “In a very unusual way, You’ve made me whole.” Perhaps a little over the mark, maybe a little overdramatic, but Tom had changed me and I would never forget him.

We let the silence surround us when I stopped. Both of us concentrating on yet another one of my confessions that came out in song. This one was unconscious, completely unintentional, but fitting in our current situation. His eyes sought out mine, trying to read the truth behind the lyrics, wading through to garner my feelings for him.

The anticipation created an ache deep in my stomach, wondering how he was interpreting everything that happened between us and what that meant in terms of how to proceed from here. The very fabric of time slowed to crawl, and the world ceased to turn. Cupping my face between his delicate and gentle hands, he lowered his lips to mine. My heart skipped and then raced with the contact, the soft delicious pressure of his lips on mine. Slanting his head, he massaged and caressed my mouth with his, showing me in no uncertain terms that he felt as deeply for me as I felt for him.

Wrapping my arms around him, I pulled him closer, increasing the pressure of the meld of our mouths. He alternated between nipping and nibbling my upper and lower lips, beyond beautiful. He stole away with all thoughts, all reservations, all doubts, my breath, and above all, my heart. I had never experienced anything so spiritual, so sensual, or so romantic in all my life, and I never believed in such things.

Tom’s hand moved from my cheek into my hair, pulling me infinitely closer, and deepened the kiss. He guided me to part my lips and allow him to graze his tongue along mine. The warm, wet
heady sensation tasted sweet, luxurious and indulgent and I didn’t want to stop. I answered and responded with as much fervor and enthusiasm as he explored every part of my mouth with his. His other arm hooked around my waist, crushing me to him, the frenzy growing between us. When he moaned into my tongue, reality yanked me out of the living fantasy of his arms.

I gasped loudly, stepping out and away from him, putting distance between us as quickly as possible. My hand flew up to cover my lips, shaking my head in disbelief. Dazed Tom with swollen and reddened lips stepped closer and asked, “Kristiane?”

When he reached for me, I stepped further away from him, shaking my head again and whispering with my hand still over my mouth, “I can’t… I’m sorry, I can’t…”
I was having a difficult time trying to pinpoint what exactly set me off, made me push Tom away. I wanted nothing more, absolutely nothing more than to be back in his arms, feeling the strength of his body against mine, and our lips drinking in one another. I yearned for it, ached for it, but my conscience wouldn’t allow me to let go and surrender completely to what my heart demanded, the consequences be damned. I’d already gone too far in leading him on.

My knees were weak and my heart was racing in my chest, the echo of it racing through my body, pounding in my ears, from the effects of Tom’s exhilarating kiss. To help steady me, I leant heavily against the stage right pillar as something solid to keep me standing upright. Breathlessly, I panted, “I’m so sorry.” The guilt and the power of Tom’s lips on mine consumed me, and I was struggling to get a handle on my wits. He looked confused and concerned, puzzled and stupefied by how quickly I stepped away from him, shocked by my inner turmoil.

“Kristiane, I’m afraid I don’t understand,” he shook his head in disbelief, his face slowly clearing of the dazed look from the kiss we’d shared.

“I know. I’m so sorry. I just can’t…”

“You felt that, didn’t you? You are feeling it? I’m not alone in this, right? You feel this attraction, this pull between us, yes? That-and-th-and that kiss was amazing. Please tell me I didn’t misunderstand this.”

Every word he uttered cut me to the quick, every word more painful than the last. I shook my head, avoiding eye contact by staring at the abused wood planking of the stage. “I’m so sorry. I can’t…” I trailed off, desperately wanting to tell him and at same time keep it secret, to keep denying the truth. He didn’t misunderstand and I was feeling exactly what he was feeling. I wanted to assure him that he wasn’t alone, but I would have to leave him that way.

Suddenly from upstage, taking both Tom and I by surprise, Terry appeared and exclaimed, “Oh hell no, kitten!” His tone and expression were anything by warm and friendly.

Oh, God, Terry! I could feel the blush start from my toes and work its way up to the roots of my hair, the rush of it making me dizzy and lightheaded. “Terry!”

“No! There’s no Terry for you! Goddamnit, woman, what the fuck is wrong with you?” He stood ramrod straight, hands on his hips, with one leg cocked out to the side. His face was bright red with fury and anger, possibly some hurt thrown in there for good measure.

I was Bambi caught in the headlamps of a speeding car, inches from my face, knowing full well I was about to have my life handed to me, or my head, but paralyzed, unable to do anything about it. There was a reason I avoided Terry’s wrath, because he knew how to argue better than anyone I knew. I gaped at him, open mouth, jaw slacked open, eyes wide in astonishment. I don’t know how he got there, how long he’d been there, or how much he’d witnessed.

Tom, coming to my defense, spoke calmly, “Terrence.”

Terry wheeled towards him, his attitude giving him purpose, “Oh you’re next, ass – or arse, whichever you prefer. Just you wait your turn!”

Tom held up his hands and stepped back from the spitting fire dancer with something to sprout like a geyser about, and Terry was steaming. He turned back to me, “Seriously, muffin, what the fuck is
wrong with you?"

“Ter, babe…”

“You, you best fucking listen! I’m tired of your shit, really effing tired. You know I adore the ever loving shit outta you, muppet, you know this! But sometimes you annoy the bullshit right out of me!”

I couldn’t say anything, I didn’t have any way of defending myself when he got like this, and I honestly was at a loss for words. Tom looked equally as clueless as I felt, choosing to keep quiet and wait out Terry’s storm.

“I’m sick and tired of you playing the selfish center of the universe. You need to get over yourself, and your issues, and LIVE!” I stole another brief glance at Tom, petrified that he would understand the hints and implications that Terry was talking about.

“I came here,” I said softly, defending myself weakly. My argument was feeble, at best, and I had absolutely no ground to stand on when it came to Terry.

“You came to hide here! There’s a very distinct difference. You came to hide, because you don’t know how to let go. You let things go bad, sour, rot, fester, and still you won’t let go, even when you know there’s no fixing it.”

“Terry…”

“OF COURSE! You don’t want to fucking talk about it, but I’m going to make you fucking talk about it because you’re fucking up my life, my plan. It was a perfect plan, angel, and you’re cocking it up royally!”

“What plan?”

“To see you with someone who appreciates you, adores you – cares for you! But you won’t let him.” Tom and I exchanged an awkward, meaningful look, before looking away embarrassed and ashamed. “Penguin, you are so capable, well adjusted – a woman who deserves respect. You are so sure of yourself in every aspect of your life, but your personal life. Where is your confidence when it comes to your own love life?”

Meekly, I tried to speak up, “Terry, please…” Despite my attempt at speaking up, I lowered my head, no longer able to meet either of their glares, or judgments as it were, if Terry had his way.

“The truth hurts sometimes, kitten. Your truth hurts all the time because you bury it. But no more, I warned you. I fucking warned you. No more of this denial shit. I would yank you out if I had to, and apparently that’s what I have to do.”

Bewildered Tom appeared as though he’d been hit full force by a speeding train. “What is he talking about?”

I shook my head, brushing him off, denying him any verbal explanation from me, because I certainly didn’t want him to know the dirt in my closet. Terry was not having my ducking the truth any longer, fed up, frustrated, fuming, and deadest on forcing me to acknowledge exactly what I didn’t want to. Wringing his fingers through his hair, Terry bellowed, “Goddamnit, Kristiane, I gave up Tom for you!!” Tom shuffled from foot to foot uncomfortably, clearly caught in a situation that he wanted no part of, but involved too deeply to escape. His hands balled into fists at his sides, his knuckles white with the effort of trying to remain neutral.
“I gave you the green light, the go ahead, the ‘have at him, he’s yours’. I created a perfect scenario for you to be alone with him, to explore this attraction. You’re leaving tomorrow, so you’re out of time. Why the hell are you still fighting this?”

“Because I have to!” I blurted suddenly, unable to withstand his berating me anymore. I lifted my head and met his gaze with fire in my own. “My life, my love life is not for you to dictate. You gave up that right when you turned me down in college.”

“Oh no!! No no no no no no no!! You don’t get to hold that against me now, just because I’m making you face the truth!”

Tom quickly asked, “What truth? I feel involved in this madness and I should know all the facts.”

Terry declared suddenly, “She’s got a boyfriend back in New York City. She’s been with him forever because it’s easy and convenient and she won’t get hurt.”

Tom looked to me with betrayal writ large on his face, “Is this true?” I wanted the stage to swallow me up, and bury me in an abyss never to be seen again. Terry simplified my history in two sentences, and in doing so minimized all the things wrong to nothing. It wasn’t fair, not the whole truth, not the whole story, and he knew that. He was angry with me and reduced my pain to a petty truth because it made him feel better.

In doing so, he hurt Tom, and that was unfair, unwarranted, and unacceptable. With tears of frustration and years of hurt, I looked at the new man in my life and nodded. “It’s true, but it’s not as simple as that!” Even as I said it, the argument sounded frail and empty.

My best friend now thoroughly exasperated, growled out his irritation and annoyance, “I’m sick and tired of feeling like Amneris to your Aida and Radames type love story. I don’t have Elton John writing me some beautiful ballad of about being the third wheel, the spurned love with the heart of gold. You two work your shit out, because I can’t make up any more auditions. This time, I’m leaving you alone with the express wish that neither of you talk to me until you have worked your shit out. Cupid is exhausted, and he’s leaving the building.”

And with that, Terry stomped off stage and disappeared. Completely and utterly defeated, I slid to the floor and buried my face in my hands. The coil and knots of stress across my shoulders was unbearable and I didn’t want to move. I could feel the tension coursing through my blood stream like a cold burning sensation, emanating from shoulders to every other part of my body.

This wasn’t how I saw my vacation turning out, with Terry angry and Tom hurt and with me feeling like I didn’t have a friend in the world… That was until Tom spoke up. “Kristiane?”

I uncovered my face to discover him standing before me, surrounded with an aura of confusion, doubt and concern. How could he still appear so compassionate with the fucked up people he’d chosen as friends? I looked at him blankly, lost for anything to say to him. He deserved an explanation for everything that was said between Terry and me, but I didn’t quite have the heart. I couldn’t totally fault Terry for his outburst as it was a long time coming, but he could’ve handled it better.

Tom offered his hand to help me up from the crumbled mess that I was. He didn’t say anything more, only helped me to my feet and held my hand in his. We stared into each other’s eyes for a long silent moment, the questions there but unspoken. Without a word, Tom led me off the stage and out of the theatre through the backstage area out into the square. He clutched my hand in his, leading me with a confident and sure gait in his step.
When we started walking along the embankment of the River Thames, I asked, “Where are we going?”

“Somewhere where we can talk… away from that. A fresh start, if you will…”

He kept tight hold on my hand, and led me over the Millenium Bridge. Within minutes, he was leading me up the steps to St. Paul’s Cathedral and into the ornate doors. He purchased two tickets for us to go in, and took my hand again. I stole a look at his face, and I could read that he was trying to make sense of the limited information he had, forming the right questions to ask when we were alone. I was feeling a mixture of nervousness, numbness, and throwing my hands up in defeat and screaming, ‘Fuck it!’

The latter was put on the back burner once we started climbing the stairs to the dome in St. Paul’s. The expected riff raff and ragtag tourists were floating around staring at the ceiling, barely paying attention to where they were walking. Tom steered us through and up to the Whispering Gallery. As soon as he saw how many people were there, we exited and kept climbing the stairs, looking for a place that we could talk. The trek up the cathedral steps became narrower the further we climbed and only seemed to echo the amount of time that we had left together, diminishing.

528 steps later, we slowly and gingerly stepped out on the Golden Gallery, 85 meters above the streets of the city. London stretched out in every direction below us, reaching out to the horizon as far as the eye could see. The height was scary and sobering, the light wind adding to the fear. The sky was bright and blue with the sun shining yellow and gorgeous. The Thames shimmered in the golden rays, the noise and hustle of the city swallowed by the distance.

I gripped the railing at waist height, and fought back the dizzy feeling, stunned by the magnificence of the landscape from this vantage point. I felt Tom’s steadying presence just behind me, rooting me in place.

I sighed deeply as a way to center herself and to express the awe that the view inspired, breathing out some of the stress from thirty minutes ago. Tom asked, “Are you alright, Wilde one?” I simply nodded, ignoring my rapid heartbeat and sweaty palms and the missing possessive pronoun that usually proceeded his calling me ‘Wilde one.’

We stood in silence as we acclimated to the elevation, reveling in the fact that no tourists had made the journey up this far. We were completely alone and away from the rest of the world at the top of St. Paul’s Cathedral. Tom placed his hands on the railing beside mine, effectively enveloping me in his arms without touching me. It was a way of letting me know that he was there and he wouldn’t let anything happen to me.

Subconsciously I stepped back slightly, learning against the wall of his chest and body, letting him comfort me. His thumbs carefully caressed the tops of my hands as I gripped the bar. “Wow,” I breathed out in a whoosh of awe. “This is incredible.”

“Yes, it is,” implying that our proximity to each other and the vista before them was incredible. I could feel that he was more invested in me than the horizon, his stare weighing heavily on me instead of the view. “Have you enjoyed your holiday? Ready for the journey home?”

I sighed again, avoiding the true subject that we climbed all those steps to discuss, “This has been the vacation of a lifetime truly. I love this city. I hate to leave, but I do miss home and my job.” I turned around to look up at my friend. “Tom, I’m sorry about everything that’s happened.”

He smarted with my apology, his eyebrows furrowing together in a horrible line of consternation. “Kristiane, can you explain everything to me because I’m afraid I still don’t understand?”
I nodded, leveling my gaze to his chin instead of his eyes. “I am sorry about that.”

“Is there someone else?”

“There is, but please let me explain before you get upset with me or yell at me or throw me off the very top of St. Paul’s Cathedral.”

“I’m not upset… confused, puzzled, disorientated.”

“What Terry said was true… well, most of what he said was true. I started dating Scott about three years ago. Terry and I have a group of other actors and actresses that we socialize with, since we joined the Broadway Bowling League. It was a thing for charity, Broadway Cares Equity Fights Aids and they needed Broadway performers to volunteer, play a few frames, and raise some money. We all got together, played every Thursday evening, friendly competition.

“Scott was starring in Beauty and the Beast then, and doing very well. Terry and I were in Les Miserables together. Scott and I formed a friendship during our Thursday Bowling nights. He was kind, but had an edge of jadedness to him. There was affection and caring there, but we had both been living in New York so long that neither one of us believed in love.

“Love was this abstract idea that we sang about in our musicals, but never really happened to real people. We started seeing each other because we got along, but we were friends more than anything else. We really never should’ve started dating, but it’s easy for me to say that now. It really was a relationship of convenience more than anything else. Someone to come to opening night, someone to go to dinner with once in a while.

“We never believed it was happily ever after, or even forever, just someone to pass the time with. When Beauty closed, Scott went on tour with the show. I didn’t see him much, the occasional week here and there when the show was on hiatus. Then the tour ended and he was back in New York, but he made a number of bad career decisions… bad isn’t the right word. Unsuccessful ventures, maybe… I’m not sure if it could’ve been prevented. He was cast in shows that went belly up within weeks, and the roles started becoming less and less frequent the further he got away from Beauty.

“He’s been out of work for quite some time now, sleeping on friend’s couches because he couldn’t make rent, picking up host gigs, or waiter gigs while trying to find his next job. As you know, that can wear down your confidence and your patience, waiting for the next thing that really makes you happy to come along. Scott is stuck in this very bad place, depressed, broke, lost his confidence in his talent, so I’m sure he’s auditioning poorly. He’s stuck in a vicious circle.”

Tom stayed absolutely silent and listened to every word, nodding at appropriate times, engaged in my explanation. “So what does that mean in terms of your relationship with him?”

“That’s the thing. I feel like I’m stuck with him… oh, that’s a deplorable thing to say. He’s still a friend, or I consider him to be. I don’t know. It’s put a strain on our dynamic, as you can imagine. My career is on an upswing on the pendulum, and his is stuck in a bad place.”

“That can’t be easy on him.”

“It’s not, and I understand it. I’ve been where he is, but this dry spell has beaten down his spirit. I feel for him, and I can’t leave him when he’s down… but there’s no love there. I don’t know how to end things with him, as I never had any inclination to.”

“Terry wants you to leave him. He thinks you’re in a bad situation. He said that your truth hurts all
I sighed, hoping that I could avoid this part of it. “As you can imagine, as Scott got further and further away from Beauty, his attitude soured. He became very short tempered.”

Tom held my shoulders and forced me to look him in the eye. “Has he hurt you?”

“No, not physically, but he’s not very kind anymore either. But we also don’t see each other a lot. Terry likes to make a big deal about nothing.”

Tom studied me closely. “Terry’s indignations are always based in some truth.”

I was struck silent because Tom could see the truth. He knew Terry almost as well as I did. Without my best friend there, I couldn’t sway the focus off of me and I couldn’t burrow in the hole I’d dug for myself. I couldn’t avoid the truth, and I couldn’t live in my denial any longer. Too much of the story had come out, so I couldn’t dwell in the unknown.

“Scott takes his frustrations out on me, not physically, but verbally. But he’s in a bad way and as his girlfriend, I have to be there for him.”

Tom folded his arms across his chest and called me out, “That’s bullshit! There’s no reason for any man to be less than gentlemanly to anyone, especially his ladylove.” The twist he put on the last word was ugly and harsh, and I wanted to be sick. “So if things were different, if your circumstances were different… where do I fit into all of that?”
Chapter 14

What if circumstances were different, if I wasn’t stuck in a loveless relationship, if I’d been patient and believed in true love, where would Tom fit into my life?

The atmosphere seemed to close in around me with his question, not in an oppressive or stifling way, rather an intimate and private way, composed of only Tom and me. I knew what he was really asking with that question. It wasn’t truly a ‘what if?’ but more a ‘what now?’ I rotated back around, finding that his eyes, the gorgeous blue, the hurt, the confusion of this situation that I inflicted on him, pained me. I didn’t mean to hurt him intentionally as I knew Terry hadn’t either, but we each had, in our own unique, spectacularly dramatic manner.

My deceit by omission gave him the impression that I was free to like him and that something could happen between us. Terry had put him in the terrible position of making it clear that nothing more than friendship could happen between them. Then Terry playing matchmaker or cupid or a cherub, manipulating the two of us so we could be alone to test our feelings for each other, all this and Terry knew the truth, my truth.

I swept my gaze across the vista of mid afternoon London hustling and bustling below my feet, already feeling the ache of separation with my eminent departure. What could I say to lessen the hurt and pain that Terry and I caused? How could make this better?


“The world isn’t made up in absolutes, Kristiane,” he objected swiftly, very close to me. “I have- I need to know that-“

Feeling awful and wretched, I cut him off, “Please don’t ask me. I’d like to be able to look myself in the mirror, and I’ve already confessed more than I should have. I don’t want to see myself as being unfaithful or running when things get bad. I’d like to think I’m made of more than that.”

I felt his hands on my shoulders, and he traced the outside of my arms with his fingertips, awakening my skin to his touch. Gooseflesh chased his outline, puckering along my pores as he slowly descended to my hands. When he seized my fingers in his, he pulled me passionately backwards into him. I gasped at the suddenness of the movement and the desire to stay there forever with his heated flesh engulfing and lining mine. His arms then clutched me around my waist, holding me prisoner against him, and I craved a life sentence.

I closed my eyes, blocking out the city, welcoming Tom into my personal space. He whispered directly into my ear, “I’ve been a gentleman, patiently waiting for you to admit that this is mutual, that this is something. I brought you up here to get away from reality, away from judgment. Pretend that it is just the two of us.”

Melting into him, my body betraying my sense of right and wrong, I sighed, “Do you want me to tell you that I’ve been attracted to you since arrived? That first night…” Tom inhaled my wild honeysuckle shampoo and pulling me deeper into his embrace, his hold firm and unyielding. I fell prey to his arms, his presence over me, and I willingly let myself forget that I should be fighting this.

His husky voice did nothing but create a perfect storm for me to forget my morals. “You’ve fascinated me since you said that I was lickable, that first night in the back of the taxi. The next
morning, when you sent me a retort text for my use of Shakespeare by quoting Much Ado, I knew, positively knew…”

I breathed out, “Tom.” I cut him off, couldn’t let him confess what he felt for me. I knew in my heart of hearts that if he told me, mirrored what I felt for him, there would be no human alive that could get me on that plane to go home the next day. The agonizing struggle of wanting to hear it but avoiding it simultaneously burned in ways I never thought possible. In fact, I knew what all these musicals had been written about.

He turned me back around to face him and our eyes met in a heated tangle of what was left unsaid and the intensity of the moment. Our eyes searched each other for a definition of this web that we found ourselves ensnared in. When he claimed my lips again like he had on the stage of the Globe, I couldn’t find a solid excuse not to follow his lead. I curled my arms around his neck as he crushed me to him in a wicked tantalizing mash of limbs and tongues and teeth and hearts.

My heart hammered in my chest, trying to break free to get to its rightful place with him. He excited me in every way, academically, personally, physically, and above all emotionally. I poured every ounce of emotion I felt for him into that kiss so he knew I cared. I combed my lithe fingers through his wild curls and held him to me, trapping him, craving that he understood how deeply I liked him.

I tasted a hint of spearmint, masculine energy and hope along his tongue, and I couldn’t get enough of his mouth on mine, his hands on the small of my back, his curls in my fists. I knew that no matter what happened from that moment on, I was leaving my love in London with Tom.

When he separated from me, he was as breathless as I was, our kisses anything from innocent. “I want to beg you to stay, but I know you won’t. I would do anything to have more time with you, to suss out what this is between us.” His thumbs ascended to my cheeks and he caressed them with the pads of his fingers. I closed my eyes momentarily to live in the caress, to feel his gentle nature with me.

“I can’t stay,” I admitted regrettably. I had my career, my friends, my family, and a man waiting for me back in the states that I had to return to. I wanted to pursue something with Tom, but with my situation back at home, I couldn’t let myself. I owed Scott something after being with him for so long, a sense of loyalty, a sense of duty…I couldn’t explain the guilt that I associated with being locked in Tom’s arms, but I wasn’t willing to move away from him either.

I tore my gaze away from him, torn between wanting to be encased in his arms and running away from it. “Kristiane,” Tom began carefully, his breath rushing in and out.

I halted his speech, unable to handle or cope with any emotional admissions. I held my hand up to communicate to him to hold his peace. Stepping backwards one step away from him, I pleaded quietly, “Please don’t.”

He took hold of my hand and pressing my palm reverently into his chest above his rapidly beating heart. The vulnerable look in his clear blue eyes caused me to falter, overwhelmed by this situation. I never knew love, doubted its very existence, until this man. Again he tried, “Kristiane, I…” The bittersweet sound of my name on his lips stabbed like a spear, wanting to hear it more but needing him to stop because I couldn’t have him.

Interrupting immediately, I beseeched him once more, “Tom, please don’t…” I shook my head, discouraging him in another gesture.

“Why won’t you allow me to speak my peace?” he asked blankly, not accusingly.
“I’m afraid of what you’ll say. This guilt… how weak you make me… I don’t think I can endure what you have to say, and still have the conviction I need in order to leave.”

“Both you and Terry have monopolized the floor when it comes to speaking. I’m in this too, and I’d like the opportunity to share my part in it.” He took a deep breath, the entire situation frustrating him. “I’m involved in this, and I have something to say."

I knew he was right. Terry and I bulldozed unsuspecting Tom in our New York attitude and our loud city voices. Against my nature, I nodded silently, granting him permission to have his say, although I knew it would pain me in indescribable ways.

“I could fall in love with you, Kristiane. I could love you.”

Every ounce of me rebelled against those words, my confidence rocked by the echo of condescending Scott in my head. “You shouldn’t.” I yearned for him to feel that for me, he was a good man, but I felt like used and damaged goods. How do I admit that to such a sweet and intelligent man? He deserved better than anything I could ever offer him. “Tom, you shouldn’t feel that way for me.”

“Why not?”

“I’m… I’m-I… Tom, I’m not the girl for you.”

“Shouldn’t I have a say in determining that for myself? I think you are exceptional, truly extraordinary… Your talent, your intelligence, your loyalty. Don’t tell me that one man has unseated your confidence and self-esteem that much.”

“Tom,” I opposed, interjecting softly.

Reaching out his exceptionally long arm, he pulled me gently back into his arms with his hand behind my neck. “You’re not going to believe me, but I’m going to tell you how it is. You’re beautiful, you’re talented, and you deserve every affection, no harsh words or insults. Above all, you deserve to be happy. You are entitled to be treated like the gorgeous woman you are, with respect and adoration.”

I’ve never been much of a crier, reserving most of my extreme emotions for portraying a role, but Tom provoked it. Tears filled my eyes at the sweet words that he showered over me. I was so used to the polar opposite that I was thoroughly overcome with the tenderness and power of a verbal compliment. To keep my tears at bay, Tom kissed me again, and it felt like he was worshiping me.

I followed his lead, down this path before my conscience caught up with me, and I pushed him away again. “I can’t do this. I’m sorry, so sorry.”

“I’m serious about this, Kristiane. I think we could be amazing together, if you would allow me.”

“You know I can’t.”

“Because of some misguided loyalty?”

That question upset me. He didn’t understand or know my life or my relationship with Scott. “That’s incredibly judgmental! How dare you…”

Calmly without matching my tone or intensity, he said, “I dare because he’s not treated you the way you should be treated. In my mind, all previous friendship becomes null with the first insult. And how many insults has he slung your way? How many times has he raised his voice to you?
Blamed you for his failures?”

“It’s easy for you-

“To lay culpability where it truly should be? Absolutely. You don’t owe him allegiance or alliance anymore because he hasn’t earned it back after the first jab at your success, or talent, or accomplishment. What’s the last nice thing he’s did for you? When was the last day about you and all you do for him, and not about his decline or frustration?”

“So you turn your back on your friends when they’re in need?”

“Absolutely not. But there is a difference between being in an unfortunate situation, needing help and support, and blaming others for your own personal failures. When he was in Beauty, did he thank you for earning the part?” I didn’t answer because I knew where he was going, and I didn’t have a retort ready. “So why would he blame you when he lost Beauty?”

Tom was calm as he delivered all of that, and I was left reeling because he was right, every bit of it. Acknowledging that was difficult enough, but realizing that I’d wasted so much time with someone who treated me poorly was sobering. I countered, “Two wrongs don’t make a right. I can’t cheat on him because he’s not been nice.”

