What You Don't Do

by LaLumiere

Summary

Charlotte Hamilton thrives on her working relationship with Tom Hiddleston, the man she’s assisted personally for four years of her life. A true friendship exists between the two, and their shared bond is the strongest one that both have ever experienced. Tom considers Charlotte invaluable, as she’s been with him since Thor and has never wavered in her support and affection.

Their bond deepens even further when an exhilarating night out turns into one of the most terrifying ordeals of their lives. The aftermath forces Charlotte’s hand, as well as Tom’s, in more ways than one.

Notes

Thanks to female singer/songwriter Lianne la Havas for her song "What You Don't Do", which inspired parts of this fic including the title. Go check out her album 'Blood' right now!

This fic is a direct 180/opposite of my previous story, Sick With Longing. This is all good
Tom Hiddleston all the time. He's sweet. And still devastatingly sexy. Lots of smut will happen later, I promise. This first chapter is heavy on violence and contains a character death. If that squicks you out, look elsewhere.

Imagine this Tom as War Horse promotion Tom (during THC filming) with the long, wavy auburn hair and the ginger beard and the cheekbones…except put him in present day 2015. Yum.

As always, comments from you all are like cookies - I love them. I want ALL of them.

(P.S. Tom's nickname for OC is stolen from 'Little Lotte' of Phantom of the Opera lore..pronounced as 'Lottie'.)
“Miss Hamilton, I’m going to accidentally get mascara in your eyes if you keep looking down at your phone,” the makeup artist intoned. She wasn’t being stern, but she was under a time crunch: the car would be arriving at the hotel in ten minutes and Charlotte still wasn’t dressed.

“I’m so sorry, Viv,” Charlotte replied, but not before tapping out yet another quick message to James. She tried to do so as fast as she could, finally raising her face back towards Viv and keeping her eyes open so last applications of mascara could be applied. As Viv transformed Charlotte from meek and mild to comely and classic, Charlotte ruminated ironically on the fact that, despite being made over from head to toe, her meek mildness would not go away.

She could always count on James to help with that.

And if he couldn’t get to her in person to deliver his laundry list of problems with her, he’d resort to mobile communication. He always preferred to pick his fights via text, jamming her screen with scathing comment after abusive retort. This evening, it was the usual complaints on his end.

You work too much.

Tom is more important to you than us, isn’t he?

How many more years do you think you can do this? You’re not getting any younger.

Twenty-nine is the expiration date for girls like you.

And there it was. Girls like you.

She knew what he really meant by that statement.

Throwing her phone onto the bed, Charlotte nodded wearily when Viv asked if she was okay to get dressed. The anxious knot that never really left Charlotte’s stomach tightened at the thought of James’ next reply. She told herself she would ignore him for the remainder of the evening, but she was never that strong. It was always Charlotte striving to calm him down, trying to right the wrongs James constantly accused her of.

Between the two of them, Viv and Charlotte carefully trussed her up into her sapphire evening gown and adorned her with shoes, clutch, and jewelry. Viv fiddled with Charlotte’s thick, dark hair, coaxing luscious waves to drape along her bare shoulders. It took all of Charlotte’s strength to wait for Viv to finish when she heard another chime from her mobile.

He just won’t let it lie, she thought to herself. Ignore him.

But she knew she couldn’t. If she could just get him calmed down enough so that she could focus on having a nice time this evening without ruining things for Tom…

As soon as Viv gave her the okay, Charlotte hurried over to her discarded phone. Opening her messages, she reread the last text she’d sent to James, yet another polite plea for him to calm down, saying she would call him as soon as the dinner was over in a few hours. He hadn’t responded kindly, not that he ever did.

Don’t tell me to calm down when you spend all your time being HIS lapdog. I have EVERY right to be upset about that. I don’t need this anymore and I certainly don’t need you. Frigid bitch.
Tears burned, then threatened to ruin her makeup and gown, as she tried hastily to come up with a defense to send to James. If she could only reason with him and then perhaps make arrangements to fly to the States for a few days…

We are done. Don’t call me.