There was tension between Tom and me now, and I didn’t want that either. He was passing reason and logic on a situation that was purely emotional. I still cared for Scott as a friend, regardless of how poorly he treated me. For me, friendship meant more to me than a few months of disagreements. Every actor or actress in the business lived his predicament, and I couldn’t turn my back on someone when the tough got going. I considered myself a better friend than that.

After taking my fill of the view of London for a few more quiet minutes, I asked in hushed tones, “Can you take me back please?”

I heard my companion sigh behind me, resignedly. “Kristiane, I’d still like to see- we’re still friends.”

I nodded sadly, “We’re friends.” The statement fell flat, because we’d said too much. I didn’t want to leave things so tense, but I didn’t know how to repair it. Tom was so much like Terry showing me the truth when I didn’t want to see it.

Tom took my hand in his again, laid a kiss on the back of it, and headed through the door back into the dome to climb back down. I clutched his hand trying to hold onto my time here in London. We were silent the entire way down, both of us reviewing the argument, not knowing how to get past it. Silently I begged the clock to slow down, to give me more time in London, to give me more time with Terry, to give me more time with Tom.

When we hit the steps in front of St Paul’s Cathedral, I held onto Tom’s arm, the one with the hand snuggly wrapped with mine to cross back over the Thames. I didn’t like the idea of getting lost in the crowd or separating from him, and he indulged me all the way back to the Globe. Every step closer felt like walking the green mile, each step forward more dreaded than the last. Despite our argument, Tom was still a sense of serenity in my turbulence.

As we neared the theatre, he finally spoke, “Are you going to try to speak with Terry?”

“Yes, I have to. I know he’s mad at me, not really with you. I don’t think I could leave with him angry with me.”

Awkwardly, he asked, “What are you going to tell him?”
I shrugged, avoiding his gaze, unable to look in his eyes. “I’ll improvise, because I haven’t a clue.”

He squeezed my hand still tucked in his. “Will I see you again before you go?”

I shrugged again, swallowing around a lump in my throat, and tears brimming in my eyes once more. I still couldn’t look at him, too affected by how I felt for him to part with him, but knowing that I must. I looked down at my feet, fighting back the crying just below the surface. My voice hollow, I said, “I don’t know.”

Tom pinched my chin between his fingers, encouraging me to look at him. “I won’t forget you, Kristiane.” With chaste lips, he captured mine in a long, drawn out peck. When it was over, he turned away from me and disappeared inside the theatre.

I was left alone to pick up what was left of my dignity and my heart, to find my way back to my hotel to pack for my journey home and try to mend things with Terry. I hailed a taxi to deliver me back to the Grand, fighting my instinct that wanted me to go back to Tom. When I was back in my hotel room, I sent a couple of texts to Terry to try to get him to talk to me. When those didn’t work, I left him a voice mail: “Ter- Babe- I know you’re pissed as hell at me. But please call me. I need you.” The tears came all at once and I couldn’t stop them. I sobbed, “Please Terry. I need my best friend.”

Within seconds of leaving that voice mail, my phone rang in my hand. I didn’t even say anything when I answered. All I heard was, “Sweetpea, I’m on my way.”

Terry arrived at my hotel room door with chocolate about twenty minutes later. I was still broken and crying from leaving Tom. My best friend didn’t saying anything, just wrapped me up in a big bear hug and held me while I cried. He had seen my very rare breakdown before, and he was the only one who had. Only he could help me through and make me feel better.

As the sobs died away, he said, “Tom called me. He knew you would need me, kitten. Do you want to tell me? ‘What’s the buzz? Tell me what’s a-happening.’” When his using Jesus Christ Superstar lyrics to inquire after me didn’t make me smile, he held me closer, kissing my head, rubbing my back.

A few minutes later, I asked, “Was this your plan all along?”

“Not to make you cry, baby bear. Tom’s crazy for you, I know he is-”

“Terry, please… I can’t.”

“Hear me out, love, hear me out. He’s crazy for you, and I know you are for him, as much as you don’t want to admit it. I wanted to show you that you could have a positive in your life. Love does exist, and you found it.”

“Half a world away, Terry. That doesn’t do me any good.”

“Oh contraire. I’m hoping that now that you know that it does exist, you’ll be able to let go of the bad situation. Scott was my friend too, once upon a time, but the way he treats you is not acceptable. You have to get away from that, blossom. Find the courage, and get the fuck out of that.”

“I don’t know how.”

“You will. You have to. You’ve got another man waiting for you.”
Burying my head deeper inside my black hoodie, I swiped my hair out of face and dialed Terry’s overseas number at the pre-arranged time. My instinct told me earlier that week to speak with Terry directly, because I would have news to share. After today’s matinee performance as indication, I’d been right and I couldn’t wait any longer to talk with him directly. My hands begun to shake from the excitement and the unexpected chill in the air. The call connected almost immediately and my Terry was on the other end, screaming as loud and clear as ever, “Princess!”

“Babe! – God! It’s so good to hear your voice!”

“Likewise, lamb. I always love hearing my voice!”

After checking the deadly traffic on the corner, I tucked my chin down against my chest and scurried across the busy intersection avoiding rush hour cars and negligent tourists looking through their cameras, not where they were going. I giggled at Terry’s arrogant pat on the back and said, “I didn’t ask for this phone call so you could congratulate yourself, you know?”

“Firecracker,” he said with mock condescension. “Where’s the fun in having a conversation if not to make me feel good about myself?”

Fleeing the dropping temperature outside, I sought shelter in my favorite burger place not far from my theatre for dinner before the evening performance. “I have news, babe!”

“Am I pregnant? Is it yours?” he exclaimed with overzealous alarm.

“Terrence,” I chided over a chuckle, as I nodded to my favorite waiter, Brad. He chaperoned me towards the back of the restaurant where it was quiet, my regular Saturday between shows retreat. “Can you be serious for two minutes?”

“Continuously or summarily?”

Erupting into a full belly laugh, I shuffled sideways into my booth as Brad disappeared to retrieve my regular order. I shrugged out of my hoodie, warming in the cozy atmosphere of my little hideout, and tried to catch my breath. The overwhelming and all too familiar urge to choke him and hug him simultaneously invaded me unexpectedly. I missed him terribly. The twinge of an ache and the formation of a lump in my throat were there momentarily before I quickly dismissed it, instead concentrating on the positive and the reason for the phone call.

“Ter, listen to me…” I said with a touch of exasperation.

“Are you being scouted?”

I squealed out loud and exclaimed wildly, my annoyance quickly forgotten, “I’m being scouted!!!!”

“Woman!! Tell me everything!!”

My heartbeat drummed erratically against my chest bone. My dream looked like it was coming true, and I could finally share the news with Terry. Telling him made it real, made it attainable, made it true. “Okay, so Tuesday night, Jerry the director came in to take notes and tighten up the show.”

“Totally norm after a year…” he said flippancy, though hanging on my every word.
“Right, totally norm… And he came to see me in my dressing room after the show, told me that he
was bringing some people in. He insisted I be here all this week and to take care of my voice and
all that fun stuff.”

Terry actually made a sound that imitated my squeal from a few moments before, and I couldn’t
hide my snort of glee. “Oh, we like Jerry!!”

I agreed, “Oh, we very much like Jerry. So Wednesday and Thursday went by without a hitch. On
Friday, Jerry came back with two of the producers but Laura went on as normal. But I think they,
Jerry and the producers, had her take the matinee off today, and I went on.”

“You got to perform the lead today?!”

“I did! I did! And Terry, babe, it was my first time and it was magical. I love this role. I want this
role to be mine. I don’t want to be understudy anymore. I love my part in the chorus, but oh my
God, Ter, I want to be the lead.”

I could almost feel his enthusiasm and his support for me from over 3000 miles away. Terry
believed in me, and I knew I had to tell him every bit of it, regardless that he knew the truth
already, including my total and complete want for this part. “Did they talk to you after the
performance today?”

I sighed happily, “Jerry came again to my dressing room, wanted me to meet with him and the
producers next week.”

Immediately, he asked, gathering all the information, “When is Laura’s contract up?”

I squealed again, “December 30th!”

I heard a crash on the other side of the phone, and Terry’s muffled cursing as he fumbled to get the
device back to his ear. “Pooh Bear! They’ll want to sign someone into the part by November 1st,
and that’s next week.”

“I KNOW!”

“Oh my God, Pookie, this is it!” The zeal and spirit at which he shouted, cemented it for me, and I
couldn’t help the tears of happiness that blurred my vision. I quickly blinked them away, though I
was quite sure I’d never been happier in all my life. From the time I was six years old, I knew I
wanted to be a Broadway star, and I had been working my ass off for twenty years to obtain that
goal. Suddenly it was within reach and the immense feeling of pride and accomplishment was
humbling. “Baby girl, you’re going to be a Broadway star.”

I couldn’t turn off the megawatt smile on my face, and that I felt in every fiber of my being. “I
haven’t negotiated the contract yet, but I’m on my way.”

Terry scoffed loudly into the phone. “You’d do it for free, and you know it.”

I laughed, just shy of hysterically with my emotions heightened. “Probably not the best opening
offer, but I’ll keep it in mind.” I stage whispered, “Though you’re not wrong, babe.”

Soberly, Terry said, “It’s good to hear you so happy, kitten. This will cap off the bad that’s been
raining on your parade the past three months.”

I stirred my unsweetened iced tea absently, watching without seeing the cubes swimming about the
top of the liquid. Since I returned from London to visit Terry, my emotional journey made me
nearly unrecognizable. I wasn’t the same person that made that trip, and I also wasn’t the same woman that landed back in New York City two weeks later. I still followed the same routine that I had before I went, but so much mentally and emotionally about me was different. On the outside, I appeared unchanged, eating too much than was healthy, wearing workout clothes at all times, wearing very little makeup unless I was onstage. I wore my headphones to my iPod like an accessory. I was still the girl who greeted Elmo every day with a hug and waved to the Naked Cowboy in Times Square on the way to the theatre.

Feeling a little removed, I said quietly, “I’m a different girl, Ter.”

“You are, but you’re very much still my Kristie,” he agreed supportively. “You’re better off now. You know that, don’t you, muppet?”

“Yes, in a way. It still hurts.” I hooked my hair behind my ear in a nervous gesture, not wanting to talk about it, but needing to talk about it. This was my growing used to talking things out instead of living in denial. Whenever something bothered me or hurt, I talked it out with Terry.

“And it always will. That part of it will always be painful, but you survived and you’re better than you’ve ever been.”

Brad served my meal, the one I suddenly didn’t want to eat anymore. I knew I had to eat something as I was back onstage in about two hours for the evening performance. I picked at the fries distractedly, reliving the nightmare of the week I returned from London. “I never thought he was capable of that.”

“Hey, none of us could’ve anticipated that, but you’ve dealt with it and moved on.”

I huffed something that sounded like an ironic laugh, with no humor in it. “Have I really dealt with it?” I traced my thumb over a stress mark in the wood of the tabletop, trying to manage my feelings about all the events that had taken place that week I returned.

“Physically, you are healed. No bumps or bruises. The emotional scars will be there because you were friends first, and you’re talking, that’s something,” he insisted encouragingly. His tone darkened, “I would never believe a friend was capable… of…”

“You can say it, babe. He…”

“Don’t!” I could hear the heartbreak in his voice when he spoke, unable to utter what happened. “I can’t believe I wasn’t there. I would’ve killed him.” I took the support like a sponge as Terry managed to take all the pity out of it, so I felt empowered instead of victimized. I could only talk to my best friend about what happened between Scott and me when I returned from London. The humiliation and the pain associated with it was far greater than I ever wanted to face again. I could only trust Terry with that information.

“It’s good that you weren’t then. Who would I have otherwise?”

Easily, Terry hinted, “I know someone, koala bear.”

In the three months since I’d seen Terry face to face, we never mentioned Tom. I came home to deal with Scott and all that entailed to get him out of my life permanently. For all intents and purposes, I told all of my friends, save Terry, that it was a bad breakup and left the rest untold. I trusted my friends to be there for me, but I didn’t want to view the pity that would undoubtedly be partnered with me and how things truly ended with Scott if I shared the truth. I didn’t want that echo or stigma attached to me, choosing to move on instead.
“I’m not so sure that’s a good idea, Ter. We ran all over Tom when I was there.” But oh God did it feel good to say his name after three months of avoiding the subject.

“Tom asks after you, angel – about once a week,” he added hopefully.

With alarm, I asked, “You haven’t told him the details, have you?”

“I wouldn’t, love, you know that. Despite the way you left things with him and how he looked shell shocked for a week after you left, Tom still cares for you, very much.”

If I told Terry the truth, the memory of Tom was a comfort to me and one I held so very dearly. When I laid my head down on my pillow at night, his words played over in my head, ‘I could fall in love with you, Kristiane. I could love you.’ I could remember the taste of his kisses, how close he held me, how he accepted me, his smile, his eyes, the timber of his voice, everything. When I couldn’t sleep at all, I’d go through my texts that I exchanged with him. I thought and lived with him in my head every day as if he were still a part of my life.

Although Scott was out of my life and had been since a week after I returned from London, I kept Tom and how I felt about him out of the mess and the fallout from that toxic relationship. I didn’t want to confuse the issues: the betrayal and the promise of what could have been. If I had any chance of moving forward, of leaving Scott and all that nasty baggage in the past, I had to learn to be my own person. I didn’t want to latch onto Tom as though he was a crutch. I’d mistreated him enough to not cause any more damage to that relationship, friendship or otherwise. I hadn’t talked to him or exchanged messages with him since I left England.

“Terry, I have no idea how that’s even possible. I was awful to him, and I’ve not talked to him since he told me that he wouldn’t forget me,” I said sadly, regrettably.

“And he hasn’t.” I don’t know how much Terry knew of what happened between Tom and me at the top of St Paul’s Cathedral. Our time, when he came to me in my hotel room, we spent talking about how I would handle being home again. He didn’t ask and I didn’t tell him about my conversation with Tom. In the way Terry intimated what he knew in that moment, I suspected that Tom might have told him something.

“Does he know that I was there that last day? That I tried to come to say goodbye?” I’d missed the opportunity to talk to him one last time before I got on the plane to come home. I’d seen Terry on my way to the airport, but missed Tom.

“Darling, I told him and he knows. Tom knows you, button. When you were with him, you let go of that darkness you carried with you most of the time. When you were with him, you were open, confident, charming, and New York level loud. Who couldn’t love that?”

I shoved another fry into my mouth, unable to actually taste any food now that we got on the matter I’d been avoiding for months. “Terry, Tom isn’t angry or upset with me? Are you sure?” The idea was very plausible, regardless of what he said. I let three months go by without contacting him. I felt that would cast doubt on my telling him we were still friends.

“Peach, why would he ask after you if he was angry or upset with you?”

“Because I’d be mad at me, if I had been in his position,” I admitted with a shrug.

“This is Tom,” he said obviously. “I told him I was in love with him, kissed him and ran away from him all in one evening. And then the man had the audacity to forgive me in the same night! Tom is super human or something. I don’t know, but maybe he should be studied.”
Tentatively, feeling more and more like I was back in high school than a woman in her late twenties, I asked, “Do you think he would want to actually talk to me? I… well… I-I miss him.”

“Sweetness, you have no idea how many phone calls I had to talk him out of when he wanted to talk with you.”

“And he doesn’t know about what happened… here… with…?” I don’t know how Terry and I managed to discuss what actually went down, since neither of us spoke in anything more than vague terms, but I was healing.

“Not a word.”

“Do you still see him with the show over?”

“At least twice a week. Would you like me to play mediator?”

Pulling in a deep breath, steadying my nerves at the mere idea of talking with Tom again, I said, “No. I’ve got to play adult and do this on my own.”

I avoided asking Terry anymore about Tom, if he was working, if he was seeing someone or if he was still as gorgeous as I remembered him. I would reserve that for speaking with the man himself, if I could find my confidence. I finished up my dinner with Terry as my company, although he was an ocean away. He kept my mind occupied so I didn’t wallow in what I would say or how I would contact Tom.

As I settled the bill with Brad, Terry wished me luck for the upcoming week and absolutely insisted I call him again as soon as I was offered and/or signed the contracts to be the new lead.

The time was 6:30pm when I weaved my way back to the theatre to warm up for show two. I checked the schedule to see that I was back in my usual track, and Laura was back on as the lead. As I sat down on my pink futon in my dressing room staring at the mirror lights, I decided that I couldn’t wait or put off trying to get in touch with Tom. I was too anxious, and I didn’t want to sweat or worry or think about it.

I pulled out my phone and typed out the first text that came to mind: ‘Kristie Taylor: ‘The only way to fix a friendship is to try.’ Please consider this my olive branch.’ I thought it appropriate considering our history to call on my old friend A. A. Milne for another quote to help me through this.

I put my phone aside and went out on stage to warm up my voice again. I forced myself to not wait and watch over my phone. If Tom wanted to respond, he could and he would. If not, somehow that would be okay too. I couldn’t help remembering how desperate I felt my last day in London, how much I wanted to say goodbye, how much I wanted to hug him one last time.

I’d been running so far behind that last day, because I didn’t want to leave. The taxi made the detour by the Globe, so I could jump out and try to see both Terry and Tom before going to the airport. The performance was already under way when I got there, since London traffic is so unpredictable. Act one meant Tom was onstage already as Lysander, but Terry could come out and meet me in the lobby for one last hug.

I wanted to stay and wait out the first act so I could talk to Tom, but there was no way I could with my time running short to get to the airport and through security to catch my flight. I hung around long enough to hear him deliver his line, the one that tore me up inside and sent me back home with tears that I would never forget: “The course of true love never did run smooth.”
Chapter 16

‘Tom Hiddleston: Did you know that the olive branch was a symbol of peace between Britain and America in the 18th century? Absolute pleasure to ‘hear’ from you! – Tom’

This was the text message that I had waiting for me when I returned to my phone about five minutes before places. I sent Tom a message because I was absolutely ready to let bygones be as they should be, learned from but left in the past. Sending him a text after three months of no contact whatsoever was, for me, another step in my healing from all the hurt and the pain that I’d been living with for too long.

Denial was a habit for me, one that I was finding very difficult to steer clear and break free, even to the only person I should be honest with - me. I caught myself in the web again as I ran through my vocal scales and physical stretches to warm up for performance number two of the day. I’d put the ball back in Tom’s court, sent him a text to see whether pursuing a friendship was an option. I opened the door and invited him in. However, in my own mind, I pretended not to be home if he accepted the invitation by leaving my cell phone in my dressing room. Truth be told, I cared, I cared a lot that he responded.

I tried to convince myself that no matter how he chose to respond to the text, I would be okay with it. After too many years of following the same pattern in personal relationships, I was challenged to face the truth of my situation. Conditioning myself against my norm was hard. For so long, I buried that I did care; I covered up the fact that Scott, despite being a friend, wasn’t nice, wasn’t respectful, wasn’t boyfriend - or otherwise - material.

Both Tom and Terry showed me the ways of real men, and how men should behave to a friend, companion, girlfriend and lover. Terry was always there for me, always picking me up when I got kicked down, loved me unconditionally and genuinely enjoyed being with me. If we weren’t onstage together, he was in the audience of my opening night, cheering and applauding me on. Scott never saw the show I was in, nor expressed the least amount of interest in what I was doing.

Tom, in the two weeks we spent together, had treated me with respect, wanted to witness my talent, asked after me, kissed me in ways I’d never been kissed before. He showed me his city, indulged in experiencing his hometown through my eyes. He was patient, attentive, calming, and a true gentleman. He didn’t treat me like a child or show me an ounce of jealousy when I bested him in competition. If anything, Tom actually delighted in the things that I considered my stronger talents and that he didn’t excel in. In very many ways, he was everything Scott was not.

At the start, Scott was kind and attentive, held my hand, took me for dinner, threw a little romance my way, but it all felt perfunctory, a little too hollow, a little too empty, and completely duty bound. He was going through the motions of being the good boyfriend, and I was with him as well, though I think I was more invested than he was in the relationship. Getting together was a mistake, in hindsight, but the camaraderie wasn’t always sour.

The relief and the buoyancy at seeing the text response from Tom was unbelievably soothing, because I knew I had another friend in him. Knowing that I didn’t scare him away or destroy his trust in me was so encouraging. He could’ve decided to ignore the text, he could’ve asked me not to contact him anymore, or he could’ve sent me a nasty hurtful message begging me to let him alone. I was pleased that it wasn’t any of these, and the reaction was pleasant.

Without overthinking, I typed another quick response back to Tom. ‘Kristie Taylor: The olive branch thing, didn’t know that… So I can assume, peace between our two nations then? – K’
I didn’t have the chance to ditch my phone before the thing vibrated in my hand again. ‘*Tom Hiddleston: I cannot speak for the governments of our two nations, but, Kristiane, we are friends. – Tom*’

‘*Kristie Taylor: Thanks, Tom. I’m due on stage, and it’s getting late for you there. I hope we can catch up. Can I text you tomorrow? – K*’

I couldn’t wait for his response since the stage manager called places for the top of the show, but when I returned to my phone later, Tom responded: ‘*Tom Hiddleston: Anytime, darling, I look forward to it. Very much. – Tom*’

*

My hands were trembling to noticeably that I could barely keep a grip on my phone in my hand, even so much as to press the speed dial for Terry’s number. I couldn’t concentrate, and I couldn’t see through the excitement and the tears bubbling up inside me. I don’t know how I kept my enthusiasm and giddiness in check this long, but the butterflies were beating around every inch of my body. I felt like I’d just run fifteen miles in record tie, when I’d only exited the elevator from fifteen floors above my head.

The lobby of the office building was formal and stiff, and I slid into one of the rigid leather chairs to collect myself and make the phone call. The wait for Terry to answer my call was torturously long, though it probably was no more than seconds, but I heard myself repeating his name on endless loop, even when the phone connected. “Terry! Terry! Terry! Terry! Terry! Terry!”

“Shit, woman, tell me you got it!”

“I GOT IT!!!” Twenty years of rejection melted away in an instant, every failed audition, every missed cue, every fumbled dance step lead to this moment. I just signed my contract to be the female lead in Daddy Long Legs the Musical, based on the novel, written by Frank Wildhorn and Tim Rice.

My best friend squealed and whooped with joy, reminding me of the time when he told me that he’d been cast as Puck in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. I held the phone away from my ear as Terry carried on, thinking that the executives that I’d just signed the next year of my life away to stories above my head could hear him. I was laughing and crying, feeling lighter and happier than I had ever before. I buried my face in my hands and absolutely let go, a cathartic cleansing of the culmination of all my successes and my failures combined brought me to this achievement.

Terry exclaimed enthusiastically, “Dearest, I’m putting you on speaker.”

The voice that could only make me feel infinitesimally better, if it were possible, came through the distance, “Kristiane, I’m assuming congratulations are in order.” I could hear the smile and pride in his honey, silvery even tone, his beautiful accent more than enough to turn me to jelly.

Despite the tears and the laughter that my success had brought, I serenely sighed, “Tom.” My heart took up a staccato, and yet I felt utterly calm. He set my pulse racing in a pleasing and fluttery sensation. There was no way of masking the affection I felt for him, nor did I feel the need to anymore. “I owe you a text. I’m so sorry.”

“No apologies necessary.” I heard over through the crackly white noise of distance, Terry and Tom whispering back and forth, then the unmistakable rearrangement of the phone from one person to the other, a small click off of speaker mode. Tom’s voice returned, “I’ve been ordered to take a walk,” he said with a small chuckle in his voice.
Snuffling and wiping my nose on my sleeve, I shook my head in disbelief, knowing that Terry was playing matchmaker still after all this time. “Terry’s so subtle, it hurts.”

Tom laughed into the phone, but the sound trailed off rapidly into silence, yielding to memories of our last conversation, the confessions we’d made to one another, and trying to find the right words to bridge the gap between then and now. With a sigh, I got to my feet, feeling that nervousness work its way through my body. I wanted to talk to him, to put everything out there, to stop the endless loop of burying emotions. I wiped the tears from my face with my shirt sleeve again and bravely faced midafternoon brisk autumn weather outside.

“There’s so much I want to say, Tom, so much… I don’t know where to begin,” I admitted lightly, trying to organize my thoughts all breaking though in my head as important.

Helpfully, he offered, “Can we start with the good news? Will that help?”

My face broke over a broad and wicked smile again. “I just landed my first leading role in a Broadway musical.”

“They’ve finally upgraded then to the better talent?”

“Flattery, sir…” I trailed off, beaming at the compliment. “Laura is wickedly talented and she’s created this role, made very intelligent acting choices. I hope to do what she’s done one day… create a role for Broadway. That’s the dream.”

“No doubt you’ll get there. One step at a time. So how did this development happen?”

As I walked from the talent agency building in Times Square over a few blocks to my apartment on the fourth floor of a rundown building in Hell’s Kitchen that charged entirely too much money in rent, I told Tom about the past week with the director and the producers coming by the show. I apologized again for not texting him as I promised to three days ago because I got sucked up into this vortex of activity that led me to signing only an hour ago. He didn’t interject or ask any questions until I felt like I’d told everything there was to tell.

“When does the part officially become yours?”

“December 29th,” I nearly shouted, curtailing another full out squeal.

Tom heard the veiled excitement and I listened as he giggled from the contagious happy sounds from me. “Congrats again, Kristiane. I’m sure it’s well deserved.”

Shoving the door slipping from its hinges, I let myself into my apartment building, pausing long enough to collect my mail from the cubby in the hallway. As I slogged up the stairs, cursing the lack of an elevator, I stated seriously, “Tom, I wanted- I tried… I came to the Globe that last day. I never meant to leave things as they were between us.”

Nonplussed, he tried to brush it off, but I heard the hurt in his voice. “Think nothing of it.”

“But I do think about it. Every day. I didn’t want us to be so… unsettled.”

He took a deep breath, steadying his thoughts. “I’m not going to lie. When the truth came out, it stung a bit. I would’ve preferred to hear it all from you willingly without Terry forcing your hand.”

I opened the door to my apartment, locking the door behind me a flopping down on the couch in the common area of my place. I closed my eyes, fighting off the internal panic that built inside me, the self-preservation instinct that made me want to stick my head in the sand, the very gut reaction...
that put me in this mess. I scrubbed my hand down my face, concentrating on the fact that I liked this man. If there was ever a time to acknowledge reality, this was it. I could not jeopardize or squander my friendship with a good man.

“That wasn’t personal to you, please know that much. I didn’t confide in anyone. I denied the truth of what was happening for so long, because I didn’t know what else to do. Do you have time to talk about this now? I don’t intend to take you away from anything.”

“Let me ring you back in a few minutes. I don’t want to abuse Terry’s generosity by sucking up his battery. Don’t disappear on me, I want to hear this.”

“I won’t move,” I promised seriously.

Within ten minutes, Tom called me back and I remained on the couch in my prone position, getting comfortable with the idea of being honest with him, with myself.

“I apologize, Kristie. Please go on.”

Biting back the fear, I launched into all I’d learned from the time I left London. “When Terry and I didn’t work as lovers in college, I shut off that part of myself, figuring that if he couldn’t love me like that, how could someone else? I adore Terry, always have, always will, as you know… But subconsciously I held him responsible for my unwillingness to accept that there may actually be another kind of love, a pure kind of affection. In a very real way, I never dealt with his rejection.”

“Did you know he was gay?”

“Oh, yes, of course. A blind man could see his flaming personality,” we both giggled a little to breakup of the tension and the drama of my confession, but that, too, died away. I soldiered on, steeling myself to the history I never really dealt with, “I knew he was gay, but our bond, our connection felt so real.”

“And it is… Your friendship with him is unique.”

“Yes, but my heart, my psyche never made the distinction. I guess, in my mind, equated what we had… or rather, what we have as real. If I’m honest, nothing stirred inside when he kissed me or when he touched me. He’s absolutely gorgeous to look at from a female perspective, but I was never physically attracted to him. So in my messed up logic, if I couldn’t love him and he couldn’t love me as lovers, then it doesn’t exist.”

“That’s dizzying intellect.”

“Ranting of a college girl who was always so focused on her career that she never paid much attention to the opposite sex. When the first didn’t work out, well then none of them would.”

“Cynical.”

“Sometimes can be referred to as realist.”

Tom seemed reluctant and hesitant to go on or to mention anything else, but I knew I had to bring this around to my vacation and his place in my life as I saw it. He began vocalizing, starting and stopping, desperately searching for the best way to ask without causing pain or another argument between us.

Instead, I threw him a clue so that he didn’t drown in his turbulent thoughts, or mine as it were. “From that time, that night with Terry… My automatic defense mechanism was always denial
when I didn’t know how to handle or cope with something traumatic. My love life, or rather my unlove life with Scott was a prime example of that preservation - of my inability to deal with the reality and desperation of the situation. I entered the relationship when I didn’t have the maturity to deal the highs or the lows of someone else’s psychology. I had enough complication in my own life that I didn’t have the wherewithal to manage or support Scott through his.”

“And yet you were involved with him for years.”

“I know it doesn’t make sense, even now. But that relationship was… I don’t know… like routine, going to the gym or calling a friend on their birthday or going to yoga or dance class. I went through the motions of being what I thought a girlfriend would be, what was expected.”

Then Tom asked the underlying question that hung between us from that initial text, “Are you still with him now?”

I sighed deeply. The events were still so fresh and so painful, and I wasn’t sure I was ready to admit that much. The desire to come clean was ever present, and I knew I couldn’t purge that ghost until I put the entire saga into words, make it real, own it, release it. Instead I chickened out again, “No, I’m not, but I don’t think I can tell you about all of that today. I don’t think I’m ready for that, to say it or for you to hear it.”

“I can respect that. Can I… Will you… uh, um… How… shit, Kristiane, there’s so much I want to ask and I want to say,” I could hear the whir of the wheels in his head through his staggering and stuttering. “I want to be sensitive to all your…”

I offered quietly, “Can we take it slow?” Taking another weighted breath, I said softly, “You weren’t alone. I felt it too, but I don’t think I’m ready to go down that road yet.”

“I’d prefer to have you in my life than the alternative. When you were here, it was special, in a very good way. I maintain that we are still friends. I know you’re wounded emotionally, so we can go slowly.”

“Tom, I don’t expect you to wait for me…”

Interrupting me, he insisted, “We’ll take this slowly. We’re just friends, no pressure, and no expectation.”

The two ton weight that I’d been carrying on my back since I left his company, and last saw his gorgeous blue eyes, loosened and lifted by half. I couldn’t blame him in the slightest if he had acted differently. I sensed some animosity when he alluded to Scott, and I couldn’t fault him for it. Tom became an unsuspecting participant in this triangle or square, or whatever shape this was, and he didn’t have the entire story.

“Thank you. Now please tell me about you. I want to hear about everything that happened since I left. Are you watching over Terry?”

“I am. Since the show ended at the Globe, I’ve been packing up my flat actually.”

“Oh?”

“My mum is going to store all my belongings for me, while I’m in California. The shoot for the Thor film starts in January, and I have to report there right after New Year’s.”

“But you’re moving?”
“I’d like to purchase my own place, and once I get a paycheck from Marvel, I’ll be able to do that.”

“How long will you be in California?”

“At least six months, with training and rehearsals. I couldn’t see paying rent on this place for half a year if I’m not here.”

“I don’t blame you. I suspect rent in London is very much like rent in New York City, too high for too small a space.”

“Too true. Since I’m biding my time here, waiting for January to get here, I’ve been picking up short films and audiobooks and things like that. I can’t commit to anything because my contract with Marvel. I feel like I’m treading water, not doing anything in the meantime. I feel restless.”

I giggled, finding the humor that we were both in a similar situation. “I’m where you are now. Ironic. Don’t get me wrong, I love the chorus and I love my track in the show, but I know the other side.”

“Kristiane, listen, I would love to chat with you again, but right now, I’m afraid I’m out of time. But I don’t want this to be it.”

“Tom, it’s not. We can talk again. I’d like that very much.”

We agreed to talk again soon, set up a convenient time for both of us considering the five hour difference, and wished each other luck getting through the next week. Tom vowed to text me when he got antsy and was on the next plane to California, so I could remind him that I was already in hold mode in the correct place.

As we were hanging up, Tom laughed and said, “Call Terry back. No doubt he’s spitting fire like a dragon that he didn’t get his time with you.”
The next few weeks flew by in a flurry of activity that left my head spinning by the time Sunday night rolled around. I was still performing my regular chorus role and tracking the lead if she called off, Tuesday through Saturday nights with afternoon performances on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday. Doing eight shows a week is not easy, tiring but rewarding at the same time.

I started rehearsals for my lead role in Daddy Long Legs during the day when there was no matinee performance. Although I knew the part well enough to perform in front of a live audience, other key characters in the musical were being recast or rotated.

“Tell me again,” a sleepy half smothered yawn filled my ear. “Forgive me…” He huffed his apology, a lighthearted self-deprecating sound. Regaining his momentum, my friend inquired, “Why is your rehearsal schedule so crazy?” The gravelly, tired tone set hundreds of butterflies free in my belly and a warmth that flowed through me from my belly outwards like hot chocolate during a blizzard.

Guilt seized me once more as this wasn’t the first time I’d woken him from sleep for a chat. “Tom, I can let you go. No human being should have to endure your ungodly hour.”

His sexy rough accented tone carried over the white noise of long distance, cancelling the many miles between us. “This is nothing. Only one hour before I would normally get up and go for a run.”

I couldn’t help but feel incredibly touched by his sacrifice. With my days devoured by rehearsal and my nights occupied by performance, the only time we had to talk was midnight Saturday night for me. With the five hour time difference, Tom was having to wake up at five in the morning on a Sunday, which seemed to me like cruel and unusual punishment. Beyond the text messages, the exchange of Shakespeare, Wilde, musical theatre lyrics, and anything in between that we sent back and forth at random, a weekly phone call was our only means of maintaining contact.

We never gave it a name, but I’d come to think of our weekly telephone calls as dates, and I couldn’t wait for this time to come around. In the past month since signing my contract, Tom became a constant in my life, an outside tether to adult conversation instead of singing, dancing and emoting. As much as I craved the comedy and tragedy of my theatre life, I also needed a sense of reality, and Tom offered that in a very soothing way.

Quietly, I hinted, giving him another out, “If you’re sure…”

“I’m sure. I want to talk with you, my Wilde one. So explain why you’re never home at a reasonable time, ugh… a reasonable London time.”

His nickname for me! I heard it, and my hand flew up to feel my fluttering heart beating rapidly in my chest, dancing a happy tune, keeping it within my body. Tom hadn’t called me that since that last day I spent with him in London, and I never realized until that moment how much I’d missed it. Maybe it was the early hour for him and his defenses were not firmly in place yet, but my moniker was back. Although, the conscious thought to call me that, to revive it, might have been planned. Either way, hearing him utter those words and putting the possessive before it back in place… I was moved.

I smiled at his calling me his Wilde one and the playful jab over the time difference, settling in on my sofa for our hour long conversation. “I’m working two jobs is the best way to explain it.”
“But you’ve performed the role several times, why do much rehearsal with the show open? Aren’t you stepping into a role that you’ve already performed, like an understudy?”

“I’m not the only cast member cycling. We’re teaching the show to two new swings, and we’ve got two new principals coming in, not to mention rotating the chorus to shadow different characters. So complex for a tiny company, but so much fun. So we’re not rehearsing for me alone. Sometimes I am no more than a prop.”

“Oh, I see! That makes sense. I didn’t realize the company was changing so much.”

“Do you want me to talk shop for a minute?”

I could hear the smile in his voice as I heard him flip the switch to brew tea. This was his regular morning routine when he chatted with me, and it felt strangely domestic that I could imagine his path. “Please talk shop. I don’t think my experience with the West End is at all similar. I’m interested to learn how your Broadway works.”

“This is typical for a cast to change so much at once. Contracts are usually negotiated for anywhere from six months to a year, although anything goes for names.”

“Names?”

“Joel Gray, Bebe Neuwirth, Nathan Lane… stars.” He made a noise in the back of his throat in acknowledgement, and encouraged me to go on. “My show, Daddy Long Legs, has been open for a year, so a lot of the contracts were either ran out by actor’s choice or renewed/renegotiated for more time with the producers. In my case, I got a new contract, as did a few of my friends in the cast.”

Tom was moving around in his kitchen, pans clanged against the stove, cupboards closed with a dull thud, drawers slid opened and closed with a slap. I could set my watch to his movements as they were almost choreographed, meticulously predictable and extraordinarily comforting. There was something so thrilling about being included in his routine, since he was so precise in his day to day. “We discussed this before but what’s your day to day like now?”

I reminded him of the shows schedule and how rehearsals fit in. My schedule would even out once I assumed the lead since I wouldn’t have rehearsals, except for the odd occasion here and there. “Until then, I work every day including Mondays, when the theatre is dark, I still have to go to work during the day for rehearsal.”

“You must be exhausted,” he commented sympathetically.

I admitted ruefully, “I am. I haven’t had a day off since I signed the contract, but it’s absolutely exhilarating at the same time, but sometimes I just crash.”

“This explains the text I got from you the other day,” he chuckled lowly.

“Oh? What did I say?”

“You were responding to my ‘Better a witty fool than a foolish wit,’ Twelfth Night text, and…” He was laughing outright into the phone. “Hold on, I have to get this right.” He cleared his throat, giggled in that endearing way with his tongue peeking out between his teeth that I remembered clearly in my mind, and said, “Your response was… oh, forgive me, this is going to be awful… You sent, ‘Yabba Dabba Doo’” The last part he actually imitated the end of day exclamation a la Fred Flinstone.
I burst into a fit of laughter that only matched his, covering my face with my hand, staring up at the ceiling above me, hoping I wasn’t disturbing my neighbors upstairs or next door. I heard Tom apologizing through my guffaws, “That was terrible, I can’t believe I just done that. I’m sorry.”

“Better than I would’ve ever attempted. That was eerily on point.”

“You’re too kind,” he said sounding genuinely humble.

Challengingly, I asked, “Did I really send that? You know as soon as we hang up, I’m going to be checking my outbox.”

“I tell the truth. That was the quote that you sent me. Surprisingly fitting actually… considering the prompt. I wasn’t expecting it, and I think I surprised the people queuing up at Sainsbury’s when I laughed out loud.”

I scoffed, picturing him out in public busting a gut. “I should not be allowed to operate heavy machinery with so little sleep.”

“Is a mobile considered heavy machinery?”

“Can you name five parts that make it work?”

“No.”

“Neither can I. Heavy machinery,” I said definitively, and then quickly added, “And possibly magic.”

For the rest of our phone conversation, we caught each other up on what happened during the previous week from the last time we spoke on the phone. There was a special understanding, unspoken, but undeniably genuine about his helping me wind down from my day as I kept him company to start his. I was eager to find out if this would continue, and how this companionship we started rebuilding would go on when he was in California, in yet another time zone. I didn’t know anything about filming a big Hollywood blockbuster, and could only speculate that it would require most of his time.

*

Sweeping my dressing room with a keen and careful eye, I double checked that my stage makeup was stowed away and my costume was in the laundry bag to be washed for the next performance. I could hear fellow cast members thundering down the stairs of the theatre, screaming and laughing together with the high of another receptive audience. Before stepping out into the hallway, I grabbed my bag, my phone and overcoat. I tried not to look, really tried not to look at my phone, but I couldn’t help it.

Disappointed though I knew there wouldn’t be, I was saddened that there wasn’t a text from Tom. The habit started weeks ago, when we reconnected, that I checked the device nearly every hour on the hour, in hopes that I’d find another message from him. I knew the five hour difference would have him already asleep by the time I got out of the night performance, but I wanted there to be a message from him.

Sighing heavily, I exited my room, flipped the lights off behind me, and descended the staircase, to find Terry talking with Victor, the stage door guy. I’m almost dead sure that was his actual title as we all referred to him that way, and he never corrected us. He turned and smiled, “There she is, my favorite of the cast.”
Flashing a wicked grin, I slapped him on the back a few times in a friendly half hug. To Terry, I hinted, “He’s always buttering me up for his Christmas bonus.” Looking at the oversized teddy bear of a man, I said with a wink, “Were you going for the keys to my apartment too? You keep complimenting me the way you do, and I’ll gladly hand them over. But we’ve still got a week to go before Christmas.”

“If you keep bringing me a daily cannoli like my grandmother made, you can keep the keys and the bonus.”

“Mammy,” I said with sympathy, since Victor lost her to old age towards the beginning of our run in the theatre.

He nodded, the corners of his mouth curling downwards, and crossed himself. “Mammy.”

I kissed the older Italian man on cheek and then hooked my arm in Terry’s, my bodyguard home. Ever since my best friend moved back to New York City, he’d been at the theatre every night to walk me the short distance to my apartment. Unnecessary guilt drove him to do it, because he wasn’t around to protect me when I needed him most and he held himself responsible. I knew why he did it and I was flattered that he wanted to see me home safely, but I wasn’t in any danger anymore.

“See you tomorrow, Victor.”

He held the door open for Terry and me to wade through the crowd outside the stage door. A few of the regular supporters of the show asked me to sign their programs for them as I made my way through the barricades. I was always surprised by the recognition as my part in the chorus was so small and my wig masked my appearance very well. I politely signed and took pictures with the few that asked before I found Terry’s arm again as I cleared the small group of people.

Pulling my wool hat over my hair and wrapping my matching scarf around my neck against the frigid air, I thanked my best friend again. “I’m so glad you’re here!”

“Three weeks, rabbit! Three damn weeks and you say it every night.” Terry returned to live in New York, refocusing his career back on musical theatre. After not finding anything in London for two months, he decided the 2010 season for musicals on Broadway would be a better fit for him. I knew he missed dancing as his main form of performance art, and he would be better suited for New York than London.

“Alright, alright, alright… at least I’m not harassing you for being back in New York and shoving you back on a plane to London.”

We turned the corner from 44th Street to cut through Shubert Alley back to my neighborhood, avoiding the teenagers swooning and making a fuss over Will Swenson’s naked torso on the poster for the musical Hair. Trying for subtle, but missing the target by a large margin, Terry asked, “Did you hear from Tom?”

Giving him a sideways look, I tried for withering, but hearing his name turned me to warm pleasing goo. Terry about doubled over with laughter at the mixed expression, and I had to drag him along with me to get him to walk again. “No, I didn’t, not since this morning, you rat.”

In a playful vibe, he pulled my knit hat down over my face. With his best posh British accent, he lilted, “Cheers! You, my beautiful friend, have got a massive crush and I’m so excited.”

Spluttering, I righted my hat and swatted him for being so unmercifully aware of my emotions.
“Damn you, Terry! And fuck you too!”

“So tell me all about it.”

“Every time, Ter. How do you get me every fucking time?” I sighed dramatically, brushing off his chortles and his arrogant beam of pride. “We’re texting, but it’s innocent and silly and completely nonsensical.”

“Is he spouting off his poetry and Oxford degree at you?”

I rolled my eyes, his impatience for the academic crystalline clear. “Sometimes, but I like that. He’s intelligent and he thinks, more than I can say for you.” I flicked my finger and thumped him in the middle of his forehead.

“Why do I hear a ‘but’ in your tone, dearest?”

We fell in step with one another and I used the time to confide in him. “Tom asked that we Skype it this week, instead of the phone.”

“Right… How does Tom plus Skype equal but? Bring it round for me, ladybug.”

“This, this this… this friendship or whatever… it’s, I don’t know… may have run its course. In about three weeks, he moves from London to LA, which, let’s face it, might as well be China…”

“Don’t know where that one is.”

Ignoring his commentary as much as possible, I forged ahead, “And this-this-this schedule-“

“Date! Kitten, you’ve been dating!”

“Whativer it is… it’s probably not going to work anymore. I think this video chat thing is actually a ‘nice talking to you’ and ‘great knowing you’ type sendoff. With Christmas and that Boxing Day thing that they have over there, we may not be able to talk next week. That’s what he told me. Then I start on my performing the lead the next week and he goes Los Angeles. Pragmatically speaking-“

“I don’t even know what that word means, baby girl!”

Despite the seriousness of the conversation, I laughed and snuggled in closer to Terry against the harsh cold wind. “Thinking practically…”

He quickly interrupted with, “Yeah, that. That I don’t do.”

“Hey, ADHD boy, I’m trying to have a serious conversation with you.”

Objecting swiftly, he begged off, “You think you’re having a serious conversation, love bug, but you’re not. This is Tom, super human Tom. I told you before, he’s crazy about you as you are for him and there’s no way he’s breaking up with you.”

“God, Ter… we’re not even dating.”

He scolded me, “Ferret, let me explain something to you. I was there, I was there every Saturday night. Tom would cut his night short to go home and go to sleep. Early. Without fail, every week, he would make sure he was awake enough to talk with you on Sunday mornings. Neither one of you has defined it as dating, but that’s what you were doing.”
“How long can we keep this up?”

“Sweetheart, how is it that you are so confident of yourself in everything else that you do, but when it comes to your love life you drown in self-doubt? You are so fucking kick-ass and then when it’s anything personal you’re cowering in the corner.”

Our steps slowed as I tried to formulate a response, but I couldn’t come up with anything. I was stuck up on something ingrained, a defense mechanism that I’d taught myself so many years ago, to always deny the positive and the negatives that would surely follow. My failed romance with Terry and my pseudo relationship with Scott started out as sweet and naïve, but the chord soured. Terry and I were capable of turning things around, but the hurt had already dug into my subconscious and weakened my self-esteem when it came to anything personal.

In a moment of solemnity that I didn’t often see with Terry, he asked, “Does Tom know about… about everything?”

Silently, I shook my head.

“Maybe if put aside the fear of pity- stick a pin in it for a little while- and tell him everything. Let him tell you what he feels instead of projecting your fears on him.”

“I might not get the chance now if our conversations aren’t going to happen…”

“Stop this! Stop it. You’re spiraling into the hole of denial again. Tom won’t let you down. Well, he will if you don’t talk to him, because he won’t know. It’s up to you now.”

We stopped in front of my apartment building and faced each other. Terry took in my pensively conflicted expression and pulled me back in his arms. “Hey, let’s not worry about your love life. You’ve got enough going on next week. Put all your energy on your first night with your name above the title of the show, the night your star is born. You’re about to take Broadway by the balls like the diva you are.”

I laughed casually, “You do realize that nobody cares about the replacement, right?”

“Hush up, poppet. I care and really I’m the only one who counts for anything.”

I separated from him with another eruption of laughter. “And there it is! My time’s up.” I dug through my bag for my keys and unlocked the front door as Terry watched over me. Over my shoulder, I asked, “When are you moving in with me? You could’ve taken Juan’s room, he’s never here. I know you can’t be happy down in alphabet city.”

“When’s Juan due back from Japan?”

“March, I think. He sends emails vey infrequently.”

“I might take you up on that. If I don’t hear from the Chorus Line people soon, I’ll have to take the Evita tour. I’m hoping the producers for A Chorus Line call before I’m forced to take Evita. I really want to stay here in New York than living out of suitcase.”

I held up my hand, with two fingers wrapped around each other. “Fingers crossed, babe. I need you here.”

“Of course you do. Who wouldn’t need me? Now get inside where it’s warm. I’ll text you when I get in. And no more worries about Tom, he won’t let you down.”
We kissed each other on the cheek and he turned in the direction of the subway. Climbing the creaky stairs to my home, I desperately tried to take Terry’s advice and not worry about Tom. I wanted to be open with him, but impending deadline was on the horizon and I wasn’t prepared.
Chapter 18

I shivered against the cold as I pulled on my Wicked sweatshirt over my two sizes too big Phantom of the Opera t-shirt, and flopped down to wait for Terry for our Christmas Day tradition. We exchanged gifts while sharing a bottle of wine before going to dinner tipsy with any friends around the city, either back in Manhattan as unemployed, on break from their national tours or too far from home to visit family for the day and a half break from Broadway. Our group was a mismatched ragtag team of out of towners or intentional orphans, finding family in each other instead of blood relations.

With an exaggerated yawn and stretch, I picked up last Sunday’s New York Times crossword puzzle. My secret ambition was to complete one in my lifetime without help, or research. I’d been working on defeating the weekly crossword since the age of twenty. My phone rang almost immediately after I sat down. I was already rolling my eyes at Terry for being late. He could keep on a time schedule as well as I could remember names.

“Are you running late already?” I asked with exasperation.

A deep nervous laughter followed by smooth honeyed accented voice greeted, “If I’m expected for tea, Kristiane, I’m afraid I’ll be very much delayed.”

“Tom!”

An earnest laugh trailed after my exclamation. “Happy Christmas, my Wilde one.”

Regaining my composure after being thrown off my ranting, I smiled and sank further into the cushions, the soft spot I had for him weighing my limbs down. “Tom, Merry Christmas. I wasn’t expecting you today.”

“I gathered… Terry?”

I sighed, “Terry. I love him dearly but he knows how to get under my skin.”

“I miss having him around to annoy me,” my friend mused.

“You, Shakespeare? You get annoyed?”

“I reserve that honor for Terry and Terry alone. What are your plans for the holiday?”

“Celebrating my first day off for two months with a very expensive bottle of wine… if Terry ever gets here.”

“Go on without him. You deserve it.”

I went silent for a moment, pondering his statement. Fighting off the darkly awful undertone of those last three words and the echo they had on my psyche, I pushed the unwanted memory away. I wouldn’t let my precious few conversations with Tom colored or tainted with my recent mess. Guilt for my silence sunk in again because every time Tom and I spoke I meant to tell him, and yet I still couldn’t do it.

Changing the subject as smoothly as possible, I asked about his family, his plans and how everything was fitting in with his relocation. Tom opened up about his sisters and his mum, told me about them and how they all got on with Sarah’s new family. I absorbed as much as I could
considering no visuals to accompany all the information. He’d only ever talked about his dad before, and I was encouraged that I was learning more about him.

Before too long and after posing too many questions, he asked, “Do you have some time before Terry crashes through your door?”

“I think so. Knowing him he won’t show here until we’re due at the restaurant with the rest of our friends.”

“Even that’s generous… Can you turn on Skype? For pictures?” With every chat or message we shared, I longed to see him again. Were his eyes really as blue as I remembered? Were his teeth really as straight? Was he as beautiful? As enamored as I was with him and his voice, I mistrusted my memory and my judgment. But I was sure in my current state of mind I would find him to the most handsome man that I ever had the pleasure of seeing in the flesh.

I was processing that we’d progressed from phone calls to video chats since he suggested it the week before. I wasn’t prepared for our scheduled Skype call in two days’ time, let alone an impromptu one. My heart turned a half step and started an erratic rhythm in my chest, accompanied by the pleasing beat of butterfly wings in my stomach. I took a deep breath, and without giving myself time to bow out like the emotionally scarred girl, I turned my computer on and agreed. We both signed in and he initiated the video call.

I connected the call and his well-remembered gorgeous face filled the screen. I couldn’t make out much in the background, but my attention was completely drawn to him. “Tom! Where are your curls?”

He laughed in his silly way with his tongue pushed through his teeth, while combing his hand through his wavy jet black dyed hair. He was still clean shaven, but somehow looked smaller than when I saw him six months ago. “Surprise. Meet Loki.” He gestured awkwardly at his face and then pointed to his hair. “I’ve had to relax the curls a bit and go black, instead of the blond.”

I thought he was stunning no matter what he did to his hair, preferring his blue, blue eyes and sexy voice. “Well, aren’t you pretty?” I tucked strands of my lifeless hair behind my ears nervously, feeling even less confident in my appearance.

His grin split across his face, and he complimented, “Not as pretty as you, my Wilde one.” My hands shot up and tucked those same strands of hair behind my ears again unnecessarily as I tried not to blush, though I felt the burn in my cheeks. I looked down at my keyboard seeking something tangible I could clutch onto and change the subject again, giggling like a schoolgirl with a crush. Giving me an out, he asked, “Are you ready? Ready for your debut next week?”

Recovering gradually, I cleared my throat and nodded, finally able to meet his gaze through the computer again. I was new to this video chatting thing, as I never had any use for it before, but it seemed simple enough. “So very much… I’m excited and nervous and ready and anxious and petrified and everything in between. I really want to do well. This show deserves the best representation. The book and the music are so powerful.”

“Only a few more days.”

A high pitched noise of excitement escaped my throat and an equally surprised chuckle from Tom filled my ears and the screen before me. “I’m sorry.”

“Kristiane, I’d have to check your pulse if you weren’t this enthusiastic. You are practically jumping in your seat. You are on the threshold of a dream, and I think the requisite is a sound like
that at a minimum of once an hour.”

I hugged my knees to my chest, settling back into my absentee roommate’s computer chair. I rested my chin on the shelf that my legs created. “Do you?”

“To be sure… absolutely! Though my noise is far more manly and masculine.”