Charlotte stifled a cry at James’ final text. He always did this to her – always when she was about to do something important for her job. If she didn’t know any better – and there was a good chance she didn’t – she would have thought that James always picked these moments to try and throw her off her game, turn her into a sobbing mess so that she would embarrass herself publicly or get fired. It was always when she was working with Tom. She could count on less than one hand the number of times in the last few years that James was happy for her, supportive of her partnership with Tom.

James Osprey ruined nearly all of the professional triumphs she shared with Tom Hiddleston.

This time, it seemed, James had had enough. She’d been with James half as long as she’d worked for Tom, but the way James spoke to Charlotte and the manner in which he treated her (more and more cruelly as time went on) suggested he’d had a claim over her for an eternity, instead of just two short years. Considering he spent most of his time in surgery, mending other peoples’ hearts, it wasn’t really fair to lay all the blame at Charlotte’s feet for working too much and making no time for their relationship.

His dalliance with the nurse from pediatrics hadn’t helped, either.

By the time Charlotte found out about said nurse, James had broken her self-esteem so irreparably that she elected to stay with him, convinced no one else would want her. James none too gently reminded her of that fact frequently. Especially when he knew she was with Tom.

She was startled out of her anxious emotional reverie by Tom calling to her through the shared door that separated their hotel suites. “Where’s my best girl? I need help straightening my bowtie.”

Taking a moment to calm her breathing and make sure that no tears would escape her welling eyes, Charlotte deleted James’ texts from her mobile, stuffing the item into her evening bag with a harsh sigh. She thanked Viv profusely for her good work in a somewhat choked voice. “You always manage to turn me into something beautiful and presentable, Viv,” she cracked a small smile as Viv rushed over to embrace her in return.

“Miss Hamilton, if only everyone were as beautiful and presentable on the outside and inside as you are.” Viv patted Charlotte on the shoulders, moving to sweep a lock of hair back from her face to show off the Bulgari earrings. Charlotte laughed lightly, but anger suddenly replaced her sorrow.

“Yes, well, tell that to my ex-boyfriend.”

_Hopefully he’ll see reason and call me later tonight_, Charlotte prayed.

She had hoped the news would shock Viv, outrage her into saying something rude about Osprey and his manipulative ways. But as Charlotte made her way to the entrance of Tom’s suite, Viv just chuckled quietly. “It’s about damn time,” she winked at Charlotte.

Not knowing what to make of Viv’s strange reaction, Charlotte lifted up the gown of her skirt and stepped over the threshold into Tom’s hotel suite, taking in the bustle of the area. Stylists, tailors, and makeup artists all scurried around the room, putting finishing touches on Tom’s hair, face, and tux. Despite him being her absolute best friend, and despite knowing all of the man’s goofy quirks, Charlotte’s breath still caught in her throat every time she locked eyes with Tom Hiddleston. It never,
never helped a situation when he was clothed professionally for a night out. Ill-fitting jeans and white tees were one thing, but the man was absolutely made for McQueen, D&G, and Armani.

His smile enveloped her as soon as she made her way into the room. She smiled back, feeling her knotted stomach relaxing slightly, as she took in his black-clad frame. He was perfectly coiffed from the waves of his copper hair to his perfectly trimmed beard. Even his shoes glistened in the ambient lighting of the hotel room. She swallowed down the butterflies that sometimes flitted around in her chest when Tom was around.

“There she is, there she is!” Tom announced heartily. “My best girl! Give us a twirl, my little Lotte.” He motioned with an index finger for Charlotte to turn, winking as he did so.

Feeling a blush creeping along her décolletage, Charlotte did as she was bid, turning slowly in a 360-degree rotation so Tom could take in Viv’s excellent work. When she’d completed her circle, she did a little mock-curtsy as Tom applauded and stood, walking on long, gangly legs toward her.

“As always, you’re simply radiant, Charlotte,” he pecked her on the cheek. “Now straighten my tie, woman!” He laughed.

“Thanks, Tom. Are you about ready?” Charlotte asked, pulling the fabric of his bowtie taut and straightening it at his throat. She was aware that most of the room was staring at them. People tended to do that a lot with Charlotte and Tom, as if they were waiting for something private to happen between the two of them. It was an unusually close assistant-talent relationship, to be sure.