“Naturally,” I hinted with a smirk.

“Naturally, then I’m required to punch a wall to retain my man card.”

“When do you leave for California?”

“Eighth of January. My first rehearsal and training day is the tenth.”

I knew he was going for at least six months, because he was filming a big budget movie. A tiny twinge of regret pulled at my heart that our careers would keep us apart for so long. I wanted to remain friends, and keep this going whatever it was, but there seemed little reason to. I was under the impression that these Skype sessions were leading to a goodbye of sorts.

Rolling all of that to the back of my mind, I inquired, “And the packing?”

“All sorted,” he announced proudly. “I’m staying with my mum in my old room until I go.”

I gave him a sideways look. “Ooh, how’s that going?”

“Seeing that I’m very nearly an eight year old in a twenty nine year old body, very well. She cooks and cleans after me, even does the washing.”

“How’s that man card?”

He chortled appreciatively. “Under review.”

*

Luckily, the day of my taking the lead in the show landed on a Wednesday, and our last rehearsal was Monday. Because the holidays played with the performance schedule, our normal dark day was moved to the actual holiday, Friday. We had a performance on Monday instead, to keep the full eight performance week.

Terry and I did a ‘girls’ day out on Tuesday to indulge and pamper ourselves, with the entire manicure, pedicure and hair trimmed and styled thing, our once a year routine. My best friend booked it all well in advance so we had a full day of boosting our confidence beyond acceptable limits, decadent and extravagant, and just what I needed.

“So how did things go with Tom this week, princess?”

“I’m not sure. We talked on Friday, as you know…”

“Only interrupted because I wanted to talk to him too.”

“That was not an interruption; that was a full on avalanche. You were in rare form,” I joked easily.

“I believe rare form is my resting face, muppet,” he said with a wink and a nod.

“Touche.” I inhaled a nose full of acetone and nailpolish before picking up the conversation where
we left off. “We talked Friday and Saturday, as usual. Friday was lovely and unexpected, almost perfect, until Hurricane Terry blew in.” He fluttered his lashes at me, beaming with pride and accomplishment. “Saturday, though…”

“What happened?”

“I’m not sure.” With uncertainty, I searched for a way to describe how our conversation went along. “We had another Skype chat, and it’s so good to see him – but something just felt off. I could be imagining it, but he was vague and… almost distancing himself from me. Everything was just about perfect on Friday… then Saturday… Nothing overtly negative or dark… just… I don’t know… off.”

I was trying not to let whatever was developing between Tom and me to influence my routine and my personal inner thoughts. However, he was always there, because I thought of him so often, but if he was moving on from me, I didn’t want to be left devastated again. I wasn’t sure there was enough of me to be put back together if another man shattered my heart.

“My little lamb,” he lightly sympathized. “I’m sure it’s not.”

I looked down at how the woman was progressing on my nails. I loved this part of it, watching the transition from dull to fabulous, but this aching twinge of possibly losing my friendship with Tom was distracting me.

I was limited to a very neutral color, so it couldn’t be seen from the audience. My character was an unassuming orphan, sent to boarding school by a very generous and wealthy benefactor. This mysterious benefactor provided money enough for my character’s education and any and all necessities, but she wasn’t the type to squander it on her nails. As I rarely did so myself, this was a small sacrifice worth making for the theatre Gods and my career, although the striking electric purple had been incredibly attractive.

“Terry, babe, I don’t even know when we’re supposed to talk again. He couldn’t tell me.”

“You’re both going through so much right now with your careers. It’s understandable.” My head sank, and Terry caught sight of it. “Baby bear, Tom… well, he’s still crazy for you. Patience.”

Sighing, I admitted regretfully, “I still haven’t told him”

“I know.”

“I want to tell him before he’s done with me.”

“He’s not done with you,” he assured me in a rush. “But you should tell him.”

A particularly strong whiff of acetone arrested my thoughts for a moment and gave me pause. “The text messages are infrequent too though, babe.”

“Muffin, do I have to remind you that Tom only speaks in Shakespeare? And last time I checked Shakespeare died a bazillion years ago. Very limited resource.”

Despite my misgivings and the small spot of dread in the back of my mind, I laughed out loud with Terry.

* 

My new dressing room, having relocated to the lead room right off the stage, was a sea of flowers,
teddy bears, balloons and well wishes when I arrived at the theatre early evening on Wednesday night for my warm-ups, stretches, hair, makeup and costumes. There were a great number of cards, handwritten notes, and letters from friends and cast members wishing me the best of luck. I was pleased as punch to see my name, Kristiane Taylor, printed neatly in the middle of a star that hung securely at eye level on the door.

The reality of the change in my life made me smile and my heart beat just that little bit faster. To see so many gifts and presents was immensely gratifying as I’d been working so hard, so intensely the past few weeks, I was relieved that my true friends were still behind me.

Two dozen yellow and pink roses sat in a crystalline vase in the middle of my dressing room table before the mirror surrounded by lights, and it made the room glow. A comfy ambiance filled the stark white walls with a contagious cheer. With a small stuffed Piglet from Winnie the Pooh sat against the vase, I knew instantly that the arrangement was sent by Tom. I touched all the different bears and read all the silvery good luck balloons, but gravitated towards that one before reading any of the other letters or messages.

The card read: ‘All the world’s a stage and all the men and women are merely players. They have their exits and entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts.

Kristiane, my Wilde one, this is your time, your spotlight, your first great role of many more to come. Break a leg. I’ll be thinking of you. Your friend, Tom.’

This was a far cry from the broken almost distancing phone conversation we’d had nearly a week ago. I was confused by the mixed signals more than anything else, as our texting remained infrequent too. Suddenly I felt the need to call him to hear his voice, to make him a part of my big night in some small way, if I could get him on the phone.

With vibrating, nervous energy, I nearly dialed my hairdresser instead of Tom and my thumb flipped past him on the first spin through my address book. I glanced at the digital clock, wondering if I actually had time for this phone call. Tom didn’t know to expect my call so he might not be available to answer.

Almost as I let my nerves talk me into hanging up, I heard his smooth cadence, “Kristiane?”

“Tom, I’m-I-I-I… I’m…”

His tone lowered and he asked concernedly, “Are you alright, love?”

I giggled nervously, the sound even higher pitched and shaky than my normal register. “Tom, it’s Wednesday!” I squealed into my hand to muffle the sound. There were very few others in the theatre two hours before curtain, but I was trying to maintain a certain amount of decorum with my cast mates.

He chuckled. “It is, darling, it is Wednesday. Very nearly Thursday for me.”

“That’s right, you’re in the future. How’d I do?”

Laughing at my joke, he assured me, “The reviews are glowing and every audience member is waiting outside to get your autograph… I think I heard something about Spielberg requesting a call from your people.”

“As entertaining as Spielberg is, I was pulling for Jason Robert Brown, Webber, maybe Sondheim.” Sobering a tad, I said sincerely, “Thank you so much for the roses, Shakespeare. They’re beautiful!”
I leaned into the blooms and took a deep whiff of the delicate fragrance of the roses. “Oh, you got them? I’m chuffed. I was concerned that something would’ve gone wrong between here and there.”

“The vase and the Piglet were sitting on dressing room table when I got here.”

Another chuckle rumbled in my ear. “The florist assured me it was a cute idea, considering our connection with A. A. Milne. She also told me that pink and yellow were the correct colors for friendship and luck.”

“How long were you chatting with the florist?”

“About fifteen hours, give or take,” he joked suavely.

I almost whispered, “Thank you.”

“You’re quite welcome. You’ll do fantastically well.”

“There’s so many of them! I’m so touched.”

“Think nothing of it, my Wilde one. Wanted to make sure you noticed them. How are you feeling?”

“Nervous. I’m very close to moving at the speed of light right now.” I shifted in my chair, trying not to jitter out of it.

“That’s quite fast. Make sure you slow down to enjoy yourself tonight, Kristiane. I’ll be thinking of you, with you in spirit.”

“In your sleep?”

“Something like that.”

“I almost wish you could’ve been here, Tom.” Taking a deep audible calming breath, I confessed wistfully, “I wanted to hear your voice before I started getting ready. But mostly I called to thank you for the gorgeous and incredibly thoughtful gifts.”

“My pleasure, Kristiane. Now you’ve got a show to perform.”

We hung up together, and I felt both encouraged and discouraged. There were no promises of chatting tomorrow or Saturday or revising when we would actually speak again. I didn’t understand the confusing signals, hot to cold, warm to chill, tepid to cool. I pushed it to the back of mind to focus on the night ahead of me.

*

As soon as the heels of my character shoes hit the stage, all the nervousness and the weeks of rehearsal disappeared and I become Judy, my character. I zoned out completely and allowed the power of the music and the script and the energy from the audience transport me into this fictional world. The vibrancy and ebullience of the house was electric and palpable, and the two and a half hours that I spent on stage flew by in the blink of an eye.

Before I knew it, I was walking to center stage alone for my curtain call to a theatre full of nearly 1500 people, giving me a standing ovation, applauding, and whistling. I stood down stage in front of the conductor in the pit and looked up into the audience, and it felt surreal. Tears flooded my eyes, I blew a kiss and bowed gracefully. I mouthed silently twice thank you, for these enthusiastic
theatre goers and then bowed with the rest of the company.

After curtain call bows were over and the orchestra was applauded for, the assistant stage manager brought out an embarrassingly huge bouquet for their new leading lady, and a few smaller tokens of appreciation for the other new members of the Daddy Long Legs family. A majority of the people at the performance had no idea that the cast had changed so much, but they loved seeing these gestures from the producers.

As I made my way off stage, after the curtain dropped, there were so many hugs and smiles and slaps on the back that I couldn’t quite get my head back out of the clouds. I’d done it, I’d just become a Broadway leading lady and I was beaming. The sense of accomplishment was nothing short of awesome.

I stripped out of my costume, freshened up a bit in my bathroom, and sat down at my mirror to remove the caked on stage makeup. The backstage phone rang twice, indicating a call from the stage door. “Victor!”

“How’s my favorite leading lady?”

“Wonderful! Did you listen to the show today?”

“I wouldn’t have missed it, Kristie. You sang like an angel! I’m not going to keep you, just wanted to let you know that I let your friends on to the stage. They’re waiting for you.”

“Thanks, Victor. I’ll be right out.”

I finished removing what I could of my makeup without a brillo pad and bleach and pulled my bag together, leaving it prepped to go home when I was ready. I stopped by Victor, handing him some of the chocolate chip cookies Mary from the cast made for me and kissing him on the cheek. “Are there people waiting outside? Has it thinned out any?”

“They’re all waiting for you, honey, but go see your friends.”

“Ten minutes.” I smiled and waved as I turned back for the stage. Most of the lights were turned off, as the crew shuts down as soon as the orchestra is clear. It was always astonishing to me to see how much time and effort went into running the show, but so quickly undone within minutes. The ghost light was on in the center of the stage, and it was mostly quiet in the theatre when I walked in.

Tentatively, I called out, “Ter?”

Stepping from the stage right wing on the other side, the silhouette of a figure stepped out into the glow of the ghost light. The shape wasn’t right to be Terry, and I peered a little closer in the dull ambiance and gasped. My heart paused for three full seconds, then took off at a race, with blood pumping and ringing in my ears. My entire body surged forward with happiness and elation as my eyes and brain finally recognized the person in front of me. “Tom! Oh my God, TOM!”

I raced across the stage and sailed into his arms, both of us embracing eagerly, giggling madly, near breathless with the shock of being reunited. “Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God! Tom! Tom, how did you get here? I can’t believe you’re here! Tom! Oh my God!” Hugging him tightly, I squealed and gushed, the words flowing from my mouth without my thinking about it. “How the hell did you do this?”
I couldn’t believe it, simply couldn’t wrap my head around the fact that Tom was with me and I was holding him. I grasped him steadfastly, determined to understand his presence by how passionately I held him to me. My laughing was just this side of hysterical from jubilation and celebration. My face ached from the massive grin displayed there, full voltage and wattage. I didn’t want to ever let go. “Oh my God! How did you do this?”

I could feel him, one arm anchoring me around my waist, holding me off the floor, his other hand in my hair, keeping me as close as possible. The smell of him was divine, that strong masculine scent that was purely Tom and only Tom. Our brief nights together half a year ago trickled through my consciousness as I concentrated on my body pressed against his and his against mine. I vividly remembered how helpless I thought wishing for the act of holding him, and how hopelessly futile I thought it was, but he was in my arms and I was beyond grateful for the surprise visit.

A deep hum of satisfaction emanated from him, a sound I felt and heard all at once. When he murmured my name into my hair with reverence, my breath was stolen away and I somehow knew that holding me meant a great deal to him. My feet touched the floor once more, but Tom only separated from me a scant few inches, too wrapped up in my presence to break our contact. His thumb found and stroked my cheek in a feather light caress, relearning the feel of my skin, before reacquainting the pad of his finger with my lips.

My hands rested on his firm chest, stuck there like a magnet. I searched his gorgeous and so well missed blue eyes. “How did you do this? How are you here?”

With a glint of mischief and playfulness in his gaze, he smirked, “Very careful planning, a very talented aeroplane pilot and probably about 47 elves.”

“47?”

He nodded with a very childish and irresistible grin, “47. Green ones.”

I shook my head, barely suppressing a giggle by avoiding his mirthful eyes. He was even more than I remembered him being, and I knew in that instant that I was without a shadow of a doubt falling in love with him, and that was exactly what I needed in my life. “What are you doing here, man child? Your family? The holidays?”

“Paroled for good behavior,” he proclaimed proudly with a sense of accomplishment. Reigning in the humor, he caught my eyes again with his and admitted earnestly, “I couldn’t miss my friend’s big break. I’ve been planning this since you told me that you got the job. I… Nobody could keep me away from seeing you.”

“Tom,” sighing with a happy mist wetting my eyes, but blinked it away again. “You don’t know what this means to me.”

He kissed my forehead gently, “I do. You’ve been telling me for months how much friendship means to you… since the day we met. As a friend, I couldn’t let you down, whether you expected it of me or not. Terry didn’t know if he’d be back in time, so I wanted to be in case he couldn’t. He would never forgive himself if he got stuck in England and missed this. I think this meant as much to him as it did to you.”
I pulled him into another deeper affectionate hug. In some ways, he understood my relationship with Terry better than we did, studying our impenetrable bond from the outside. In the past, most men cowered away from that, unable to grasp the concept of undying, unconditional love that existed between a man and a woman without sex, threatened by the huge part of my heart that belonged to Terry and no one else. Tom wasn’t threatened or jealous, and cared for us both together and individually; he just got it.

Meaning every word, emotion coloring my tone, I said, “Thank you. I’m… I- thank you. My God, Tom… how?” I held him as close as I could, and returned the sentiment in kind. “How long are you here for? Are you staying with Terry?”

The professional, consummate triple threat himself could not miss a cue, stepped onto the stage and announced himself in great fashion. “Why have I not interrupted a snog fest?”

Ignoring his blatant call for Tom and I to get physical, I turned and ran at Terry full tilt into his open arms, nearly screaming myself hoarse in my excitement and giggling the entire way. I kissed him loudly on the lips before holding him with almost as much fervor as I’d held Tom. “That’s my girl! You fucking nailed it tonight, on fire. You are one fierce diva, flower. One fierce diva.”

I unhooked my legs from around him as he put me back on my feet on the stage. “You have to say that, otherwise I’d kick your ass, but I’ll take it.”

Our hands clasped together, drawn together like our magnetic bond and we looked out into the empty theatre. Tom gently took my other hand and held it tenderly in his. There was another presence in the theatre with the three of us, an incredible aura of tranquility and we all felt it. A respect and admiration for the space, for each other and for the craft that we were each chasing, and I was speechless with it for a minute.

After our moment with the spirit of the theatre, I turned to Terry, “How the fuck did you keep this one a secret?” I asked, jerking my head in Tom’s general direction.

A mocking voice said behind me, “Bribery.”

Terry’s face took on a wild heated indignation like an on switch. “That was a nasty thing you did, and I’m still planning revenge.”

I cough-laughed desperately trying to maintain a straight face, but Terry’s flare for the dramatics made that an impossible feat. “Let me guess… Bernadette Peters collection?”

Tom announced proudly, “Patti Lupone, which included all the CDs she appears on for duets.”

Terry broke in with, “Lest we forget Alice Ripley! The man is made of pure evil.”

Coiling my arms around Terry’s waist, I kissed his cheek lovingly. “Thank you for the wonderful present, the surprise was… babe, I’m in awe!”

It was an admission full of sincerity with an added appeal of mollifying his ire by a few degrees. I then moved back into the circle of Tom’s arms, laying my ear along his chest. He kissed the top of my head, and Terry might have flapped his arms with excitement.

Beaming with pride at bringing his best friends together again, Terry offered in his half ask, half stated way, “Celebration at Marlowe’s. First two rounds are on me. Maybe I can get Zoey to let us use the stage. I have reinforcements outside.”

I didn’t release my hold on Tom, nor did he on me and he felt wonderfully amazing to be near
again. From my tucked position under Tom’s chin, I asked, “Who else did you bring tonight?”

My best friend scoffed, “Anyone and everyone. Debbie, Eli and Leah saw the show. James, Matt and at least Sandy are going to meet us in…” he glanced at his iPhone casually. “Um, about twenty minutes at Marlowe’s for a drink. How are you feeling, beautiful? Drinks?”

Tom rubbed my back affectionately, and I was momentarily caught off guard, falling into a satisfied trance. I nodded enthusiastically, “But not too late. I have a show tomorrow.”

Terry nodded. “Of course. I’ll go round everyone up and meet us there. Tom will see you there safely.”

The serious tone that pointed to the true meaning beyond Terry’s words made Tom take notice and held me that much tighter.

Tom didn’t let go until we heard Terry say his overly rambunctious farewells to Victor complete with back slapping and made the older gentleman promise to look out for me.

My companion looked direly concerned with the repeated concern for my safety. “Kristie, why does Terry think you require security or human bodyguards?”

I sighed with a shake of my head. “He’s being overly protective.”

Pushing his brows together, taking up a more troubled expression, he asserted, “I know his disposition for exaggeration, but it’s always based in some truth. What’s going on?”

I looked down at my feet, tracing over a mark on the surface of the stage for the location of a desk in act two. How much could I tell him without standing there for hours? He had to know, he deserved to know, and I knew I could trust him. An amaretto sour prepared by Zoey herself was calling my name as liquid courage to back me up.

“We need to talk, but not here. At Marlowe’s. Let me grab my bag and coat. We’ll go.”

He nodded once, following me to Victor’s station, so I could slip back upstairs to get my things. Victor and Tom were carrying on a friendly conversation which they summed up and shook hands.

The stage door man opened the door for us to exit the building, assuring me that Gregg, theatre security, was just outside the gate. I led the way for Tom, who followed closely behind me with his hand along the small of my back through the short alley way to the gate to the sidewalk.

A small smattering of applause greeted me when I opened the black gate. I felt my eyebrows shoot up my forehead as my face brightened with a genuine smile. A collection of audience members were lined along a waist-high barricade to get my autograph. I was the last cast member to leave the theatre this night with having Tom and Terry backstage with me, so I knew this group was waiting for me specifically.

Tom inconspicuously stole away to the end of the line to patiently wait for me. Silent Gregg handed me a sharpie to sign playbills with and hovered at my shoulder as he did for the cast that stopped to sign autographs.

Playbill after playbill, picture after picture, I thanked every person that complimented my performance or said they’d seen me in another show or promised to see the show again. The entire experience was intensely flattering and I was over the moon with happiness, from a satisfying performance, Tom’s visit, and a very enthusiastic audience. With the sharpie returned to Gregg and a wink between us, I linked my arm with Tom’s and walked in the direction of the bar, one block
over and one block up from the theatre.

Over the next hour, I hugged, kissed and drank with my friends at the party in my honor, introducing Tom to everyone. We stayed very close, or gravitated back to each other if we got too far from each other while engaging in conversations with my other friends. The atmosphere of Marlowe’s was a home away from home for me and my theatre friends, with show posters along the walls, the comedy-tragedy masked embossed on the plates and glasses, the patrons that would burst into song with no warning, and the comfortable, informal tables and chairs.

My friends and I spent more nights huddled in Marlowe’s than our own apartments, sharing successes and failures, ups and downs, good times and bad, and everything in between. A neutral, common ground for all of us to feel comfortable and accepted steps away from the theatre district was our chosen place outside of auditions and classes. Hours were spent at the tables, swallowing drink after drink as we argued, debated and congratulated each other.

After greeting all my friends and thanking them for coming, Tom and I found a quiet table in the back corner to chat privately.

I began, “There’s so much to tell you, and I’m ashamed that it’s taken me this long to tell you any of it, Tom.” I finished my second drink and stared at the empty tumbler glass for the right place to start and to try to calm my racing heart. My statement was a way of organizing my thoughts, prioritizing what needed to be said first.

“Don’t feel pressurized to tell anything.”

“But you should know. You’ve come all this way.”

Tom reached across the table and caressed my arm briefly. “Kristiane, I made this journey with absolutely no agenda. You asked me to take this slowly, whatever this is,” he gestured with his finger between us. “Wherever it leads. I want to honor that, respect your boundaries, your limits, because I want you in my life in whatever capacity that means.” Holding up his hands with his palms facing me in a display of sincerity and openness, he said, “I have no ulterior motives.”

I stole a look at his eyes for proof of his veracity, not that I thought him untrue, but more for the strength and confidence that always fled me when I needed it. With a deep calming breath, I said, “Terry’s been playing big brother… because of what happened with Scott.”

Tom visibly flinched with the mere mention of the other man that had been a big part of my life. “I thought you weren’t involved with him anymore.”

“Oh, I’m not. He’s out of the picture completely. I don’t think I’ll ever see or hear from him ever again, but that freedom didn’t come without a price.”

“Are you ready to tell me?”

“I don’t think I ever will be, but I want to be free of it. I think the only way to be free of it is to put it into words. Only Terry knows everything, but I couldn’t confess it to anyone else.”

Tentatively, Tom promised, “You can trust me.”

“I do, Tom, I do, but I’m not good at trusting myself. My defense mechanism from a broken heart was always to lie to myself. It’s difficult to break that pattern. Telling you about Terry and me and the effect that had on me was not only being honest with you, but with myself too.”

“I feel as though I should thank you.”
I shook my head, following a line of moisture along the side of the glass with my eyes. “No, if anything, I should thank you. It’s because I can trust you. I have another person to confide in. I’ve only had Terry.”

From my peripheral, I saw Tom nod to encourage me to continue on.

“Those last days in London, being with you, spending time with you… shit!” I stopped myself abruptly for skirting the issue. I scrubbed my hand over my face, fighting the internal panic that was rising like a tidal wave, swelling and drowning me. I blurted in fast succession before I could let the terror consume me, “Tom, I like you. I like you very much.”

He reached across the table again and squeezed my fingers, feeling the tremble of nerves in them. He offered, “I feel the same way about you.”

I concentrated on breathing for a few silent moments, pushing through the terror, finding some comfort that I’d said it. “When I got back, I knew that I had to break things off with Scott. I didn’t want to do it for you. I wanted it to be for me. That’s why I didn’t talk to you when I got back. To be fair to both of us – no, to be fair to for everyone involved, I took that time.”

Tom remained silent, his thumb swiping over the back of my hand smoothly. Daring another look into his eyes, I had his full attention, listening to every word and allowing me to talk.

As fantastically loyal and devoted as Terry was to me, he craved being the center of attention. He also loved reminding me of how much he adored me, and didn’t always have the patience to let me talk it all out. Terry was excellent at talking me up, but sometimes I needed to wallow. My best friend was always there for me and I could always turn to him, but he wasn’t the perfect solution. I didn’t expect him to be; there were issues and emotions that he wasn’t prepared to listen.

“When I got home, there was a break up post-it note on my apartment door. Scott couldn’t handle that I took this dream vacation without him, or that I could afford to do it on my own, or that I was visiting another man – I’m not sure the why and it doesn’t matter anymore. But he broke things off with me while I was with you and Terry.”

The sense of betrayal and the visual of the black writing upon the square yellow piece of paper with the strip of adhesive on the back flashed through my mind. That note spelled the end of a friendship and there was a bitter taste in my mouth for it. I’d hung on too long, and I was left reeling from it.

Through clenched teeth, I recited, “The post-it simply stated: ‘Kristie, we’re over. How dare you. – Scott. PS, you are out of cookies.’ My hands fist ed in knots upon the tabletop as I relived the horror and the embarrassment of that moment. The feeling of helplessness of wanting to scream and shout and rail on the person that left me so… callously when I had stood by his side, it was enormous. My New York City bad girl side itched to be unleashed, yet the personal attack on me kept me quiet, as though I’d failed in some way.

“Cowardly bastard,” Tom interjected quietly.

His words, his voice, his presence - Tom yanked me out of the poor mood threatening to overshadow my evening. To lighten the atmosphere between us, I said, “The bastard ate all my cookies!”

Tom smiled, but it didn’t quite meet his eyes. “I know how passionate you are about your cookies.”
“Food, if you please, Shakespeare.” Brushing off the fingers of darkness as much as possible, I forged on, “So I got out of the hard part… a slight reprieve, but it hurt like a bitch. I couldn’t believe that a friend, someone I spent so much time with during the good times and whom I stood beside in the worst of it… reduced me to a fucking post-it note. A post-it note! Still absolutely enrages me. Three years and I get a post-it note!”

Sensing my rant, Tom said, “From what I understand, maybe that’s all he could spare as an expense.”

The unexpected joke landed perfectly and I burst into a hysterical peal of laughter. I covered my mouth with my hands to contain the noises of mirth, but it wasn’t worth the effort.

Tom was shaking his head, fighting back his own laugh as his cheeks blushed. He showed equal amounts of pride and shame for the joke at someone else’s expense. He clearly didn’t mean it maliciously, only lightening the ambiance between us. Chuckling, he apologized, “Forgive me. That was crass.”

Through my giggling, I managed, “The fucker ate my cookies!”

And then we both erupted into more laughs, a fit that took several minutes for us both to recover.

After our laughs crested and trailed off, I looked closely at Tom’s face. I couldn’t help it. He was gorgeous, but that wasn’t what held my attention. He wasn’t judging me. In my head, I was reluctant to tell anyone what happened between Scott and me for fear that they would question what would prompt a man to break up with someone in that way, somehow it would be a reflection on me. Tom wasn’t looking at me accusingly, searching for what was wrong with me or pitying me for earning such an impersonal Dear Kristie letter of sorts.

Sobering, Tom said, “But this can’t be the reason Terry feels you need a human shield…”

“No, you’re right. It’s not. As final as that succinct post-it was, that wasn’t the last I heard or saw of Scott unfortunately.”
Chapter 20

“What happened?” Tom asked gravely, sitting forward in his seat.

Until then, I hadn’t noticed that he’d steadily been moving closer and closer to me, not that I minded. His chair had swiveled, so that he could face me directly, our legs within grazing distance. He sat with his knees apart, elbows planted on top, his hands reaching for me or touching mine at random.

Weakly, trying for another joke, I said, “Scott came back… looking for more cookies.” I shrugged, but neither one of us smiled.

Tom was reading my demeanor and how tense I got discussing it, and he knew it was more serious than I let on. He knew the severity of Scott’s verbal insults and the grim truth of his berating me. I didn’t need to remind him of that, because I’m sure that Terry filled in the gaps as soon as I’d left London. What Tom didn’t know was how closely it tied to him.

Recalling and drudging up the details of the encounter with Scott wasn’t pleasant or easy, but I needed to cleanse it from my everyday, the constant reliving of it in my head. “It was a day or two after I returned from London. I was back to work, but my internal clock was still set to London time and my emotions were all over the place. I missed Terry, I missed you, in some ways, I missed Scott’s friendship, I was relieved to be home, yet there were holes everywhere.”

“Holes?”

“Gaps… There was no closure between you and me, nothing for me to hold on to. I didn’t know if we would ever be friends again after the way we - well I - left things. I tried so hard to get back to the Globe to see you once more…” my speech faded away as Tom wrapped his hand around mine and interlaced fingers.

“I’m here, Kristie,” assuring me softly, Tom comforted. “I know you tried.”

“I was upset that we -” I shook my head and left it there, moving the story along as best I could. “With the post-it incident, that felt unfinished as well. I didn’t get a say in the ‘how dare I’ statement. I couldn’t defend myself with Scott. I couldn’t speak with Terry – at least not right away - because of the time difference and our schedules, I had gaps.”

Tom’s eyes never left my face, and mine never left our clasped hands in my lap. In his silent way, he was offering up a safety net for me. He provided a sympathetic and understanding ear, and I felt that I could lean on him if I needed a shoulder to cry on, though I was reliving rage more than heartache.

“I didn’t know how to patch any of it, but when Scott showed up, all that went out the flipping window. He still had the key to my place, and he let himself in. I think he suddenly realized that without a girlfriend, he no longer had access to female companionship, politely speaking.

“I could smell the cheap beer on his breath before he got anywhere near me. He didn’t drink a lot on the best days, and he just became even more belligerent and angry. We exchanged some heated words. He accused me of fucking around with Terry while I was with him… all nonsense really.”

“Putting you down to make himself feel better?”

Nodding solemnly, I added, “I wasn’t very complimentary towards him either. In my exhaustion,
he awakened my livid streak and before I knew it, we were involved in a screaming match. I reminded him that he broke up with me, and in doing so he gave up all rights to take me to bed. In my temper, I might have insulted his, um - skill in the bedroom. This may be a little TMI for you, but we weren’t compatible there either. Since his depression and mounting failures, he wasn’t able to get it up for months. The alcohol seemed to fire up his libido, though I didn’t give him the opportunity to rise to the occasion… But who knows? Maybe his problem was really me too.”

“I’m sure it’s not.” There was a deeper meaning interwoven in his phrasing. The hint lit a hope in me that maybe he wanted to do what Scott could not.

Ignoring the innuendo, I continued, “Really fucks with a girl’s sexual confidence when she’s faced with another man that she’s unable to provoke to arousal, let alone orgasm.”

“Kristiane,” he stated, shifting forward in his seat. “That’s not a reflection on you, in either instance. Terry experimented, I think we all have at one time or another, and you can’t fault him for that. I understand that you were hurt by it, but he also hurt himself. He wanted to be the man for you.”

Yelling across the expanse of the bar, Terry screamed drunkenly, “Hey, lovers, do you need another drink?” The slurring was very pronounced for the plurals that Terry ended up hissing like a snake. This only served to make all of us laugh.

Tom and I looked at each other, then over to Terry, and shook our heads in unison, turning down another drink. We were too involved in our conversation to detract from it with the addition of alcohol.

“Of course, I don’t know your entire history with Scott, but he doesn’t seem a bloke to be sharing your bed with,” stated Tom logically.

I nodded, acknowledging his statement, “You’re right, I know that. It’s difficult to justify that half the men I’ve been with intimately like that flaked on me, and one of those on a regular basis.”

Pragmatically, Tom suggested, “You haven’t found the right man to love you the way you deserve.” The insinuation was almost as clear as if he’d offered himself to me. Our eyes locked together, unwavering, the truer meaning distinct and significant. Desire snapped between us, the intensity jumping my pulse up a notch and my body temperature increasing a fraction. “Maybe a bit more selection is the answer,” tested Tom softly.

“I’m afraid that my failed sex life actually wasn’t the point of the conversation, or what I meant to bring up. Scott was summarily very unhappy that I threw his lack of – well, you get the idea – in his face. He was outraged that I’d mentioned it, and in his drunken state, looked to prove to me otherwise.”

Tom furrowed his brow and echoed his question from St. Paul’s Cathedral, “Did he hurt you?”

I nodded just once, a small tilt of my head and the impact was immediate on Tom.

He sucked in a deep pull of air, his abdomen contracted and he squeezed his eyes shut briefly, his mouth curling into a grimace. Without a word, he led my hand to his lips and landed a feather light kiss on the back of it, holding it as though I was fragile porcelain. The tenderness was almost expected, but my body response was nothing I ever experienced.

I inhaled through my nose, and tears burned behind my eyes. I blinked at him once, twice, working out whether he could be for real or not. I knew it wasn’t sympathy or pity he was showing me,
Tom looked confused. “He left?”

I nodded subtly again. “It wasn’t nearly as hellish as it could’ve been. He could’ve hurt me more severely, or raped me, left me bleeding or dying, instead he left. He knocked the wind out of me, burned and bruised my arm, and left my elbow aching, but overall, I’m okay. At the time, shaken, sure but more shocked by the deterioration of our relationship and how quickly it soured. It was the loss of the friendship that hurt most of all, physical injuries heal, but emotional ones stick around a lot longer.”

Tom spoke lowly, “If you allow them to…”

Sighing, I shook my head. “Tom, I don’t particularly want to be in pain, I don’t choose that.”

“Please know that I’m not choosing a fight with you, Kristie, just merely an observation, if you’ll allow it. You’ve admitted yourself that you bury what you view as your failures, even when they’re not. But you bury, rather than cope and heal from it.”

I looked up at him again, frankly surprised that he listened so well. He retained everything and was an observant outsider, freely giving advice when I hid behind my denial. “I’m working on that.”

Tom grasped me hand with a little more urgency and asked, “Is there a chance of Scott coming back? Has anything more happened?”

“No, he’s gone. I suppose there’s always a chance that he’ll come back, but I don’t think it’s very likely. He called the day after the incident, and apologized. He sounded embarrassed by his behavior and actually promised not to see me again. The last I heard, he moved to Virginia, with his brother and is painting houses or something now. I know his brother Robert lived there and had some sort of contracting business or something, so the information seemed legitimate.”

“Terry’s acting on the small chance that he might return and finish what he started?”

I nodded slowly. “Terry’s… Terry only wants what’s best for me. I know that, but I suspect he feels guilty for not being here for me. The confrontation with Scott happened during the day before a performance, and if Terry were here, we probably would’ve been together and Scott couldn’t have attacked me.”

“That’s a lot maybes.”

“Terry,” I said with a shrug. I sat forward in my chair closing the small gap between Tom and me, so we were knee to knee. I sought his gaze, and locked my blue eyes on his. I reached up and touched his wavy black hair, missing his blond curls, and appreciating the new look at the same time. His hair was still soft and I muffled the want to comb my fingers through it.

Instead, I surprised myself and confessed, “I’ve been wanting to tell you this since we started talking again. I was afraid that you’d pity me and all that happened. I thought that all this would reflect badly on me, and you wouldn’t be attracted to me anymore. I really like you, Tom, and I
didn’t want to risk that.”

My friend leaned across the tiny gap between us and kissed my cheek longingly, similar to that night in front of my hotel in London when I thought the kiss was misplaced. “You’re still the prettiest girl, Kristie. I’m as attracted to you as I was six months ago.”

I looked down at both of my hands in his, wondering how we’d gotten so close so quickly. “When I returned from London, I was a mess. I left you and Terry behind, and I thought my heart would shatter without either one of you.”

Tom let go of my hands to cup my face in his. He leaned into me once more and kissed my lips gently, affectionately. It was soft and sweet and very brief. “You’re an amazing woman, my Wilde one, even more so than last we met.”

I could sense the hesitation in his kiss, he was trying to remain the gentleman that he promised he was, the man that came to visit with no agenda than to be a friend. We both embraced that we liked each other, but there wasn’t much that could happen beyond our friendship.

With Tom going to California for the next six months and with me tied to New York for the next year, there wasn’t much of a future for us. So easy to forget about the long distance when we were together and that familiar pull stronger than ever, I found myself wanting to forget. I wanted to feel his arms around me. I wanted to feel his lips on mine, like we had in London, away from reality.

With a confidence I never possessed before, I said, “Tom, kiss me.”

The man didn’t hesitate, but lowered his lips to mine and captured them in a heated kiss. All the time spent apart, all the months we didn’t speak, all the miles that were usually between us melted away as we gave in to the enormous attraction. His lips were firmly soft as they caressed mine, evoking all I felt for him and reflecting it into the movement against each other.

All the sounds of the bar faded into nothing, the noises of the city right outside the door faded into nothing, and we were the only two people that mattered. I parted my lips inviting him into a deeper meld, and Tom was all too eager to comply. He pulled me closer, tipping my head back, and his tongue touched mine. I could taste his Guinness and my Amaretto and we were delicious together.

When we pulled apart again, we were both breathless. Our rushed breath mixed and mingled together along our parted lips as we pressed our foreheads together. “Kristiane,” Tom huffed, digging his hands into my hair, holding me to him. “I can’t promise you anything.”

“I know.”

“Please know that I came here for you and your show as a friend. I wanted to be here for that.”

“I know.”

“What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think I can stop kissing you.” The admission fell out of my mouth before I could stop the flow. I’d never so freely confessed my wants and desires.

Tom smashed his lips on mine again, and stole all conscious thought from me. The passion between us drew us into a deep kiss. I combed my fingers through his hair as I’d been itching to do and melted against him, crushing him to me. We didn’t stop again until we were out of breath.

We separated again and looked into each other’s eyes. He said with earnestness and sincerity, “We
should probably talk about this.”

I agreed, “We probably should, but I think I’m all talked out for tonight.”

After catching our breath some, my heartbeat calming back to a resting speed, and the butterflies in my belly eased off some, I asked, “Will you walk me home?”

“Yes, of course.”

I found Terry at the bar, gave him a huge hug and kiss. “Thank you for this, thank you for today. You gave me the best opening I could’ve ever had.”

“Anything for you, kitten. Anything for you,” his speech still slurred from the indulgence in alcohol. He’d be cranky and hung over tomorrow, swearing off beer, no doubt.

I waved over my shoulder behind me, indicating our mutual friend. “Tom’s going to walk me home.”

Terry beamed and pulled me back into his arms. Confiding in me, Terry echoed his words from London, “Give him hell – for me. You go get your man, baby girl.”

I rolled my eyes dramatically. “I’m not going to sleep with him, Ter.”

Tom and I ducked out after saying goodbye to those of my friends that were hanging about, drinking with Terry. Along the short walk from Marlowe’s to my apartment, I asked about his visit to New York City and what he was looking to do. I couldn’t ignore the irony of how our roles were no reversed this time around.

“If you have time, Kristie, I’d like to spend some time with both you and Terry. I wouldn’t mind doing the New York City thing, like you did the London thing with me.”

“Terry’s a terrible tour guide.”

Chuckling, he said, “You’re right absolutely.”

Tom rattled off some of the sights he was interested in, having never been to New York before. I agreed to be a part of whatever he wanted to see, as long as I didn’t have a show.

When we arrived at my apartment building, we were both reluctant to part. I could feel the desire to extend and enjoy as much time as we could eke out of his vacation. Surprising myself, I asked, “Tom, will you stay?”
“I want to stay – you have no idea how much I want to stay,” Tom confessed seriously, running a hand over his hair. From his expression, he was taking all I’d told him to heart and understood that I wasn’t offering him sex. He stood rigidly before me, the desire to hold me against him evident in the reserved stance. His fist balled and relaxed in even intervals, itching to touch me, to draw me in. The hard straight line of his mouth displayed his struggling self-control as the tactile man and the one that was showing patience and reserve. With a great inhale, he admitted honestly, “I don’t think I can trust myself with you.”

My heart leapt in my chest, galloping a steady clip at his admission. I asked him to stay with every hope that he would agree. I would be devastated if he turned me down, whether it be rejection, postponement, or otherwise. I didn’t think I could handle him walking away from me again, the memory of our last afternoon together flashing through my head and how painful that had been, crying against Terry’s chest. Staring down at my hands, visibly trembling from laying my pride on the line, facing my fear of speaking my deepest desires, I spoke softly, “I can’t watch you walk away again.”

I let the sound of my voice and his frustration hang in the crisp winter air. His profession of taciturn yearning for me took the visual form of mist from his mouth into the frigid weather. As quickly as it appeared, it faded again, Tom keeping his gentleman persona. He closed his eyes momentarily, concentrating on his denial and landing it just right so it didn’t sting. “I don’t want to complicate your life and leave again in a week’s time.”

I stepped into him, taking his flexing fingers in mine, looking up into his face. “I trust you, Tom. I want to spend every possible minute with you, as friends, until we go our separate ways. I’m- I know- we’re on borrowed time, I understand that.”

The conflict played over his face, torn between the decent man and the sexual being. There was no masking the want he had for me, his sapphire eyes drinking in my visage, memorizing the shade of my lips, the length of my nose, how my hair hung. Before I could blink, he pulled me into another passionate kiss, and the inkling to stop him abandoned me for parts unknown.

When he broke the kiss again, pulling away reluctantly, he agreed, “I’ll stay.” With a rueful expression and smiling lopsidedly, he shrugged, “Had to get that out of my system before we get on the other side of that door. I’m going to try to refrain from kissing you again…”

Sliding my key into the lock, my mind whispered, if the rule applied that he wouldn’t kiss me inside my apartment, we would be spending huge amounts of time on the sidewalk in the cold. I smiled inwardly that it was fitting that it was winter and would substitute well for cold showers.

As I took on my next obstacle of texting Terry to not expect Tom back at the bar after walking me home, Tom was getting acquainted with the layout of my apartment and the appalling lack of square footage. He couldn’t quite get over that in three strides he got from wall to wall. I shared a two bedroom with a mostly absent dancer named Juan who spent maybe a total of two months within the walls all told. The entry door opened into the small living room/dining room combo, lighted by two windows. The bathroom and kitchen was along the right wall and the bedroom doors on the left. It was small, but I thought of it as cozy… and home!

Convincing Terry that I was not having hot animal sex with Tom was proving to be another major feat. ‘Kristie Taylor: Babe, Tom’s staying here for the night. And before you go flying off into some teenage boy masturbatory flailing, I repeat I’m not sleeping with him. – K’
“Where’s your roommate?” asked Tom, looking over one of the musical theatre posters wallpapering every inch of available empty wall.

I flopped down on the couch, phone in hand, and answered, “This week, I think he’s in Singapore.” My phone vibrated with Terry’s response: ‘Terry Beck: dfkjaoeioregksd;ieimfkd’ Fantastic, I rated a keyboard smash, and clearly he hadn’t read the entire text.

“I exchange emails with Juan about once a week. I probably spend more time talking to him through the computer than he spends in this place. I can’t really complain, he pays the rent on time,” I told my friend as he inched along the overburdened CD rack.

Another text from Terry, having collected himself: ‘Terry Beck: Girl, I want details!’

Quickly followed by: ‘Terry Beck: ‘AND PICTURES!’

‘Kristie Taylor: I might have a ruler around here… - K’

I think I heard him scream at Marlowe’s from four blocks away, followed by another keyboard smash text.

While I was swapping ridiculous texts with my delusional best friend, Tom asked, “And your relationship with him?”

“Co-worker. My Broadway debut, my first professional job in Manhattan was Grease, replacement chorus member. He was already in the cast, dance captain. He was looking for a roommate and I was looking for an address, perfect timing.”

“Do you get along?”

I sent another text to Terry, unable to let him believe that I was falling into bed with his best friend: ‘Kristie Taylor: What is it about I’m not sleeping with him confuses you? – K’


Throwing my phone aside, ignoring Terry’s question, I turned my full attention back to Tom. “Sure. We go drinking when he’s in town, during his breaks in touring. Not often. He likes having a Manhattan address, but prefers filling his passport with different stamps from every country on the map, and even some that aren’t. He’s a lot like Terry, flamboyant, outrageous, but in a more professional way.”

Tom finally halted his mapping of the floor plan with his feet and scanning my humble surroundings, taking a seat beside me on the couch. He took my hand in his threading my fingers with mine. “This isn’t what I pictured when spent those mornings on the phone.”

I smoothly quipped, “Nights.” I rested my head on shoulder, pulling my knees up and tucking my feet underneath me. I settled against him, enjoying his presence, his smell, his warmth – him.

“What did you picture?”

Chuckling, he said, “Wonderland. Bright colors, mythical creatures that only you can communicate with, rainbows, pots of gold, and a room full of books, floor to ceiling.”

“Left all the rainbows and creatures at Terry’s. But my bedroom has a lot of books.”

“The musicals wallpaper suits you well.” We fell comfortably into silence, a calm curling around us, the late hour finally registering after all the early excitement.
Tom smiled and hummed audibly after a few minutes. “In the mania for tonight, I never got the chance to tell you how beautiful you were on stage. I really enjoyed your performance, absolutely privileged. Your talent never ceases to amaze me.”

“Tom, thank you. Your being here- made it perfect, for me.”

“Your star is certainly on the rise, Kristiane.”

Receiving praise from him, having experienced his talent, I felt truly rewarded for all the hard work I’d sunk into getting to where I was, and all I’d accomplished. A peer, one that I respected so highly, recognized that I had an ounce of talent – and it was profound. The man I cared for so strongly complimented my performance was extraordinary. Having the peer and the man as one and the same, incomprehensible and I was struck speechless once more.

The events of my night, in mere hours, occurred to me suddenly. The gravity of being alone with Tom hit me like a ton of bricks, brisk, unexpected and hard. A career dream happened. My breath caught as I realized that two things I wanted so much took place in one incredible streak of good luck. I wanted to banish my recent string of bad luck, and I felt beyond blessed.

Tom interpreted my silence as apprehension instead of appreciation. Offering softly, he said, “I can go if it’ll help you relax. I can still meet up with Terry.”

My thud in protest, I didn’t want to be without him, now that he was with me. “No, please stay.” Unfolding myself from my curled position, I got to my feet, indicating that he should follow with a slight squeeze of his hand. His bright eyes followed me first, and then the rest of him as I led him to my bedroom.

The tension was nearly unbearable, the wanting each other but refraining to avoid being hurt. With no words spoken between us, we got into my bed and fell asleep in each other’s arms.

* 

The next morning, while dressing in the bathroom, Tom answered Terry’s knock on my apartment door. I was getting ready to spend what I had of a day with both of them, and trying to control my giddiness. My two most favorite people in the world, and I had them all to myself for part of an afternoon.

I heard Terry immediately launched into a litany of his complaints. “Thomas, I am not your valet. Honey, you know I don’t mind you shacking up with my best friend…”

I rolled my eyes, shook my head and smiled at my reflection, suppressing a giggle at the unmistakable indignation. I tuned out the rest of his rant to finish slipping on my favorite pair of comfortable jeans, the ones that hugged my hips well, paired with my Jekyll and Hyde hoodie before brushing on eye shadow and applying mascara. I kept my makeup minimalist since I wore so much during the show, and my skin hated it.

With the soundtrack of Terry’s tirade in the other droning in my ear like white noise, I took a deep breath as I combed my hair up into a messy ponytail, another provision for my job. The butterflies, the flutter that Tom’s presence created, were back, after spending the night sleeping in his arms. It was a restful sleep against his chest his strong arms cuddling me close. We were tensely cozy, completely dressed, keeping our attraction towards each other under emotional lock and key with the occasional stolen kiss. Neither one of us wanted to complicate our friendship only to break each other’s hearts in the end. We knew that we couldn’t date considering the time and distance that our careers fostered.
I overheard, “Terry,” Tom acquiesced in his gentle manner. “Thank you for my bag.” He scoffed self-deprecatingly, “I’m not sure I can explain blowing you off for Kristiane.”

“Oh, I understand, you beast! Believe me, I get it!”

“It’s not what you think.”

“It better be what I think it is, the only explanation for blowing me off that I’ll accept. If you’re not sticking it to that girl, I’m chucking your luggage, the bag I dragged all the way here from Harlem, in the Hudson.”

“Dragged, all the way, on the underground?”

“Hush you. Don’t think I won’t make you swim to get your belongings. You left me without Alice Ripley for three months.”

Tom stumbled and stammered through an explanation of staying with me for the rest of his time in New York, especially after a mostly innocent night. He and I both wanted to spend every available moment with each other. I froze in my morning preparation to listen to his voice, eager to hear his explanation for our relationship, the uncomplicated complication. I felt like a high school girl wondering if her crush liked her as much as she liked him.

To save Tom from Terry’s wrath and his grasping at straws to define where we were at, I burst out of the bathroom, and announced airly, feigning some surprise, “Babe!”

“Cupcake!”

Tom ducked into the bathroom to take a quick shower and change into his own clothes while Terry and I decided where to go for breakfast until I had to get to the theatre.

* *

New Year’s Eve in New York City is a unique and special holiday all its own, the calm before the storm until around five or six early evening, until the melee hits. The gale force screams and whistles of the crowd in Time’s Square begin then and continue on through and well through midnight. Around two in the morning the storm has passed, but still lingers, until the mayhem eases off and the calm slowly descends again until late morning New Year’s Day.

Since there are so few people or tourists searching out culture on either of these days with the excitement of a fresh start, the Broadway community adjusts to public demand. I had a three o’clock matinee performance on New Year’s Eve, and severely cut into my time to spend with Terry and Tom during the day, but left my evening open to celebrate and enjoy the party at Marlowe’s with the rest of the theatre folk. With no show the following day, I could be normal Kristie, shed the cloak of moderation and let my hair down a bit.

Terry and Tom walked me to the theatre at half past one to give me enough time to warm-up, physically and vocally, and get ready for places before they headed off to lunch without me. Both my men surprised me with stating that they were coming to the performance again. We stopped off by Victor to let him know that he should let them both in after the show to meet me on stage.

Terry pulled me into a huge hug. “Break legs, muffin. I’ll be cheering you on the loudest. Love you, honey.”

I giggled with him, “Love you, babe.”
With a kiss on the cheek, Terry passed me off to Tom. Tom and I hugged and he placed a kiss on my other cheek. Our eyes met as we pulled away, and there was another moment. I couldn’t define the pull between us or what happened when our eyes locked on each other, but it was electric, intangible warmth. We were connected.

* 

Terry pulled me aside to a corner in Marlowe’s away from our friends, away from Tom for a pow-wow, I could tell by the look of determination in his big brown eyes and the furrow on his forehead, his nostrils flared. He was about to demand answers, and he wasn’t going to put up with any bullshit.

“My darling baby girl, excuse me, but what the fuck are you doing?”

I stared him down hard, immediately taking the defensive, my back up. “What the hell, babe? I was having a drink!”

“Chickie, love of my life, you are wasting time!”

I stared at him blankly, wondering what bee got under his bonnet. I didn’t have a clue what he was talking about. “I’m not wasting time. I’m enjoying the party!”

“Penguin,” he said exasperatedly. “You’ve got a man that flew over three thousand fucking miles to be with you. Why aren’t you riding him like the stallion he is? You shouldn’t be enjoying the party, but HIM!”

“Terry! Please!”

“Oh, no, diva, you don’t get to object! You hear me out!”

I turned to walk away, but he held my hand fast, careful not to reawaken old emotional wounds by grasping my arm. The thoughtful action actually froze me in place. Calmly, I informed him, “You aren’t in my sex life, babe! You don’t-“

“Baby girl, I am. I know I am.” The seriousness of the statement and the low tone roped me back in, and tempered my indignation. Terry looked at me with warring emotions, caring and guilt, reader for an unexpected heart to heart. “Kristiane, I’ve been in your sex life for ten years, and I should’ve never been there to begin with. For that, I’m sorry.”

My eyes widened at the sheer honesty there on his face, the admission, the apology. I couldn’t believe the truth of the moment, the impact of it. I was silent with shock, unable to think fast enough to say something, to fight him.

“Neither one of us has faced it… well, we’ve faced it, but not moved on from it for ten years. I can’t stand idly by, and I won’t let you anymore. It’s destroying both of us, and possible relationships with other people. There’s a reason that I haven’t been with anyone, and that’s you. There’s a reason why you can’t dedicate yourself to someone completely, and that’s me. I can’t let you waste this golden opportunity.” He gestured in the direction of Tom, standing at the bar where I left him, chatting with my friend Michael.

“Kitten,” he said softly, brushing strands of my hair behind my ear, drawing me back in to our history. “I never should’ve tried with you. I think it’s damaged both of us. I knew I was gay from very early on, but I wanted a chance to be ‘normal’” He held up his hands to do the proverbial air quotes. “I hurt you. Hell, I hurt me.”
Terry brushed an errant tear that streaked down my cheek, a single tear for the life that could’ve been. His eyes glistened with the memory and the death of a dream. “I love and adore every last bit of you… every molecule… every hair… every last atom, and I will for the whole of my life.”

I wanted to say something, but I honestly couldn’t speak. He captured my full attention front and center, and stole my ability to form words… an argument, an agreement, a declaration, anything.

Terry continued earnestly, “I love you more than probably wholly healthy, but that’s beside the point. In trying to sleep with you and be with you, I’m afraid that I fucked you up – but in the worst possible way.” He took a deep breath, collecting his courage and his thoughts. “We both wanted us to work and although we’ve both known that we wouldn’t, we didn’t know it at the same time. Holding onto the hope without dealing with the reality.”