“Yes, sweet. Did you take your medication so all the decadent food won’t harm your stomach?” Tom asked. He was gathering his phone and wallet, taking stock of all the items that needed to be pocketed. Charlotte nodded when he looked at her. Then she replied with a reminder of her own.

“Please remember to phone your mum later and ask about the color scheme for Emma’s baby shower, yes? I want to make sure the cake coordinates perfectly.”

“Oh course I will, Lotte. Mum is so thrilled to be planning Em’s shower with you. They both love you so,” he beamed at her. “C’mon, doll. The red carpet is calling our names.”

Hearing about members of Tom’s immediate family loving her had Charlotte nervously smoothing the folds of her dress, thinking about James’ behavior earlier. He always insisted she was unlovable, an inconvenience, selfish.

And now he’s rid himself of you, she mused resignedly. Surely Tom’s family didn’t think those things? Surely Tom himself didn’t? But it was hard to say. James was a smart man and knew a lot about the world – about how people worked. His predictions about Charlotte were rarely wrong. He’d told her on more than one occasion that Tom was merely using her friendship, pretending to like her so she’d do more work for him and essentially make his life easier so he could play hotshot movie star. Charlotte never got those vibes from Tom, but she could also tell that Tom loved to play the Hollywood game. He reveled in his hard-won fame. He was always so nice to everyone that sometimes she second-guessed his friendliness toward her.

It was just another example of James Osprey poisoning her life.

Realizing Tom’s outstretched hand was waiting for hers, Charlotte shook her head free of James and clasped palms with Tom, doing their ritual two-squeeze “let’s go” signal. She swept as gracefully as she could ahead of Tom while he held the suite door open for her, whistling lowly as she passed him.

“Viv’s outdone herself this time, Lotte. You’re going to have every man in there eating out of your
hand! James should be nervous,” Tom teased. He led her to the bank of elevators with a protective hand at the small of her back, his head held high. She loved him like this – sure of himself, respectful yet in control.

Her quiet reply made his control falter, though. Visibly.

“Oh, I don’t think James much cares at this point,” Charlotte breathed, watching the floor as she stepped gingerly into the elevator. Tom followed her in, flanked by his security. He looked questioningly into Charlotte’s gray eyes, which were again threatening to well up with unshed tears.

“What happened this time…?” Tom began. Charlotte shook her head quickly, closing her eyes and holding up her palms in a frantic gesture that Tom figured meant please don’t ask right now. She focused on steadying her breathing, trying to calm her heart rate and churning stomach the entire elevator ride down to the lobby. Had she looked at Tom during their descent, she would have recognized concern coloring his face, that telltale eyebrow of his raised in silent query. Instead, she took a deep breath; eyes closed, she inhaled Tom’s scent, letting the clean, masculine aroma of her dearest friend enshroud her.

Charlotte remained silent and contemplative the entire walk through the lobby to the Jag waiting in valet parking. The combination of making sure she kept her dress from tangling in her stilettos and forcing the tears to dissipate in her eyes momentarily distracted her from James’ ugly final words to her.

Frigid bitch. We are done. Don’t call me.

She was settled down by the time she carefully folded herself into the backseat of the Jag, feeling a small sense of accomplishment at being able to control her emotions. No tears meant that James didn’t have complete power over her, but he still retained enough that she found herself pathetically trying to plan a line of communication to get him to talk to her – to get him to take her back.

Yes, she thought again, a trip to the States will make him see I’m serious about working things out. We can have a vacation together. Go someplace he’ll love.

Buckling her seatbelt, Charlotte focused her mind on positive thoughts as she rifled through her clutch for her phone. She would look up airfares immediately. It would help pass the time as she and Tom commuted to their awards dinner at The Victoria & Albert. Frantically scrolling on her phone, Charlotte was stopped, mid-swipe, when Tom leaned into her left ear and cleared his throat.

“Don’t tell me you’re doing what I think you’re doing,” he scolded good-naturedly. Before she could protest, Tom gently pried the mobile from her grip and deposited it safely in his trouser pocket. When she went to reach for her device, Tom gently grabbed her hand between his two large palms, giving her little fingers the two-squeeze again.