Setting our drinks aside, he took both of my hands in his. “I’m ready to admit it, Kristiane that we aren’t going to work. We are meant to be soul mates, best friends, but not lovers. I need you to see that too.”

I nodded dumbly, but not fully committing to it, and Terry saw through it immediately. Around us, the energy of the room was tensing with the approach of midnight. I could almost hear the crowd out in Time’s Square from a couple of blocks away.

“Kristiane, hear me. We aren’t going to work. I can’t love you the way you deserve to be.” He guided my gaze to Tom across the room, still chatting, laughing and sharing a beer with a friend. “He can, Kristie. Tom can, if you let him. This is what I’ve been trying to tell you for six months. He will treasure and cherish you in ways that I can’t, and I won’t let you waste another minute of the time that you have.”

“Ter… but…” Fearing the worst, that Terry was leaving me, I stammered helplessly, “But… you’re my… you’re… you’re my best friend!” The New Year was approaching, and I felt that he was looking to start fresh without me. I couldn’t let that happen. I couldn’t lose my best friend.

“And I always will be, kitten. Always, but for now, you need to be with Tom. Let yourself believe that what you’re feeling for him is the real thing. You’ve found love, girl, it’s just not with me.”

I threw my arms around my best friend. “You can’t let go of me, Terry!” I needed to stop the clock, slow the time. I didn’t want this fresh start.

He held me close. “I’m never leaving you, girly. Never ever, you’re stuck with me. But I need you to face the reality that we aren’t ever going to happen, and that’s okay because we’re inseparable. I’m always going to be by your side.” He pulled out of our embrace and held my face in his hands. “It’s okay to let go, you won’t lose me. I’m not going anywhere.”

Silently, I nodded. The chanting of the seconds to midnight began in the crowd around us.

“I love you, but I’m not in love with you. You love me, but you’re not in love with me. And that’s perfect and the way it should be. Now, go get your man. Love him while you can. What’s that saying? Love, loss, better?”

I murmured softly, “Lord Tennyson, I hold it true, whate’er befall; I feel it, when I sorrow most; ‘Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.”

Thirty-three.

Thirty-two.
“That’s it!” He snapped his fingers and pointed in Tom’s direction. “Go! Do, as old dead geezers say.”

Taking a deep breath, steeling myself for something I never thought I would do, I crossed the room, my steps counted for me.

I didn’t wait for midnight, couldn’t wait for midnight or I’d lose my mind or my nerve. I took Tom’s hand, led him three steps away from Michael. As Tom was asking me if I was alright, I pulled him to me into a passionate, soul-searing kiss.

I felt his arms wrap around my waist and pull me against him, surrendering to my demands on his mouth. Lust and love and too long denied infatuation swept us up in a fury of tongues and lips.

This was my new beginning, my fresh start, even if only for a small moment in time. In the words of Stephen Sondheim, ‘If life were only moments, then you’d never know you had one.’ This moment, this window in time, this was my moment and I was going to savor it with Tom. For this moment, I was Tom’s and he was mine, until he had to go. I knew it would hurt like hell, but it would hurt more, if I didn’t.
Three.

Two.

One.

Happy New Year! I barely heard the noise and the screams and the singing of Auld Lang Syne and the raucous laughter of the other people in the bar over the pounding of my heart and the thrum in my veins. I was in Tom’s arms and I never wanted to leave that sacred circle.
I felt a shift in Tom when I kissed him. Though I initiated the contact between us, when I threaded my fingers through his fine black hair, he surrendered to my insistent pursuit of his kiss. I pressed my body to his after he pulled me close to him, and the shift happened. I wasn’t kissing him so much as he was kissing me, worshiping me.

His hand held the back of my head and he poured desire and affection into how he took control of the meld of our lips pressed together. I felt a hungry moan from him along his tongue, the vibration stroking the sparks to flames of need. Freeing myself of my ancient history with Terry and relinquishing the doubt and denial that I’d been clinging to for years, I put an open invitation in Tom’s capable hands. He was at the ready, waiting for the green light at the starting line, holding out for the go ahead. There was no reservation or withholding in his kiss. I tasted the freedom, and so did Tom.

I don’t know how long we stood there kissing, but the excitement of the New Year had started to slough off. When Tom broke the kiss, he whispered against my lips, “Happy New Year, Kristiane.”

“Happy New Year.”

The pads of Tom’s thumbs gently caught the tears that were drying on my cheeks, the last of Terry’s talk with me. Sympathetically, Tom asked, “Have you been crying, my Wilde one?”

A small grin played along my lips that moments before had been on Tom’s curled up the corners with a hint of the relief of the past and the hope of the future. “Only a bit, it’s all – okay.”

“Did you have a good talk with Terry?”

I nodded, absolutely captivated by his eyes and the understanding there. Tom couldn’t have heard Terry releasing me emotionally, but he got it. I wouldn’t be in his arms without it, all our previous kisses had been guarded – with the exception of this one. I forgot all my anxiety and I opened up to Tom completely. Circling his waist with my arms, I said, “Terry won’t be joining us tomorrow—well, technically today.”

“Your day off?”

Biting my lower lip, I confirmed his question with a tiny nod. Tom didn’t say anything more on it, but I could see his mind turning this information over and over, weighing up exactly how to absorb it. Without overtly expressing anything, Tom was internalizing the new development because he had his own set of reservations about being with me.

“Shall we go?” he asked, gazing around the emptying bar. I nodded in agreement, ready to be alone with him, like we’d never been before, without Terry, without the memory of Scott, without my baggage.

The short walk from Marlowe’s back to my apartment after wishing all my friends a goodnight and happy new year was a silent one. Tom held my hand securely in his as we passed by numerous drunk party-goers and smokers outside their bars along the way.

When I let us into my apartment, and secured the deadbolt behind us, no sooner than I abandoned my keys and bag, Tom had me pressed into the hardwood surface. The door supported my back as the wickedly tall man blanketed the front of me, his ravenous lips and tongue on my mouth. The urgent, assertive kiss robbed me of everything but sensation. I craved the incessant rub of his
tongue along mine, hungered for it, burned for it. Submitting to his forcefully delicious display of his attraction to me, I wrapped my arms around his neck and melted.

Tom’s hands moved from the door on either side of my head, trapping me there, to my hips, eradicating all space between us. The smell and taste of him overwhelmed my senses, and arousal shot directly to my sorely neglected core. My inner muscles clenched in anticipation, my brain telling my body that I very much wanted this and needed this, and by God, I’d be ready for it. A heady moan sounded from the back of my throat, begging for more.

I felt my thigh lifted and my leg wrapped around his waist, following the lead and directions dictated by his left hand. Tom rocked into me, his hips into mine and that’s when I felt his erection, stiff and hard against the most intimate part of me.

With some effort, he ripped his mouth from mine and lowered his head to my shoulder, his breath panting from the passionately active make-out session. My heart slammed against my chest as I tried to catch my breath, heaving in and out of my lungs. Tom pressed his center into mine again, and I whimpered with it. I clutched a fistful of his hair and moved my other arm to his lower back, locking him in place.

“Do you feel what you do to me, Kristiane?” His breath was still fast and furious, the heat of the huffs of air seeping through the cotton of my t-shirt. I was floating in the sea of sensation and emotion. With that one question posed to me, I knew Tom listened to everything I’d said: the doubt that I was sexy or desirable, the doubt that I could get a man sexually aroused, the doubt that a man could truly want to love me in every sense of the word.

Tom flexed his hips again, pushing his erection against my moist center, frustrated with the layers of clothing between us. And yet he wasn’t taking me to bed.

Slowly he lifted his head to kiss me softly and adjust our position against the door, seemingly to make me feel even more of him. My eyes slid closed and I inhaled sharply as he found an ultra-sensitive spot between my legs. Intense clawing, itching need gripped me, and I nearly toppled over unable to hold my weight after he’d turned every bit of me into raw exposed nerve. The pulsating need within me, the maddening need that Tom awakened in me made me tremble like a leaf on the wind in autumn, desperately clinging to the branch – or sanity. I thought that the very next caress or kiss might send me over the edge.

His raspy sexy voice spoke my name, bringing me back from the edge or pushing me closer, it was difficult to know which. I opened my eyes to gaze into his, almost all the blue occupied by his irises. “Kristiane, I desire you. I want you. My body wants you. Every bit of me is burning to take you, except one part of my brain. I can’t quiet it long enough to see this through. But I needed you to know the affect you have on me.”

Tom paused, composing and organizing his thoughts. “What I told you- the other night- I can’t swing into your life, complicate your feelings and turn my back again in a week’s time. It’s not fair to you when you’re free of Scott, to get you all tangled up with me when I can’t promise you anything. My life for the foreseeable future belongs to my career as yours does, here in New York. Sex would complicate things and I have no doubt that we’d be incredible together. I don’t think I could walk away from you if we saw this through.”

I believed him. Proof of his desire, his most intimate flesh was pressed against mine. He couldn’t hide that his body craved mine. Despite the pounding in my bloodstream to plead with him to change his mind, I didn’t do it. I’d demanded so much of him from the very beginning. I couldn’t pursue this. I could respect that he was trying to escape this with his heart intact, and mine. I’d knocked him about enough that I couldn’t show him impatience when he’d shown me nothing but.
I said nothing, but instead hiked up on my tippy toes and kissed him serenely, showing him gratitude and understanding. My lady parts might never forgive me, but Tom and I were still friends. Smiling brightly, I asked, “Do you want to read Dr Seuss with me to calm down?” I glanced down between us to indicate the predicament our physical beings were in.

He chuckled, pushing his forehead into mine, “Only if it’s One Fish, Two Fish… I think I’m too turned on to spout off – what’s his name?”

“We’ll just call him Billy until you have all your faculties back!”

*

With our sex life on moratorium, Tom and I actually relaxed into our dynamic more so than we ever had before. We slept in each other’s arms after reading until we came down from our erotic yearning. It was still there; we still craved one another, but the stress of will it happen was erased, with the comprehension that we wouldn’t. Late morning, we got up, each took a shower separately, and headed down to the local deli for breakfast sandwiches and coffee from Starbucks.

I was expecting awkward silence and searching for any bit of conversation, but my fears were unfounded. Tom was his charming, playful self, fitting in with my routine quite easily. In hindsight, I probably should’ve taken him sight-seeing, but instead, he quite readily agreed to take a dance class with me. Because my friend Jimmy adored me and would do anything for me, he allowed Tom to stay without fee and without an Actor’s Equity card. Jimmy was rather smitten with Tom’s accent, and more than once, I caught Tom playing up the flirtation, so Jimmy never felt used for letting him stay.

“I take this on my dark days from the show. It gives me a good workout, and the gay men love me,” I told Tom as we were stretching in the few minutes before the class started.

“You’re their new diva,” he said with a mischievous grin. “The new Patti Lupone or Elaine Paige.”

He laughed when I squealed loudly and threw myself into his arms. “If only…”

He whispered, “I better put you down. I’m thinking Jimmy doesn’t love you so much anymore. You’re competition for my attention.” He winked and stepped away.

“You’re too good at playing this game.”

“I want to stay to see your bum in those tights.”

I stuck my tongue out at him, turned around and wiggled.

Tom was a natural mover and an amazingly quick learner when it came to the routine, keeping step with us. He was graceful, slick and kept really good rhythm. We had a friendly unspoken competition going between us to see who could stretch farther, look better doing a movement, or catching the eye of one of the other fifteen dancers taking the class.

*

Tom and I spent the day out and around the city, visiting my favorite bookstore, CD store and best of all, my favorite pizza place. Our conversations revolved around the shows I’d been, I got to point out some of the theatres I’d worked in over the years, and Tom’s hope that he could return to the stage eventually. Ingesting an obscene amount of pizza, we rolled back to my apartment for movie night.
Curled up on my bed, we put on Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory. I sat between his legs and leaned back against his chest. It was fun watching it with him, hearing him imitate all the characters and all the voices and I sang all the songs. He rewind Veruca’s solo ‘I Want It Now!’ twice to listen to my rendition and imitation of ‘I want to wear them like braids in my hair and I don’t want to share them.’ The laughter I provoked from Tom with my awful British accent and the selfish temper tantrum was infectious.

“Did you ever think of auditioning with that?” His hands stroked down my bare arms to my wrists before sliding back up to repeat the action. My skin alighted in gooseflesh and I shivered, not from a chill, but from the dormant desire that had been neglected all day. The barely there touch of his fingertips along my skin almost immediately awakened the ache of need for him.

I scoffed, “I’d never work in this town again.”

“I would hire you if you had the balls to actually go through with it.”

I glanced up over my shoulder at him to roll my eyes at him. “If only you were in charge of hiring me.”

With his lips against the crook of my neck, he asked, “What are your plans for the future?”

I shifted ever so slightly to let him at whatever patch of skin he was going for along my neck. I felt butterfly kisses along the column of my neck as I tried to stay focused on the conversation. “Uh, after… my contract’s… up… right now?”

“Yes,” he said, his voice at least a register lower than a few moments before. “You’re with this production for a year, correct?”

He continued caressing my arms and nibbling along my neck, stealing all reason from my head. “Yes. A year. In New York City… I don’t know… audition… possibly extend.” I could barely speak through the rush of lust, and how quickly it took hold of me. My pulse pounded. I sighed, “Oh, Tom.”

As soon as his name escape my lips, his hands moved to my legs, his touch far more deliberate. From the top of my thighs down to my knees, he retraced his path along the inside of my legs, changing course just shy of my center. “I tried, Kristiane, I tried…”

I reached up and combed my fingers through his hair, holding him against my neck where he was gently nipping along the curve of my shoulder up to my ear. He soothed the tortured skin with his tongue back down to where he’d started, the effect having the exact opposite on the arousal sitting heavy between my legs. “W-w-wha-what did… you… try?”

His hands were easing my legs apart bit by bit, with every pass, widening them a little more. His touch was unmistakably searching for more of me. “I tried not to want you, tried to stay away from you.”

Breathlessly, I said, “I know. I was there.” I covered his hands with mine leading him to where I wanted him to touch me, along my center. He pressed the wetness there and my breath hitched in my throat. His hand started a slow circular motion over my jeans, bringing all my attention to that movement. “I tried not to want you, tried to stay away from you.”

I pulled away to look behind me and into his eyes. “I think we were beyond that, before you surprised me at my show the other night.” I brought his lips to mine by tugging his hair, stuck in
the center of my fist. The glorious meld of lips and tongues, as his hand continued its focus between my legs. Our fervent kiss didn’t last long with the awkward angle we were in.

Tom moved his hand from the front of my jeans and cupped my breasts in his hands. “I’ve been dying to touch you here.” He squeezed the soft pliant flesh, still fully covered by my clothing. I gasped as my nipples tingled and that pulsating need raced from one part of me to the other. “I actually ache to touch you everywhere.” One hand lowered to my belly and pulled me deeper into his embrace, so I could feel his ache, long and firm against my back.

I whimpered helplessly dizzy with desire, “Touch me everywhere.” With the enticement, I sweetened the deal by unbuckling my jeans, to give him better access.

“You are so beautiful,” he breathed out on an exhale. His hand on my abdomen slid down within the confines of my pants and inside my pants. He hesitated for a few moments, presumably determining if this was the point of no return. When his finger made contact with my moist heat, his breath caught beside my ear.

My hands gripped his knees propped up on either side of me, my back bowing already. “Oh my God!”

His finger followed along my folds, dipping between ever so shallowly, and it was maddening. My inner walls clenched in anticipation, begging him to delve deeper. As he continued tracing my lips, determining how wet I was, he asked, “Last orgasm?”

Spreading my legs a bit more, asking for him to touch me even more, I admitted, “Too long ago.”

Tom slipped one finger inside me, and I keened loudly. Slowly, deliberately, testing my reaction, he slid his finger out and pressed back in. “Before you met me?”

Pushing back against his chest with my back, clutching at reality and my sanity, I growled between clenched teeth, “Yes.”

“Can you handle more than one finger?”

“Oh, God, Tom, please just make me come.”

Showing me mercy, he pressed another finger into me. He retreated but then pressed back in. I panted heavily, my hips thrusting up against his welcome intrusion. “So tight,” he mused lowly. “Out… of… practice.”

He moved his focus from entering me to my clitoris and I nearly jumped out of my skin. “Ohpleasepleaseplease…” With the right amount of pressure, he caressed my sweet distended button in a circular motion. My back arched away from him again as I squeezed the muscles of his thighs, all sound arrested from my throat, my jaw slacked open. All my focus on his talented, gorgeous fingers on me, and the pleasure building within me. Because it had been so long, I knew that he’d have me a shaking mess in no time, but my patience was at an end already. I needed relief from the wanting, desiring, needing Tom for half a year. I held my breath, my hips following his lead.

My hand grabbed his wrist as I felt the coil tightening impossibly inside me. With the additional pressure, I broke. The spring sprung and I was coming apart at the seams. I sobbed his name as the pleasure and the release consumed me. I felt the wave of relief wash over me from the top of my head to my toes. I shook as the pent up energy expended through my limbs.
Tom was whispering sweet nothings into my ear, his fingers still at my center working me back
down again. The orgasm was intense after so long without, and with a man I truly trusted, I felt
amazing.

I hummed in the back of my throat as the quaking inside slowed and eventually stopped. When I
opened my eyes again, I was sprawled all over Tom. “Feeling better?”

With a whoosh of air, I moaned happily.

Tom carefully laid me out on the bed as he shifted around to hover over me. Still feeling rather
boneless, I pulled him down into a lazy kiss, as he rested his weight on me. He was such a pleasing
weight on me that I wrapped my legs around his.

Tom didn’t seem to be in any rush to undress me and finish what he started. I clawed at his back,
letting him know that I wanted more of him, wanted to feel all of him, wanted to love all of him.

I pulled out of the kiss as his lips found my neck again. “Tom?”

He moaned into my pulse point, his teeth scraping along the skin gently.

“Undress me.”

His hand glided along my side, up to my breast, covering the small mound of flesh with his long
fingers, still frustratingly over my clothing. He made a small sound of disappointment and lifted his
head from my neck, his hand squeezing my breast. “I don’t have a condom.”

“I do.” I reached up to my bedside table and slid the drawer open.

He took a foil packet from inside and lined my body with his once more. “Are you sure about
this?”

“I’m sure. I need to feel you, Tom.”
Chapter 23

Tom was looking down at me with a mixture of awe, confusion, arousal and almost regret. I reached up and stroked my hand down the plain of his face wondering just where he went, where his thoughts were. He would start to speak, and then close his mouth again as his thought went in another direction. I sympathized and understood his hesitation about being intimate with me, but I knew I had it bad for him long before I found him on stage after my debut. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Surprise joined the myriad of emotions painted over his handsome features. “Wondering how in the world, this world, how I was granted the privilege of being your lover. How is that even possible?”

I smiled, a pure one from the soul that perked up every part of me. “I don’t mean this as crass as it’s going to sound, but you offered.”

A tiny happy sound bubbled up from his throat, a combination of a laugh and a breath. “That’s what I mean… why isn’t Terry outside your door beating potential lovers away with a bat as not worthy enough of you and your affection? And how on God’s green Earth did I make the cut?”

“In his eyes or mine?”

“Both!”

Changing tactics, I asked smoothly, “Did I ever tell you about Terry’s tryout for the BC/EFA softball team?”

“No,” furrowing his brow, confused by the turn in the conversation.

“Terry’s no good with a bat. He brought a golf club to home plate ready to take a swing…” Tom laughed, and I quickly included, “At a basketball because he doesn’t know,” I said with a teasing lilt.

Tom shifted against me as he granted me another laugh. “He could still do a lot of damage with a golf club in defense of your honor.”

“Says you. Have you seen his aim? Gay men have terrible aim.”

Rocking his hips against me gently, I sighed with his fanning the flame of arousal again. A small squeak pushed out from behind my lips, barely containing a demand that he take me. My eyes slid closed and I bared my neck when my body felt a jolt from my core. I couldn’t lay still with the licks along my nerve-endings. Tom bowed his head to my neck and worried a small patch of skin between his teeth before laving at it with his tongue. He groaned as his erection twitched within his trousers and against me. “I don’t understand how I’m here. How did I get so lucky?”

Ironically, I giggled, “If you quit talking about it, you might get even luckier.”

He chuckled and jerked his hips against my center, watching me bow underneath him with rapt attention. All at once he stopped again and said seriously, “Kristiane.”

I met his eyes through the haze of heat and arousal between us. “Tom.”

“I’ve- this is different. I’ve never done this before.”
I pushed my eyebrows together over my nose, wondering what he was getting at. I wasn’t naïve enough to believe him a virgin. I couldn’t read his thoughts that he was having trouble conveying, but he was madly seeing the words. I want to ask him about what’s going on, ask about the confusion and the regret clouding his blue eyes, but his hands are lifting my t-shirt, ironically a Once Upon a Mattress t-shirt, up over my head. Those gorgeous azure eyes have lowered to my breasts, contained within a simple white bra. I cursed silently that I didn’t wear my pretty underthings.

Tom didn’t seem to mind my plain lingerie as he exhaled, staring longingly at my chest. His right hand skimmed up my ribcage to draw a circle around my nipple. He watched the response my body had to his touch, and I watched him with equal fascination. He was so intent on me, and it made me feel sexy and desired.

My nipple hardened under the focused attention and I quelled my body’s natural response to move into the stimulation. My spine and my lower back tingled and tickled to bow but I didn’t want to lose myself in the stir of awareness.

Tom breathed out, “Fucking beautiful.” He took the small mound of flesh covered in what satin into his mouth. The sudden movement surprised me, and my hands moved to hold him to me. Open mouth kisses engulfed that swell of skin, his tongue skimming and lapping at the nipple underneath. The heat of his mouth rekindled the heavy, leaden, pushing, pressing need between my legs and I gasped loudly into the room. The pulsing within my sex echoed that of my raging heartbeat.

My over-anxious response only spurned my lover on in his voraciousness to shower more attention on me. He quickly moved to the other breast, giving it the same treatment as its twin. His name spilled from my mouth like a benediction, and his hips surged into mine. I could smell my own arousal and his, the earthy, masculine freshness like the clean spring rain.

Tom stripped my bra from my body and deposited it on the floor beside the bed. He paused to take in every beauty mark, every freckle, every inch of bared skin. I could feel my skin warm and color with a blush of awareness of his eyes on me, almost as bold as a caress. Speaking low, wrapping us in a sheet of intimacy, he asked, “When’s the last time sex was about you, Kristie? For you?”

His hand carefully slid across my stomach and back up to my breast, before dragging his eyes from the action back to my eyes. Fully mesmerized by him and his question and how tenderly he was touching me, all I could do was shake my head in denial. I’d never had sex when it was about me or what I wanted. I’d always been really passive about that part of my life.

I was eighteen when Terry and I crashed and burned during my freshman year of college. Up until that point, I was so focused on my acting classes, dance classes, voice lessons, and academics that Terry was my first kiss, the first time I let a man touch my breast. I’d been ready to give him all of me, because I wanted him to have all of me. It took three years to get up the courage to let another man near me, and another year before I lost my virginity, a burden that needed unloading.

Without feeling a thing for him, I dated another actor named Jeremy for about a year. He’s the one that took my virginity and whom I slept with for a few months without ever experiencing an orgasm. I had a couple of drunken one night stands with the same guy, couldn’t even remember his name, but he was memorable for the orgasms. Scott got lucky every once in a while, but wasn’t his goal with it came to sex. We had weekly ten minute romps, twice if he was particularly horny that week. For him, sex was getting his rocks off, and that was up until the tour and then the subsequent impotence.

Since around the age of twenty-five, masturbation became my means of sexual gratification, but
even over the last few months while I was putting my life back together, I couldn’t bring myself to participate in that activity.

Tom pressed his lips together, his thumb lazily circling my nipple as he pondered my response and the brief rundown of my sexual history. “When’s the last time that you had sex?”

“About a year ago.”

He lifted off me, sat back on his haunches, and hooked his fingers into the waistband of my jeans. I elevated my hips to allow him to remove my pants, and those joined my bra and t-shirt on the floor. He left my panties in place as one last obstacle. As he laid on top of me again, he kissed me simply, a small sweet endearment, our eyes glued to each other. He asked, “Are you sure that you want to go through with this?”

“I want you, whatever you want to share with me.” Grazing my hands up his back under the shirt he still wore, I splayed my hands over him possessively. “I played Shelby in the play Steel Magnolias in high school, and one line has always stuck with me. ‘I would rather have thirty minutes of wonderful than a lifetime of nothing special.’ Sleeping in your arms, fighting with you to keep Jimmy’s attention at dance class, kissing you at midnight on New Year’s Eve, telling you my secrets without you passing judgment on me – it’s all been wonderful, and I’ve been blessed with more than thirty minutes.”

I leaned up and kissed his lips again softly. “I get the hesitation, I do… and you’ve shown me nothing but patience and understanding without pity. You’ve been so kind…”

He shook his head, and the regret flashed through his eyes again. “I didn’t arrive in New York to intentionally hurt you or sleep with you.”

“I know that, Tom. You didn’t know if I’d let you anywhere near me. The last time you showed any interest in me, I spectacularly rejected you, with very poor excuses for it.”

“Are you trying to talk me out of this?” he asked with a half grin and a lift of one eyebrow.

Giggling, I shook my head and comically folded my lips between my teeth to keep quiet.

He adopted a predatory look. “Tonight, I’m going to see that you are grateful that you were born a woman. Tonight is about you.”

Before I had time to respond, his tongue found my nipple and set out to fulfill his promise. My back arched under the direct contact of his mouth on my breast. I called out his name, a combination of surprise at his statement, the speed at which he changed direction and the bolt of pleasure that coursed through me from his talented mouth. His hands were already working my panties off my hips, my body back under his control within seconds, playing me like a guitar – a strum here, a stroke there, a twang here, a bit more fingering and gripping there.

Tom’s teeth gently scraped the swollen peaked flesh and his nimble fingers played between my legs. All I could do was enjoy the manipulation, as Tom had taken the lead and didn’t seem to want to relinquish any command to me. After all my inexperience and failed or false starts when it came to sex, I was all for following wherever Tom led me.

He descended down the path of my abdomen as he finally pulled my panties off my legs. With him nibbling and kissing the skin around my belly, steadily moving downwards, the nervousness kicked my heartbeat a few notches beyond the arousal and my head went a bit swirly with anxiety. Tentatively, I heard my voice croak out, “T-t-tom?”
He pulled back and came back to hover over me once more. “Do you need to stop, darling?”

“No… got… nerv… overwhelmed.”

The hesitancy landed on him, and his expression changed instantly as the understanding hit him. “You’ve not done that?”

I shook my head. “I’ve never had anyone go down on me.”

He kissed me and gently caressed his thumb over my cheek and lips. “It really hasn’t been about you…” he contemplated aloud. “That’s okay. We don’t have to.”

I stopped him. “No, I want to… I just got nervous.”

“Kristie, darling, I’m not forcing you into…”

“Oh, God, you’re not. I’m not saying no, I’m just nervous and I thought you should know.”

He winked. “I’ll talk you through it… well, figuratively speaking.

I laughed with him dispelling some of the tension. “That was a terrible joke!”

“Granted, but you already look more relaxed. You’ll only enjoy it if you’re relaxed.”

I took a deep centering breath, and the uncomfortable fluttering subsided some.

“Oh?”

I nodded for him.”

“Anytime you get anxious or you want or need to stop, I will.”

I nodded again.

“Can you put your feet on the mattress for me?”

I bent my legs in half with my knees up.

“Ready?”

I nodded once more.

Tom lowered himself to between my legs, and I breathed out through my lips, staring up at the ceiling, to combat my nerves. I heard him say, “You are so beautiful. The prettiest girl,” he added reverently, relaxing me further by reminding me of our day alone together in London.

Lightly, his finger quested over my folds, and I felt his other hand find mine tangled in the sheets to interlace fingers with mine. My heart soared and I looked down at him, at the man I loved and trusted so completely. I forgot my nerves as Tom set his mouth on me. I bit down on my lower lip to keep my sounds in check.

My hand squeezed his, trying to stay grounded with the new and unexpected sensations. Tom started slow, following the inside of me from the bottom to the top with his tongue. The warm wet massage was pleasant and began stirring the pleasure up. With every pass over me, he added more pressure. When his tongue slid inside me, I cried out in pleasure, trying like hell to stay still. “Tom! Tom! Oh my God!” The sinful indulgence of a man tasting and moaning into the most intimate
flesh of my body felt decadent and licentious and wonton. The man I loved was worshipping me in the carnal way, and I was high on it.

“Tom!”

Pant.

“Please!”

Breath.

My clitoris was treated to the same attentions as my breasts, driving me to near madness. The circular motion morphed into flicking and back again to circles. I was panting heavily as spikes of pleasure and chaos flooded and jolted though my bloodstream. Bolts of lightning flashed behind my eyes, and I was drowning and soaring and flying and falling all at once. “Tom! God! Tom! I… can’t… Tom!”

My hand that had been clutching the sheets flew between my legs to his hair to keep him there. Overwhelming pleasure welcomed irrational thought, as I teetered on the brink of a crisis. I was desperate for him to continue where he was, afraid he might disappear and I’d be lost in this… critical point.

I could feel the pressure I was putting on his fingers, but it was too good-too good to stop!

“Tom! Oh! Please! Oh, God! Pleasepleasepleaseplease! I need!”

My pelvis surged up and strained to get more… so close, soclose soclosesoclose sofuckingclose.

Before I could vocalize anything more, I felt two fingers pump in and out of me in time with the flicking, circling, dancing over the pleasure point. Tom moaned and I was completely undone. I burst into a million stars.

I burst into a million pieces.

I was completely undone.

The pieces burned.

I was left to ashes.

Off in the distance, I heard screaming, heavy breathing and the chanting of a name. Over the ecstasy and the constricting muscles inside me, I managed to open my eyes. I realized that I was making all the noise. Slowly I came back to myself and to the man I loved, resting his head on my stomach.

Faintly, I felt the mattress shift and Tom got up off the bed.

I attempted to lift my arm, almost paralyzed by euphoria, to halt his progress. I groaned, “Tom?”

He smiled down at me. “It’s alright, darling. I’m entirely overdressed for the rest of this evening.”

Tom was, in fact, still completely clothed. He was completely in control of how the night had gone so far, and he made sure every part of it was about me. I’d never had two orgasms in one night, but then I’d never been loved by a man like Tom.
Tom pulled his t-shirt off with crossed arms and dropped it in the pile of my forgotten clothes. He revealed fully toned, almost perfectly sculpted torso, leaner than I was used to but absolutely mouth-wateringly delicious. “Did they teach you how to do that at Cambridge?”

“Between Chaucer and Joyce,” he grinned, unbuckling his pants. I tried not to look at the bulge beneath his fingers, but I couldn’t help it. I felt incredibly intimated by his size.

“Why does that make so much sense to me?” I threw myself back into the pillows, again calming my nervousness. How did he have this effect on me? Covering up my nerves, I mumbled, “DH Lawrence would’ve made sense too.”

Tom stepped out of his trousers and his boxer briefs before sitting on the bed beside me. Absently his hand caressed up the inside of my thigh to my belly and rested it there for a brief moment. Raking his gaze up to me, he asked once more, “Are you sure about all of this?”

Sitting up, I handed him the condom that had been left unused up to this point. I leaned into him and kissed his neck, pressing the foil packet into his palm. He took it from me, and sighed. “Tom, I’m fine,” I whispered into his ear. “More than fine.”

My hand trailed along the inside his thigh, tracing infinity signs along his strong skin and hard muscle. I avoided touching his erection, knowing that it could set a man over the edge.

“I want you so much, Kristiane. I do. I just can’t ignore the deadline for us.”

I kissed his earlobe, then his neck again, and then his cheek. “I know it’s there too. But it’s going to be there whether you make love to me or not.” I guided his head to look at me straight on. “Do you think it will hurt less if we don’t?”

He was silent for a long time, his eyes searching mine for the truth. I whispered, “If it will hurt less if we don’t, then we don’t.”

He remained silent for another long moment. His answer – he kissed me deeply. He took up the lead and we fell into the pillows together, with him kneeling above me. I moved my legs on either side of him, ready to accept him. He eased out of the kiss, prepared to take it further but kept his head about him. He sat back, tore open the wrapper and rolled the rubber on, hissing with the effort of keeping his dignity. His cock was nearly purple with how engorged it was, and he was eager for some relief from the pressure of it.

Tom laid me back and covered me with his body. I propped my feet up on the mattress, trapping him between my legs. His hand sought mine and threaded his fingers through mine once more, anchoring it above my head. With his other hand, he positioned himself at my opening and pressed the tip just inside. He reached for my other hand and mirrored our hands on the other side. Our eyes locked together, as he pushed in just a bit, watching my reaction, reading my nervousness.

He kissed me softly, encouraging me to relax and allow him in. He sunk in a bit more. I adjusted my hips, the angle a little. “Are you alright?”

I nodded.

He inched in ever so slowly, careful not to hurt me, attentive to any signs of distress. When I did, he eased back, waited, and then moved forward again. I watched the self-restraint displayed on his face, keeping the sex hungry creature on a very tight leash, until he was seated fully inside me.

I never felt so full, so stretched, so very much in love with this man. He exhaled slowly, letting his head fall forward onto my shoulder. His patience was at an end, and he wanted to celebrate in it by
moving. Muffled, his strained voice said, “Please tell me that I didn’t hurt you.”

I encouraged him to look at me. “Tom, I’m okay. You didn’t hurt me.” I kissed him and gave him permission to continue, “Make love to me.”

“Kristiane…” And he moved slowly, retreating almost all the way out before sinking back inside. He kept the pace slow and even, allowing me the time to stretch to accommodate him. When I placed my feet on the back of his knees, he increased the speed of his thrusting and I was drowning again, in pleasure, in love, in tenderness. This was where I was meant to be, who I was meant to be with, when I was meant to be.

Our hands were clasped, our bodies joined and our hearts twisted around one another. And then we were kissing again, and I thought I would burst like a firecracker with a slow, slow burning.

The heat increased, sweat slicked our skin.

The gait of his surging hips increased, shortening our breaths.

Our emotions increased, quickening our pulse.

Suddenly I was free falling, my entire body lost in ecstasy, floating in midair beneath Tom.

I opened my eyes, not realizing I’d closed them, in time to see and feel Tom lose himself in the pleasure of my body. He collapsed on top of me, his middle jerking into me at random, feeling the last of the effects of an all-consuming orgasm. There was no rush to untangle or move, so we stayed, listening each other breathe, listening to each other be, feeling each other’s presence.
Chapter 24

A gentle warm unassuming hand ghosting over my skin roused me from sleep, pulling me from a pleasant and restful slumber. The caress that started at my shoulder traveled down my arm to the top of my thigh, staying respectable, sliding back up to my waist. Feather light touches brought me to lovely wakefulness at the responsibility of a delectable man, an incredible man; one that saw that was pleasured and sated three mind-numbing times before he found his own delight only a few short hours before. My skin, every part of me was still glowing and alight from sharing something so deliciously sinful with him.

That drifting hand found a comfortable place along my belly and remained there, splayed and holding me firmly to him, his thumb tracing tiny patterns along my belly. Tom’s lean strong body spooned mine from behind, cocooning me with his strength and warmth with his presence. Soft, near invisible kisses were brushed along my shoulder, maintaining this sanctuary of intimacy, one that he created with his care for me.

I felt different already, after spending my night in his arms, worshipped in nearly every way, I felt more alive than I ever had. I always doubted my own skill in bed, as all of the men I’d gone to bed with spent so little time with me there. I was used like a piece of meat and quickly passed on for the next activity once they’d found their orgasm. Tom made absolutely sure that my decision to share my bed with him was beyond a shadow of a doubt the right one. He was patient, kind and attentive, but I knew there was a passionate fervent man there too, biding his time, waiting patiently for me to be comfortable with him.

Tom was changing my life in very small but significant ways. He made my dream of performing on the Globe stage and in Royal Albert Hall a reality. He made me feel wanted and desirable for more than just being a woman, yearned for me because of my personality. He skewed a negative, dark hurtful memory of Scott throwing me up against my front door to a positively erotic one. Tom wanted to make love to me as a woman, as an equal rather than a quick roll in the sack that didn’t mean anything. He held off his pleasure to make sure I got mine.

Airily I moaned into the brush of lips on my shoulder, contented in the small show of affection. The hand on my abdomen pulled me deeper into his embrace, the dizzying feel of skin on skin awakening me further, away from sleep into paradise. The butterfly kisses turned to confident kisses on my neck, and how I craved it.

The sheets rustled and whispered against me and him as he closed the gap between us completely, glued together by our attraction and affection for each other, fused together in the cloak of darkness. My focus drew in on the swiping of his thumb along my belly, willing it to do more than make me feel like smooth Chinese silk. I wanted that touch everywhere.

The kisses and caresses altered from shy, reserved endearments into sure, outward displays of desire. His burgeoning erection rocked against my rear, stiffening, lifting, thickening. Agonizingly slow the hand along my navel ascended, fingering along my ribcage, dipping and elevating along each ridge and crevice to cup the underside of my breast, his thumb lining the valley between. My breathing became shallower and quickened my body near quivering with the anticipation of more pleasure at the very capable hands of this man.

The lips kissing my throat spoke, “Your heartbeat is racing.”

I sighed his name and rotated onto my back. Into the darkness, I whispered, “For you.”
Tom captured my lips in a beautifully torrid kiss, one that felt of longing. I held him to me, his hand moving to cover my breast and my erratic heart. Gradually the kiss deepened and the heat between us soared. His hand enveloped my flesh, caressing, squeezing, massaging, tweaking. He wasn’t merely touching me for the thrill of being intimate with a female; he was touching me for me to get a thrill of it. It wasn’t for his own gain, but for ours together.

Adjusting his position to get on top of me, I moaned into his mouth that I wanted him there. Hungry arms took him in, held him close, and refused to let go. His solid build under my scouting fingertips tried to learn and memorize every inch of him. He hovered above me, propped up on one hand as the other continued to admire the twin globes on my chest.

Tom eventually pulled free of our kiss, to kneel between my thighs. He reached over to my bedside table to retrieve protection from within the confines of the drawer. I sat up with him and helped roll it over the length of him. I wanted to touch him, love him as he’d loved me, and offer him pleasure for every patience he’d shown me in the past half year. I cared for him so deeply that I never thought I could meet the level he’d shown me.

With a hand on his shoulders, I straddled his hips. I thought I heard him hold his breath as I found a comfortable place on him. I took his length in hand and aligned him to my entrance, lowered myself on him, sheathing him with my body. His eyes fluttered shut briefly in the relief and pleasure of being so close to me, being in me. He groaned my name, locking me in place against him, as we maneuvered to a more comfortable position, to bring him deeper into me.

Secured in place with Tom buried to the hilt within me, he took my hand, kissed the palm and placed it over his hammering heart, reflecting where his had been on me. Both his hands covered my one over his heart, holding me there. He murmured to me, “For you.”

That strong steady accelerated throb promised something meaningful of himself to me, as mine had done for him. I wasn’t sure all the connotations of the gesture yet, but we’d figure out what we were, and what we would become when our small window of time together came crashing down on us.

I glided my hips over him, Tom sucked in a lungful of air swiftly as he ribboned his arms around me. Combing my fingers into his hair, I tipped his head back to kiss his long sexy neck. Unable to hold back anymore, I licked the triangle of freckles on the side. My pelvis moved over him, taking him all the way in, retreating, advancing, withdrawing, and pushing forward again. There was music in the sounds coming from his throat, drowning in sensation, swimming in pleasure, floating in longing. I felt genuine affection between us when we moved together.

He felt amazing, but this was about so much more to me than the physical act of making love. As incredible as sex was when done right, the act of making love was significantly more than that. I threw my head back as a jolt of pleasure shot through me, my breath hitching in my throat, clutching his hair with the shock of it. Tom’s hips flexed up, pushing more pleasure into me. I breathed out, “Oh, God!”

Even in the dull, low light of the room, I could feel his eyes watching me, reveling in my joy, in my ecstasy. His hand slid up to my hair behind my back, bringing my lips to his, lips slanting and parting for another searing kiss that made my toes curl. My waist surged forward, and our mouths came apart with another charge of electricity crackled between us. Tom kept me anchored to him.

His lips whispered over mine, “You are so beautiful. So beautiful, Kristiane. Exquisite.” He kissed me tenderly again, making me believe the statement.

Breathlessly, I whimpered, “Tom, Tom… I… Tom…”
I was beyond words, all concentration arrested by where our bodies were joined. My middle undulated with him and away from him, seeking a tumultuous end to our lovemaking. Our pace increased to a fever pitch, my clinging to him as my body was swept up in euphoria. My back arched, my breasts pressing into his chest, my head thrown back, my inner muscles clinching around him. I could barely breathe through the overwhelming pleasure, and I shattered apart in his arms.

Tom found his climax after a few more strokes into my body. His cock twitched inside me as we held each other, our release working its way through us. Our heaving breaths evened out as we stayed tangled together. I wanted to tell him what he meant to me, how much I cared for him, how dear he’d become, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I didn’t want to complicate things between us anymore than they already were.

The truth was that Tom would leave me in a week’s time, and I didn’t want to make him feel guilty for getting involved with me in this week we had. I’d fucked up his life enough six months ago, involving and twisting things further with emotions now seemed unnecessarily cruel. I knew he couldn’t promise me anything, he’d made that clear enough and I respected that. Our careers meant more to us at present than we meant to each other.

Gently, Tom laid me down against the mattress and left me briefly to discard the condom. When he returned, he snuggled me up in his arms again, feeling satisfied and tired. I draped myself across his chest with his heartbeat as my pillow, curling my arm around his waist, pressing my bare skin against his. He pulled the sheets over us once more, and nuzzled the crown of my head.

Wordlessly, we fell asleep together, wrapped around one another.

* 

The next morning brought the cruel reality of a two day off work week. My Saturday and Sunday performance schedule was changed to allow for New Year’s Day on Friday, giving us an extra holiday. The producers added a Sunday night performance to make up for the skipped one on Friday. Life upon the wicked stage ain’t ever what a girl supposes, and doesn’t allow for my new found love life.

I woke before Tom with the bright daylight pouring through the flimsy white curtains. I didn’t move for a long time, savoring the quiet morning, with his even breathing and the slow rise and fall of his chest under my head. His arms were still draped around me. I’d slept with Terry like this many nights, but this was different, felt different, and I liked it.

Sliding my hand up from his waist to the small patch of hair at the center of his chest, I burrowed closer. Tom was so warm and I didn’t want to get up, didn’t want to leave being in his arms.

A low, croaky moan rumbled under my ear from deep within Tom and he squeezed me closer to him. I smiled into his chest and kissed the pale skin. “Good morning,” I said quietly.

Another moan.

I giggled, “Have to get up soon. Two show day for me.”

The velvet voice laced with sleep asked, “Can I just stay here?”

“Nope. We’re in the same time zone.”

He kissed the top of my head. “What’s your routine on a two show day?”

“Shower…”
“I like the sound of that.”

“You’re an animal.”

All of a sudden, I was on my back, the mattress depressing beneath me under our combined weight. Tom was smiling widely, “I can be.”

Our eyes locked and there was a moment of calm that descended over us. We were smiling, drinking each other in after our night of passion. “Good morning, my prettiest Wilde one.” I wrapped my arms around him and led him to my lips for a swift kiss, nothing too involved without ridding myself of morning breath first. “Are you alright?”

I nodded, touching his cheek gently. “I’m fantastic. I’m not fragile. I had an amazing night with you.”

He leaned down and kissed me again. “Just had to be sure.”

I knew he was really asking, if I was still okay with how much happened with us, if I was okay both physically and emotionally. “I’m good. I wanted this, Tom. I don’t regret it. Last night was truly wonderful.”

That much was true. This part of it, pretending that we were a couple, pretending that we weren’t facing a heartbreak, was easy, living in the moment. We were ignoring that we were on borrowed time, even though we both knew it was there, always in the back of our minds. For a little while, we were okay.

Tom and I got up and took a shower together without lingering for too much longer than necessary. We exchanged kisses, caresses, and helped wash each other. It was soothing, spending every minute we could together. I was astonished to discover that I could learn to like this coupledom, something that seemed so foreign, so bizarre, and something that others did, but I didn’t believe in. I stumbled into this state of being by accident, and I welcomed it.

After our shower, I sent a text to Terry to meet us at our favorite diner on Ninth Avenue. I had time for us all have breakfast and spend time together before I had to make call. “I’ll hand you over to Terry for babysitting duty while I go to work,” I said casually walking back into my bedroom. Tom was already half dressed while I was still clad in only a towel. I dug into my panty drawer for my intimates and then the drawer below for a pair of jeans.

My lover came up behind me and curled his arms around my waist. He nuzzled my ear and whispered, “Do I need watching?”

“Something tells me that you could get into mischief.”

“My reputation precedes me.”

I wiggled against him, earning an open mouthed kiss on my shoulder. “I’ll get you to prove that later.” I turned around in his arms and hugged him.

When we pulled apart, Tom was looking at me seriously. “What do we tell Terry? …About this? …Us?”

“Terry is going to know whether we tell him or not. He knows me too well. I couldn’t hide anything from him if I tried.”

He combed his fingers through my towel dried hair, drawing me in, laying a kiss on my lips. “Are
“You alright with that?”

I nodded. “I have to be. I can’t hide. He knows where to find me.”

“I had to go for the girl with an accessory,” Tom mused, stepping away to finish dressing.

I laughed, “I could say the same about you.”

“Which one of us has custody today?”

*

Terry knew. There was no way to disguise that my relationship with Tom had changed, and overnight in Terry’s eyes. He’d pushed for it, manipulated, encouraged, and schemed to bring us together. He wanted to see us both happy, and for the most part, Tom and I were happy, knowing full well that it was temporary.

Tom and I got to the diner hand in hand ten minutes late, to allow for Terry to roll in ten minutes after that. My best friend, not being the one for subtle, exclaimed before he even sat down, “You slut!”

Kissing my cheek quickly, my lover excused himself, “I’m leaving you to deal with this one all on your own.”

Terry called after Tom’s retreating form, “Coward! You can’t hide in there forever!” He landed in a heap beside me, and glomped all over me.

“You know, Terry, nothing says ‘good morning’ like announcing to the entire diner that my circumstances have changed.”

“Fuck that, muffin… well, I guess you already did that.”

“Terrence!”

“Your circumstances… Strawberry, you didn’t change banks! You had sex!”

“Yes, I did. Can we stop telling all of Manhattan?”

“ Fucking absolutely not. Everybody should know!”

I rested my elbow upon the tabletop and put my chin in my hand, staring at my best friend. He was beaming from ear to ear, clearly proud of himself, looking as satisfied as if he’d had sex. I rolled my eyes, giggling at the insanity in human form. “Kitten you’re positively purring.” I imitated the sound of a purr with my tongue and hooked my arm in his, bringing him closer to me.

“You are positively glowing, and you’ve lost the weight of the world off your shoulders.”

“So I’m a kitten on fire?” We laughed together.

“A kitten in heat for sure!”

I dissolved into a full belly laugh. “Ter, I’m happy. I don’t think I’ve ever felt this before. It’s light, and there’s no baggage. I’m free.”

“It’s amazing how enlightening sex can be.”
“Terry, it’s not just about the sex, but the sex is pretty mind blowing!”

“Bragger! I’m jealous!”

“Sorry, babe. As satisfying as that is, I actually told him everything… about Scott, about my past, all the fucked-up shit… and he didn’t blame me! He didn’t pity me. He still wanted me after all the shit I put him through and all the shit that was done to me. Tom wanted me.” I sat back, pondering the statement. I still had trouble grasping the concept but it felt good saying it.

“Good God, woman, how long have I been telling you that you are all those things?”

“You have to say it because you’re my Terry.”

He heaved a sigh, folding my under his arm. “As best friend, I do. But I also mean it from the bottom of my heart. I fucking adore you, woman. You’re a fierce performer and an extraordinary woman. I’d do anything for you.”

I leaned into him and landed a kiss on his cheek, huddling into his embrace.

With a squeeze, he said, “I’ll even get you laid.”

“God! Terry!”

“So…” he hinted lightly in a sing-song voice. “Now that I’m working back in New York City, will you be taking off for California every week?”

I furrowed my brow at him, confused by the question. His hint hit me first. I gasped, “Did you get A Chorus Line?!”

“You’re looking at the new Mike and dance captain!”

Squealing happily, I threw my arms around him. “Terry! Why didn’t you tell me?!”

Chuckling, he said, “You had enough going on with your show, and then Tom…”

“But you’ll be in Manhattan with me! Are you going to move into Juan’s room now?” I tugged on his sleeve like a five year old, trying to get him to agree.

“So I can talk to you while you’re not there?”

“What are you talking about? I’m always there! We’ll be working the same schedule.”

“You’ll be racking up the frequent flyer miles.”

“Where are you sending me now?” I waved Tom back over, indicating it was safe to return to the table.

“Won’t you be going out to see him?”

I pushed my eyebrows together again and shook my head, trying to figure what he was getting at. I didn’t get the opportunity to ask as Tom rejoined the table.
Chapter 25

Sweaty hands gripped my hips as my fingers clawed at the sheets beneath me desperately, the gratifying pleasure of Tom driving into me again consumed me. I cried out as another climax burst like water behind a crumbling dam and bowed my back off the bed where we’d landed. As the previous nights had gone since Tom and I became lovers, I gasped for breath from my open jaw as my inner walls contracted rhythmically around him, clamping and releasing, cinching and relaxing. He slowed his bruising pace to a leisure rotation of his hips into me, playing out my orgasm for as long as possible, keeping his at bay.

Tom peppered soft feather light kisses along the calf of my leg, straightened along his chest, held against his shoulder so his cock could hit my g-spot inside me. As I came down, I hooked my other leg around his waist and pulled him down to me. Tom eagerly took my lips captive in his, savoring this small interlude in our lovemaking for true intimacy and not just pleasure.

As we languidly indulged in long deep kisses, Tom guided my leg from his shoulder to around his waist, sinking deeper into me, pressing me into the mattress and the 400 count cotton sheets. His hands caressed up from my waist along my ribcage to my breasts. Leaving a small squeeze behind, he trailed up to my shoulders and down the length of my arms to clasp hands with me. Circling our arms above my head, lacing his fingers through mine, Tom gently rocked his hips into me again in slow measured strokes.

Lowering his head along the column of my throat, he found yet another way to make me moan, his talented mouth nipped at the skin there. I wanted to weep from how tender these nights in bed with him were, and how much I was growing attached to him. My two show days passed with Tom sitting in my dressing room, waiting for me on my futon, reading a book or his script for Thor or playing Words with Friends on his iPhone. He’d declined going off with Terry to spend as much time with me as possible, if only during the few scene breaks I had throughout the show.

Victor recognized Tom and let him come and go as he pleased while I was in the building, knowing now that he was with me. Tom would bring in dinner for us to share between shows, so I didn’t have to leave. I was given a rose after every performance by him. We also spent time reading or reciting scenes between shows on the unoccupied stage, to give Tom the opportunity to perform on a Broadway stage.

Monday was my next day off, and I spent the day showing Tom around the touristy things, Ellis Island, the Statue of Liberty, Battery Park, and the Empire State Building. Though the January weather was chilly and less than ideal for a boat ride, I took him on the Circle Line tour around the island of Manhattan. I felt like I was living the dream of the perfect week with the perfect man in the perfect city and performing my perfect job with the perfect (and a little absentee) best friend.

I knew this wasn’t reality, but perhaps I’d gone through enough hell that I deserved a little dose of fairytale. My very own Prince Charming showered me with both public and private displays of affection, boosting my confidence, morale and self-esteem. Nights in bed with Tom were passionate and agonizingly beautiful, knowing there were less of them to come.

Breathlessly, I met Tom stroke for stroke, thrusting my hips up to meet his press deep into my body. I writhed beneath him to get to the next plateau and the next peak beyond. Exchanging heated breaths as only lovers do, I panted into his mouth, “Tom… I… I… I love… Tom… I love… how you feel.”

His eyes focused on mine, his cock sliding in and out of me and there was a hint of understanding.
I suspected he knew what I was trying to say, but my conscience spoke up at the last minute and forced me to say something else. I was determined not to make this difficult on him. I could be happy with one week.

*

On Thursday, while Tom was dressing in my bedroom, I was in the bathroom with the door propped open, brushing my teeth and applying my makeup. Tom was singing off key in the other room, and I was both trying to tune him out and will him to stop pushing so hard, the sound incredibly sharp. This man was so good, almost flawlessly good at impressions with such a keen ear for inflection and tone. Yet his singing skills could’ve used some training.