“James can wait, Lotte. I’m sure whatever awful thing he’s said to you justifies you ignoring him for the time being,” Tom explained, “at least for tonight. Enjoy dinner with me. Please? You know we make the best pair…” He gave her the puppy dog eyes. He knew she hated them and that she would acquiesce to whatever he wanted if he used those eyes.

Tearing her hand from his grasp, she swatted at Tom playfully, rolling her eyes. “You are the worst with that sad face, Hiddles,” Charlotte mocked, knowing he hated the moniker about as much as she hated his facial bribery. “This means I get your helping of pudding tonight, okay? If I promise not to be mopey and stupid.” His wide grin caused her to smile involuntarily.

Seeing it, Tom lightly pinched Charlotte’s dimples between his fingers. She squealed and pulled
away as he threw his head back and laughed animatedly. “Of course you can have it,” he chuckled. “You’re my best girl.”

How she adored when he called her that. It made her feel special; important. He certainly treated her as such. Early in their working relationship, before they’d become nearly inseparable friends, Tom had promised her that if she devoted all her energies to working with him, he would devote all of his to being there for her in much the same way. They were promises they’d both kept. The outcome was a mutual working relationship and a close friendship that rivaled many of the actor-PA partnerships in the industry, some that had been forged decades ago. Tom and Charlotte had built their successful little world in less than half of one decade.

She was his best girl. He was her…well, she didn’t have a name for him. But Tom was many things to her. Client and business partner, yes. But also friend, confidante, travel buddy, fellow reader of too many books, dance partner…the list stretched quite long when she truly acknowledged how important he was in her day to day existence. And he had more than a few times taken her mind off of the havoc that James caused within her head – and heart. Tonight was no exception. Yes, she was his best girl. And he was her Tom.

He’d distracted her with talk of plans for Emma’s baby shower for the majority of the drive to the V&A, asking questions about the “spectacular” cake Charlotte was arranging for the occasion. She was only too happy to discuss details with him.

“I swear, Charlotte, for all the thought you’ve put into this…you and Em could very well be sisters,” Tom chuckled, fidgeting with his cummerbund and bowtie in equal measure. Feeling relieved – if just for the evening – of thoughts about James, Charlotte was riding the high that being with Tom sometimes afforded her, turning into her sometimes-flirtatious self.

“Why, Mister Hiddleston,” she batted her lashes at him comically, placing a tiny palm on one of his outstretched knees, “then we would be related, and our love would be…incestuous…” she drawled the word seductively, wiggling her eyebrows at Tom and squeezing his knee until he was a blushing, laughing mess. He poked her gently in the side, egging her on.

Their repartee continued until they arrived at the entrance to the museum. Charlotte began to check herself one last time, knowing cameras would await both of them once they vacated the Jag. She unbuckled herself as the car came to a stop, and was about to open her car door when Tom leaned over toward her, a serious look on his face. “Wait, darling.” He cupped a hand around the side of Charlotte’s face and leaned in close to her, filling her nose with his delicious scent once more. She fought the urge to run her fingers through his deep auburn tresses, instead searching his face for some clue as to what she was supposed to wait for.

She grasped her evening bag with both hands just to give her fingers something else to do. With a pained expression on his face, Tom finished his request.

“Please don’t ever call yourself stupid again. My best girl is nothing of the sort, okay?” He tucked a strand of hair behind Charlotte’s ear before letting her know he’d open her door for her, that she should just sit tight.

“Oh, okay,” she breathed, to no one but the driver. She had agreed, but she knew in her heart she would
still feel stupid a lot of the time. James had always been good at pointing out her less-than-smart moments.

Don’t think about him right now, she scolded herself. Don’t be stup–

She shook her head, chocolate waves brushing her shoulders. Gritting her teeth, she steeled herself and turned as the car door opened fluidly. The elegant hand that extended to her, complete with the French cuffs and onyx cufflinks, served as a reminder that she had more important things to focus on than James.

Tom is worth my full attention this evening, Charlotte reasoned. And indeed he was.