I’d heard and witnessed him do impressions of everyone from Marlon Brando, Julie Andrews, and Gene Kelly to Tim Roth, Patrick Swayze and Julia Roberts, not to mention a few animals. His talent for imitation should be studied, bottled and sold, and yet pitch from memory was his downfall. I loved listening to him speak, the accent, the tone, the cadence, the incredible vocabulary were all gorgeous and I could listen to him for hours, but my man could not carry a tune without going sharp.

My man.
My man.
My man.

Immediately, as the thought hit me, my bright smile faded and my breath caught in my throat. All the joy and the laughter that I felt fell away and the cold startling and unsettling truth filled me with dread. I was living with a thick black ball of roiling, churning storm cloud that sat heavy in my stomach. Tom wasn’t my man. This fairytale week was not reality. Tom’s bright and sunny demeanor were not meant for me, at least not for always.

He was leaving me. He wouldn’t always be there, waiting for me with a rose and a kiss after curtain call. He wouldn’t be there to read lines and scenes of Shakespeare with me in between shows on a Wednesday or Saturday. He wouldn’t be there to wrap his arms around me, be my human shield when the winter weather chilled me on the walk home from the theatre. He wouldn’t be there to sing off key in my bedroom the morning after making love to me all night long.

The truth was, in three days’ time, he would be gone and I would be alone again. In three days’ time, I’d lose the best thing to ever happen to me. In three days’ time, my dream come true would burst and be nothing more than a memory.

I’d never feel his hands on me.

I’d never see that look that he reserved for me.

I’d never hear him whisper sweet nothings in my ear as I fell asleep in his arms.

The unforgiving reality stopped me up in my tracks. I paused as the truth hit me full force. I shivered violently, placed my hands on the sink and fought the urge to be sick. I doubled over, placing my forehead on the crook of my elbow and tried to breathe through the panic and the pain. Time was going much too fast. Somehow I’d been slighted, my week was half as long as everyone else’s.

I tried to breathe, but I couldn’t quite get there.
Warm comforting arms wrapped around my waist from behind me, and with some effort, I righted myself. Gorgeous blue eyes gazed at me in the mirror, a combination of concern and tenderness. His arms and body supported me so I didn’t collapse into a heap on the floor.

The long straight British nose.

The tall prominent forehead.

The sharp, almost severe cheekbones.

The scar just off center on his forehead.

The matching one just above his thin lips.

The rounded chin underneath.

The blue eyes that could go from slate gray to the warmest sapphire, and every shade in between, every color that had the power to turn me to goo.

I forced a smile over my lips, a fake one that never made it to my eyes and felt more like a grimace. I was staring into the eyes of the man I loved, and I couldn’t make him stay, but how I craved it.

“Alright, my prettiest Wilde one?”

I nodded stiffly, hugging his arms to me around my middle, sucking up what I could of his comfort like a sponge. “Went a little dizzy. I’m fine.”

I wanted to tell him what I was feeling, what really stole my breath away. I wanted to tell him what he’d come to mean to me, how grateful I was for his friendship, how thankful I was for him showing me that good men existed. Thank him for making me feel beautiful. Thank him for showing me that love existed, and was so much more than a four letter word that I sung about in my musicals. More than anything I just wanted to tell him that I loved him for who he was, because he deserved it.

But then in three days’ time, he was leaving. I knew that. I didn’t want to make his leaving any harder than it already was. I didn’t want to make him feel guilty for doing all he’d done. I didn’t want to hurt him. I wanted to make this break as clean and as painless as possible for him. I would give him the cleanest break, because I didn’t want the man I loved to hurt.

Searching the reflection of his face in the mirror, I didn’t want to admire how we looked as a couple, how much I wanted that image to be a reality. Quieting a scream from my heart of hearts, I stamped down: ‘I want that!’

“Why don’t you nap until Terry gets here? Clear your head?”

I nodded solemnly.

He tugged me away from the mirror and the picture of us as a couple, indelibly burnt into my memory. Hustling me through the common area of my apartment to my bedroom beyond, Tom helped me back into bed, joining me in the middle, pulling me into his arms.

I drifted off to sleep as Tom suggested. The next thing I was aware of was that I was alone in bed, with a blanket tucked up around me and I could hear my two men talking in the living room.

Listening closely, Terry asked, “Where is she?” I sensed hostility in his tone, but I couldn’t be sure.
The men moved from the front door deeper into the apartment, securing the door behind them. In hushed tones, Tom said, “Sleeping. She got a bit light headed… about twenty minutes ago. Can we give her ten more before waking her?”

Terry must’ve agreed, the air shifted as they both sat down on my couch, the leather whining under them. I could feel the tension between them from where I was, and I was trying to figure out what was going on.

Terry asked, “How is she really?”

Tom exhaled. “Terry, she’s fine… just needed a nap.”

“And this has nothing to do with you,” Terry sarcastically statement questioned as he did so famously.

“Terrence…”

“Nope, honeybee, I’m not trying to hear this.”

Tom shushed him as Terry’s voice elevated slightly. “Please let her nap.”

Even from where I was, unable to see him, Terry was playing protective big brother over me. There was something happening with the two of them that surrounded me. I knew then that this was the reason for Terry’s scarce and disappearing act since Saturday. “I’ll let her sleep,” he quietly conceded, lowering his voice by not easing up on the attitude.

A few silent minutes stretched out between them.

Finally Terry spoke, “Tom, you know how much I love you, right?”

“And I, you…”

Terry adjusted his position, his clothes rustling against the old worn leather. “Okay, so you know how much I adore you…” Some of the attitude escaped, but he was attempting to keep most of it in check. “You know how gorgeous you are…”

Tom didn’t answer.

“You hurt that girl, and I will break your gorgeous face.”

“Terry,” Tom warned again with a mixture of defeat and defiance.

I’d become a wedge in their dynamic. That possibility never even occurred to me, and I was saddened to be the reason for the stress between them, two best friends. I never anticipated that changing my relationship with Tom would change the friendship between Tom and Terry. Terry had been hoping that Tom and I would develop into more, but maybe he hadn’t dealt with the reality of it so well.

“Nope! I’m not listening to any excuses or apologies or explanations. I heard them all and they’re not good enough – for her. You hurt that girl and I will break your gorgeous face. She deserves…”

Tom huffed and pushed to his feet. I felt the tension in him, like I had that night we first made love. I cuddled further under the blanket, the one that smelled of him, smelled of me, smelled of us. “She deserves everything,” Tom growled in frustration, keeping his tone low and even. “She deserves romance and loyalty, adoration and devotion, flowers for no reason and breakfast in bed, sonnets
written for her and songs in her name, patience and affection, above all love. She deserves all of that. She deserves everything I can’t give her.”

With every addition of what Tom thought I deserved, I both delighted in it and felt my three days left with him grow shorter and shorter. I wanted to run to him and beg him to not let go, especially in those moments. He really did care for me, and I truly believed it when he explained it to Terry without him knowing that I was listening in on their conversation. Guilt joined my feelings of happiness at his admission and hopelessness of the deadline closing in.

I could feel Tom’s inner turmoil even more so with his words than his hesitation in being with me. He was struggling with being respectful and the gentleman he believed himself to be. He tried to keep our distance, but he’d failed. He lost before he started playing the game. Our attraction was too strong.

Tom’s voice modulated from soft to louder as he stalked back and forth the three strides of my common area. “I don’t want to hurt her. I didn’t come here with the intention of breaking her heart or mine. I was trying to be her friend.”

Placating, Terry admitted, “You were her friend and so much more. You set her free. She was so wrapped up in her head after the shitstorm that prick put her through.”

Tom stopped pacing and sat heavily again on the couch. “I can’t be with her, you know that as well as I do. You’ve made your thoughts quite clear, Terry, but you don’t speak for me and you don’t know my heart.”

Tom and I were stuck in an impossible situation and I didn’t see any way for us to stay together, not with both of us so devoted to our careers, both put in motion long before we met.

Terry suspiciously asked-stated, “Explain it to me. Make me understand why I shouldn’t castrate you for being a jackass!”

“Terry…” I heard him surrender all pride in the pronouncing my best friend’s name. “You seem to think that this is a choice. I’m not repaying her for not being honest with me or rejecting me. I was angry then, but I didn’t understand all the pressure she was under. That fucker hurt her physically, emotionally and mentally. She was broken then, and I get that now.”

“So what the hell are you doing? Is this about your commitment issues?”

My stomach knotted in ugly twisting threads of dread, remembering that conversation with Madison back in London. She told me then that Tom was intense, hated rejection and had commitment issues. Did Tom want me because he couldn’t be with me? I pulled my knees up to my chest, and hugged them to me, trying to disappear. I couldn’t have jumped from one bad situation to another. As quickly as the worry swept in, Tom swept it back out.

Sighing, Tom adamantly refused, “No! Kristiane means more to me than that. I want to commit to her actually. Maybe the initial attraction was about her being unavailable, but I saw this through – I saw this through! I’ve never done this before. This is different.”

The way he said that freed something in my memory. He’d uttered those exact words to me. He’d uttered those exact words to me. He was trying to tell me that first night we spent together. I knew it then, but we never got to finish that conversation.

“What’s different?”

“It would be easy to write my attraction to Kristiane off as some kind of phobia, attracted to her
unavailability. But I never pursued it this far, and I was only chasing down her friendship! Kristiane is different, she’s special.”

“Then why let her go?”

“Terry, I want to see this through, I want to be with her, but I can’t. It would absolutely gut me to see her with someone else. But, now that she’s opened herself up to this kind of relationship, embraced the truth and the reality, I can’t string her along for months on end. She deserves to love freely and earn love in return.”

“She wants you!” Terry was frustrated enough for all three of us. He wanted Tom and me to work out, and he wasn’t going to admit defeat easily. This was an impossible situation.

“And I want her. But I can’t tie her to me selfishly. I can’t see her or be with her for at least six months, and I’ve got so many fingers out there with this LA agent. I don’t know what’s going to happen following this shoot. Maybe nothing, maybe everything… but it would be unfair to keep her tied to me, when in six months I have ask her for another three months or six months or a year. I can’t make her wait for me.”

Feebly, Terry offered, “If you asked her to, she would.” He knew he was fighting a losing battle.

“Part of me knows that and would love to pounce on that, but Terry, I might be prolonging the inevitable. For now, she’s better off not shackled to me.”

Waving the white flag of surrender, Terry quietly said, “She’s been so happy with you.”

“Terry, she makes me happy. She should be loved, and I would honored to be that man if the time were right for us. If she could be happy with someone else, now that she knows it’s a possibility, then I have to let her go. I want to be selfish but she’d be miserable waiting around for me. I don’t want our relationship to sour with broken promises and unfulfilled expectations. That’s why I can’t ask her to wait for me. I want to, God, you have no idea how it kills me to lose her before we’ve really had a chance.”

My best friend simply said, “Fine! I kind of forgive you. I’m annoyed as hell.”

“I know you are, Terry. Please blame me and don’t take it out on her. Forgive her. Stay angry with me, I’ll take it.”

“You’re irritating!”

“You love me.”

I heard my boys throw their arms around each other, slapping each other on the back. The laughter between them was decidedly friendlier than when they started out. The atmosphere between them cleared and I felt better for it. I was no longer an obstacle in their relationship, and they worked it out on their own.

I’m not sure what possessed me or what motivated my feet to walk or my body to move, but I went to Tom. After listening to everything he’d told Terry, I needed to be close to him. I couldn’t argue with his reasoning or his decisions. Tom was trying to keep our best interests at heart, and I knew he cared for me. The end of our week together was going to be extremely painful, but I understood it. Terry would be able to support me through the rough time ahead.

I exited the bedroom and Tom saw me first. I walked to him, right into his arms. He held me close to his chest and kissed the crown of my head.
Terry asked, “Feeling better, pookie bear?”

I swallowed the lump of emotion, pushing the expiration date with the man that I loved to the back of my head, and nodded.
Chapter 26

Sleep did not come easy between Saturday night and Sunday morning, even after a two show day, I was too restless. I couldn’t get over that Tom was leaving and these were my last hours with him. I didn’t want this fairytale to end, didn’t want my dream come true to be over, and didn’t want to have to walk away from him. How many times did the thought cripple me to paralysis? Tom only caught the one in the bathroom, but there had been countless, where I would stop, unable to continue.

However, those last twenty-four hours together, those were the worst, not between us, but the countdown to no more us. A gathering storm of emotion that increased in velocity and severity, much like the ticking of the clock when we were alone together. Tom didn’t waste time sleeping either, too wound up to rest, torn between wanting to go on to something he’d been looking forward to for eight months and not wanting to go because what had developed between us. Time was not kind, and time was not our friend anymore.

From the minute we came through the door of my apartment after the Saturday night performance, there hadn’t been space between us for any length of time, indulging in each other as much as we could. In the morning, I caught him sitting up, feet on the floor, elbows on his knees, crouched over himself with his back to me. I softened my voice to match the stillness that closed in around us. “Tom.”

Without a word, he reached behind him and, as if he’d memorized or sensed where I was, he took my hand. He didn’t turn around, but stayed in that position. The impending change in his life was weighing on him, the guilt of leaving me behind showed in his shoulders. This was the very reason he didn’t want to get involved with me because he knew it would hurt, and the pain was bearing down on him.

I sat up, slid across the sheets, and held him. My hand slid from one shoulder to the other as I lined his back with my chest. Skin on skin, I brushed my lips along his shoulder blade.

Tom rasped, “I wish- I want… Kristie, I… may I tell you something?”

“Oh course.”

His body rose and fell under me with a deep centering breath that he took, collecting his thoughts. “You might not like it, but I really want to be honest with you.”

I froze against him, pondering what he could tell me, considering if there was anything he could say that would put me off. “We still get along after all my trauma. I’m sure I can handle some of yours.”

Our hushed voices were the only sounds in the room, the atmosphere intimate and private. I moved my hand from his shoulder, caressed down his back to curl my arm around his waist. His daring into dangerous territory made him flex his fingers against mine of the opposite hand, bringing it off the sheet to around him. I swung my legs around so I was straddling his hips from behind, to make easier to wrap myself around him.

“I’m worried, Kristie. Are there happy relationships? I’ve only involved myself with women,
knowing the relationship would be short lived. They lived far away, or I was off to tour around Europe, or on location in Sweden. Terry called me out on it with you, and it got me thinking.”

Silently I ordered myself to stay calm, he wasn’t trying to hurt me. He was trying to explain himself, and I had to give him a wide berth since he had been so patient with me. I felt his back muscles tensing against my cheek as I held him. “What did you think?” I asked in the way of inducement, when he went quiet.

“It all started with my parent’s separation…”

“Were there clues?”

“There must’ve been, but I was in boarding school at the time. It was a bit of a shock to me,” he confessed.

“Has this shaped your outlook then?”

“I think it did, but I’ve been thinking, really examining things while being here in New York. I did consciously get involved with women and the relationship couldn’t flourish – before. Fear of commitment, absolutely, fear of rejection, undoubtedly… but Kristie, with you, despite following the same pattern, I’ve done things differently.”

Patiently, I waited for him to continue, but he didn’t. He brought my hand to his lips and kissed my palm, then clasped it in his tighter. I broke through the silence with a whisper, “How?”

“I wanted to be your friend first. Several times during your holiday, I considered giving you the key to my flat, meet me for a rendezvous, never to see each other again. I admit that I was smitten. But I didn’t because you… you were so endearing, your feisty spirit beneath this dark raincloud that hung over your head. I could see her breaking out of this fog of uncertainty. I was angry that you weren’t honest with me, but then you looked at me, this broken girl looked at me, and my heart broke for her. When you told me that you weren’t the girl for me, something clicked in me.

“You were so torn, tugged in opposite directions, confused and alone, clinging to Terry… Then you looked at me, seeking a friend… and that’s all I wanted to be for you because that’s what you needed. That’s when I knew that what I felt for you was different. When I kissed you, I knew that I what I felt for you was new.”

I kissed his spine, communicating that I appreciated his gesture. I settled against him again and simply waited for him to go on. The relief that came from admitting that he was angry with me and that his initial attraction wasn’t as innocent as I believed was immediate. He was human, and I did stomp all over him while I was in London. I deserved a little rage.

Tom took another deep breath. “You were so broken, and it wasn’t that I wanted to fix you or mend you – I wanted to see you happy. When I heard how happy you were about getting your show, I had to see that happiness. I heard it but I had to see it. That’s why I’m here, to see you happy and smiling. I wanted to be your friend.”

I circled around so that I was in his lap and I had my legs hooked about his waist. I looked deep into his eyes. “You’re about to apologize to me and you don’t need to. I never questioned your motives here. Even if this was just about the sex-“

“It’s not!”

I nodded, assuring him that I was on the same page. “Even if it was, I got rid of the baggage without you here. You helped me feel sexy and beautiful, somebody worth spending time with.
Regardless of how we got here, I’m grateful.

“I’m sorry that I have to leave.”

I shook my head, combing my fingers through his hair. “That’s your dream. I understand that.”

He nodded, acknowledging that of all the people on the planet, I would understand it. I was just as ambitious as he was in our chosen profession, the business of show. “I have a gift for you, Kristie.”

“You’ve given me so much already.”

He cracked a small sad smile. “This was a bit symbolic, and I couldn’t ignore it.” From my bedside table, he revealed a Statue of Liberty rubber duck that were sold all around Manhattan. It matched the gift he’d given me in London that sat in a prominent place upon my dresser. I giggled despite the somber mood as he handed it to me. “Lady Liberty. She’s a symbol for freedom, and, Kristie, you found yours.”

When he made love to me again that last time, it was bittersweet. We took our time to love each other, knowing that this was the last time we could be together. The caresses were longer, the kisses more meaningful, the act slow and move loving. We connected as we never had before, and he was forever engraved on my heart.

* 

Victor made sure a cab was waiting for Tom, Terry and me outside the main entrance of the theatre instead of the back by the stage door where I was expected, to make a quick getaway. The three of us piled into the back of the yellow car headed for the airport directly after my performance. As much as I hated skipping out on the stage door experience with the audience members, I couldn’t lose those last precious minutes I had with Tom.

Terry, big brother, soul mate and best friend, wasn’t going to leave my side until he knew I would be okay before and after Tom left. This was traumatic enough for him as my own personal cupid, and he wasn’t one of the lovers involved. In the back of the cab with Tom on my left and Terry on my right, I kept absolutely silent, willing back all the words that would make this more somber than it already was, buried in me never to be spoken. I was determined not to complicate this for Tom. I understood his reasoning and his rationale behind setting me free, though I didn’t want to be.

The mood was quiet, with Tom and Terry exchanging stilted sterile lines of dialogue at random. A well of sadness sat on the surface, and I was barely keeping a lid on it to contain it. Tom circled my shoulders with his arm and pulled me against him. He whispered, “Are you alright, my Wilde one?”

I nodded, pressing my lips together to keep the tears so close to spilling over behind an iron will. I hooked my legs over his, snuggling into him, my head on his shoulder, and my arms around him. The street lights blurred by unseen, ticking away my last minutes with Tom. I closed my eyes, hoping against hope the clock would slow to a stop and I could stay in his arms.

Surreal, my life was passing, almost without me being a part of it. I missed Tom desperately already and I was still with him. My pain threatened to show itself, but I steadfastly held onto composure. This awful listless hopelessness invaded my heart, and I could barely hold onto to it.

When we arrived at JFK airport, I moved as if in a trance or autopilot. If I thought about it, I’d curl up in a ball, never to come out again. Tom held my hand, keeping me close, leading me along with
him to the check in desk. I wanted to scream or cry or do something other than this, anything else other than saying goodbye to the man I loved.

While Tom checked in, Terry tugged on my sleeve. He examined my face closely, looking for signs of distress, confused by my quiet demeanor. “Teddy bear, how’re you doin’ in there?”

I nodded mutely, clinging to my last shreds of calm.

As we approached security, I felt like I was walking the green mile. Every step felt heavier and heavier, and I think I stopped breathing ten feet before the sign. I barely heard Tom and Terry wishing each other luck and hugging it out, promising to talk soon. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t listen to my love leaving.

My mind raced for something to say. What do I say to the man that simultaneously opened my heart, made me feel, rocked my world and soothed the rough edges all in one week? Thank you didn’t seem appropriate, but I was at a loss for anything more fitting than throwing myself as his feet and begging him not to leave or begging him to take me with him.

Tom rocked my world, not once but twice. When I returned from London, I fell apart. I’m not an incredibly emotional person, but I cried for hours when I returned from him the first time. I felt like I was losing my mind this time, like I’d never be happy again.

Thoughtful Terry looked at me closely, gestured towards the exit, and said, “I’ll be right there, baby girl. I won’t be far.”

I could do nothing more than nod again. I watched him walk away, almost completely devoid of emotion. I could feel myself shutting down because I couldn’t cope with the misery surrounding my heart. I turned back and looked up at Tom, and tried to gulp down the stubborn lump in my throat. He didn’t look any better off than I felt.

He took my hands up in his and heaved a big sigh. “This is it, I suppose.”

I rasped out, “Yeah.”

“Thank you for being my tour guide,” he said with a weak smile, his voice sounding a bit hollow. “Terry wouldn’t have the patience that you showed me.”

I felt myself nod, my mind floundering for something to say.

Overhead, we heard the first boarding announcement for his flight, and my heart pummeled to my feet. This was really it. This dream was really over.

Tom apologetically stated, “That’s me. Take care of yourself, Kristiane.”

I dumbly said, “I will. You too.” What was wrong with me? I was about to let this man walk out of my life, and I couldn’t say a word longer than a syllable each.

He leaned down and kissed me softly. As he pulled away, he repeated his words from London and the last time we parted, “I won’t forget you, Kristiane.”

I murmured, “Me too.”

He began walking away, so I did.

I made it a total of three steps, when tears began pouring down my face unchecked, all the tear I’d
kept hidden up to this point. Before I could stop myself, I whipped back and sobbed, “Tom!” It was a tortured, strangled cry that ripped from my throat – no, from my very soul. This couldn’t be over. This couldn’t be the end.

Anguished tears trickled one after another, tears I didn’t know I had. My broken, shattered heart was thumping erratically in my chest, about to give out at any moment. Tom turned back to me, closed the gap between us in four strides, dropped his shoulder bag at his feet and took me in his arms. I sobbed into his chest, the power to stop out of my control. I never felt such utter desperation, complete isolation and despair. My heart and mind raced for a solution, a way for Tom and me to be together, to stay a couple, for him to love me.

He took my face in his hands to meet my weeping eyes. He was fighting his own tears, his own pain at our impending separation, our times up. With gentle swipes of his thumbs, he caught some of my tears cascading down my face. Tom kissed me again once more.

I couldn’t quiet my emotions anymore. “I love you, Tom.” The relief of saying those words was unimaginably liberating. I’d only ever said that phrase to Terry before, and this was a huge personal step for me.

An expression of tormented relief arrested his beautiful features and he let his own tears go. “Oh, Kristiane, I love you too.”

He captured my lips in a hungry kiss, one that spoke of abject longing and unspoken hope. I poured all of myself into that endearment, trying to convince him with my passion for him to keep me in his life, keep me as his. Our tears mingled together, sharing in our mutual misery of being parted so soon after finding each other.

When we broke apart, I pleaded, “Please don’t let this be it. I can’t bare it. Tom, you made me sing as I never thought I could.”

He petted his hands down my hair, wiped my tears away as they came, considering my words, thinking over what I was asking. “I don’t want this to be all there is for us, but I can’t ask you to wait for me.”

“Tom… please… it hurts too much to say goodbye.”

Recognition and astonishment registered in his eyes. I think he realized that this was a huge step for me. I never spoke up for what I wanted before. I was no longer the passive victim in my love life. I was standing up for what I wanted, and I wanted Tom. “Kristiane…”

I grasped his hand in mind, and placed his palm over my racing heart. “For you. My heart beats for you. I told you that a week ago, and it’s truer now than it was then. I love you.”

His eyes swam between his hand over my heart and my eyes, wanting to give in to me, wanting to fulfill my every wish like he had before, like the Globe and Royal Albert Hall. He cupped my face, bringing me even closer to him. “I love you so much, and this why I have to set you free. I want this, but it’ll turn stale if you’re waiting for me. I don’t want you to resent me if I can’t come back for you. This isn’t the right time for us.”

I knew he was right, I knew it before I requested it of him. I took a big shuddering breath, realizing that this went against everything that I swore I wanted for him. I wanted to make this break clean for him, and I turned that on its head. This no longer resembled the clean break, avoiding the dumping of guilt on him. It was unfair to bulldoze him like I had six months ago. “I hate losing you, Tom. I can’t face it.”
He softened. We heard another boarding call for his flight over the PA system. He cringed against the deadline that was crippling us. Tom quickly shed his family watch from his wrist, the Hiddleston family heirloom that he wore for good luck and secured it around mine. I gasped, “Tom, I can’t accept this!”

He held the timepiece around my wrist and stared at me intently. “We aren’t over. You will need to give that back to me. I have every intention of coming back for you sometime in the future, but don’t wait for me. Live your life. ‘I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.’”

I recognized the quote from Much Ado About Nothing, one of my personal favorites written by Shakespeare. I smiled through my tears, and quoted back, “‘When you depart from me sorrow abides and happiness takes his leave.’ I won’t wait, Tom, but I’m not giving up.”

“I don’t want you to.” He kissed me passionately again before stating flatly, “I have to go.”

I nodded, overcome with emotion, my tears continued to flow down my face.

“I love you, my Wilde one.”

“I love you, Shakespeare.”

He picked up his bag, reluctantly separating from me, and settled it on his shoulder. He kissed me once more and turned towards the security checkpoint. I watched him sail through, away from me. When he was cleared and on the other side, he glanced back to me, kissed his hand, held it to his heart for a moment and then sent it back to me. His tears were still evident, hating to leave me as much as I hated him leaving me.

I blew a kiss to him and finally gave up. I ran to Terry to help put my broken heart back together. I took a tiny bit of solace that we weren’t over. I didn’t know if we would be in touch in the interim, but that didn’t matter. He would be coming back for me eventually and I had collateral to prove it.

Our story wasn’t over. In the words of William Shakespeare: The course of true love never did run smooth.

The End.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading this far. I hope that you enjoyed the story. I’m sorry for my erratic posting, I’m dealing with a mess at work, and leaves me little time. If you’d like to read more of Tom and Kristiane, I do have some follow-ups already written and I’m currently writing a sequel.

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