He helped her out of the car, his eyes never leaving her, a proud smile on his face as she exited the vehicle to the shouts of fans and photographers alike. Tucking her hand in Tom’s proffered arm and squeezing twice, Charlotte strutted her way down the red carpet at his side. It was a dance they’d done before, many times. People speculated as to why Tom Hiddleston only ever brought his family members or his assistant, Charlotte Hamilton, to his functions, but he never felt the need to explain his motives.

Charlotte had only ever enquired about it once, after a jaunt to a particularly swanky affair, and Tom’s answer had been simple.

“I only ever have people beside me whom I trust implicitly.”

There wasn’t much room for discussion at his admission, and at the time, Charlotte was too stunned by the honesty of his words to pursue the conversation any further. But in recent months, Tom’s involvement with Jacqueline caused Charlotte to wonder just how many more functions she would be allowed to attend. Surely the girlfriend would take precedence?

If today had been a day for Charlotte’s boyfriend – ex-boyfriend – to be upset about her pairing with Tom, surely Jacqueline Silver would also have words for Tom later on, especially after the press photos came out.

Tom helping Charlotte out of the car.

Tom holding Charlotte’s hand and giving her his arm down the carpet.

It was no secret that Jacqueline (“Never call me Jackie!”) loathed Charlotte from day one. In fact, Jacqueline Silver could have given James Osprey a run for his money in terms of making Charlotte feel like complete and utter shit. Two completely different people – an American jazz singer and a British heart surgeon – both invested in the systematic destruction of Charlotte Hamilton’s self-esteem.

Not tonight, thought Charlotte. If this is the last hurrah with my Tom, I’m going to savor it.

Thinking that the evening out could possibly be her last for the foreseeable future, Charlotte decided to perk up and smiled generously for the cameras, waving to fans and exchanging lighthearted banter with Tom as they progressed along the carpet, stopping at various media outlets to discuss Tom’s recent work and upcoming projects.

While she normally would have stayed with Tom to see him through the entirety of his interviews, Charlotte eventually caught the eye of Aminta Brightman, who waved her over for a few moments to catch up.

“How are you, my lovely protégée?” gushed Aminta, kissing Charlotte on both cheeks. She had
been a colleague of Charlotte’s at her old public relations firm, a sort of mentor whose expertise and training practically led Charlotte to Tom’s doorstep four years ago.

“I’m well, ‘minta,” Charlotte replied. “Quite a nice evening, isn’t it?” Aminta nodded, taking in their surroundings. The older woman was always very observant, her keen eyes sweeping around any area she inhabited. “The best PAs anticipate things before they’re needed,” Aminta had explained to Charlotte early on. It was a rule that Charlotte lived by, and looking back at the formative years of her career, especially with Tom, it had served her very well.

“Tom is treating you all right, then?” Aminta queried, mirth shining in her eyes. Charlotte flushed slightly, smiling and looking down at her shoes momentarily.

“As usual, yes,” she whispered.

“Smart man. Best thing I ever did was send you to his agency,” Aminta mused aloud. “That man adores you.”

Charlotte blustered, laughing slightly to mask her embarrassment. “Well, now I wouldn’t take it that far! He’s my best friend,” she insisted.

Why was she feeling so defensive all of a sudden? Aminta spun Charlotte back in Tom’s direction, murmuring in her ear as Tom’s gaze caught sight of Charlotte’s face. He brightened immediately upon finding her.

“That’s a good place to start, Hamilton.”

With a motherly swat on Charlotte’s butt, Aminta sent Charlotte back to her charge, who winked at her and held out his arm for her to take once more. Strange as it was, Charlotte always felt a slight release of pressure when she made renewed contact with Tom, as if her body was immediately put at ease by his presence.

“I see Aminta found you, lovely. How is she?” Tom queried, ignoring the catcalls from fans and the shouted requests from photographers crowding the perimeter of the carpet.

“She’s wonderful. Always asks about you, making sure you’re not abusing me too badly,” Charlotte joked. They were almost to the end of the carpet, the noise fading slightly into the background.

Tom plastered the most evil look on his face that he could muster, crowding her space and using his tall frame to his advantage as he loomed over her. “I’ll only abuse you when you ask for it,” he chuckled, channeling Loki as best he could with his reddish-brown, wavy hair.

Feigning disgust, Charlotte turned away from Tom to hide her laughter, thinking of her cleverest retort for the God of Mischief who’d suddenly appeared disguised as a famous British actor.

Her comeback was immediately drowned out by a quick succession of gunshots – loud, percussive, and seemingly nearby. Before Charlotte had any time to think, her brain was taking in the scene before her: people running, ducking, falling, and screaming. She would have run into the museum but too many people were jostling her and shoving her in the other direction. Tom was lost to her in the commotion.

The sensation of the hem of her dress ripping was coupled with a wet spray that filled the air just to her right. Looking down at her arm, which lifted up her dress so that she might flee more efficiently, Charlotte put two and two together to realize the wet spray was someone’s blood, and it was now all over the right side of her body.
You need to get inside, she thought in a panic.

That panic ratcheted to another level when she whirled around, still unable to find Tom.

And then the next series of shots rang out.

Animal instinct had Charlotte on hands and knees, crawling across the ground to shield herself as best she could, searching for a way into the safety of the V&A. But was it actually safe?

“TOM!” she screamed, to no avail. The crowd was so large, the collective panic so widespread that her voice evaporated into the chaos as soon as it left her mouth. Eyes darting every which way, trying to find her Tom, Charlotte was soon faced with another sickening obstacle – bodies.

People were dying.

Her ground-level view was turning into the perfect venue for seeing casualties in their grotesque, bloody, immobilized states. Charlotte’s stomach lurched violently as she stumbled to a standing position.

Two more shots rang out.

Where the fuck are the police?! Charlotte screamed silently in her head, ducking and covering the best that she could, attempting to move with the tide of humanity still trying to head somewhere for blessed cover.

She darted through the crowd as efficiently as possible, willing the nausea and blind terror away, when she was suddenly grabbed from behind. Shouting and whirling at the same time, Charlotte blanched when a bloodied Aminta latched onto her, a good chunk of her left cheekbone missing from her face. Muscle and blood oozed from her friend’s wounds, and she was as white as chalk.

Not able to speak, Charlotte gripped Aminta tightly and half-dragged her toward the supposed safety of the museum entrance, which was still bottlenecked with survivors trying to flee the scene.

“Almost... there, ‘minta,” Charlotte gasped, feeling the older woman’s weight become heavy and useless the more blood she lost. Charlotte was starting to wonder how she’d get her to safety, when a final rat-a-tat-tat of bullets pierced the air.

Aminta Brightman dropped with the finality of an anchor plunging into the cold, barren sea as another stray, random bullet punched through her back, then her front. Charlotte screamed, watching as her friend collapsed in a crimson heap.

The red carpet beneath Aminta’s body absorbed her blood until it was a darker shade of red, a more sinister shade of red.

Equal parts guilt and alarm flared in Charlotte’s brain as she made the agonizing decision to leave Aminta and try to make it into the Victoria & Albert.

She ran, ignoring the droplets of other peoples’ lives scattered about her skin. She stumbled, her heel catching on her still-lengthy Givenchy gown, causing her to fall onto the wet carpet with a sickening thud.

The last thing Charlotte Hamilton saw, as someone’s foot clumsily collided with the back of her head, was the swimming and blurry face of her Tom, calling her name.
Tom winced as the nurse swabbed his bicep with an alcohol pad, gritting his teeth at the cold, burning sensation sweeping along his arm. Feeling chagrin at his behaviour – a cut was a much kinder fate than a bullet – he attempted to hide his displeasure.

“I’m sorry, sir. I know that’s painful. Just making sure there won’t be an infection later – that’s a nasty gash you’ve got there.” She prepped bandages to dress his elongated wound.

He was trying to be gracious to the young lady who was seeing to him in A&E, but his thoughts were with Charlotte, who’d been rushed upstairs for a CT scan.

“Yes, it is, isn’t it?” Tom sighed.

In his rush to get to Charlotte amid the pandemonium, he’d managed to get his arm cut open after a series of split-second decisions: taking off his tux jacket for a wider range of motion when dodging through the crowd, whirling around like a madman looking for his best girl, and subsequently getting pushed against a crowd-control barricade (the top of which had been knocked about and dented until it resembled a jagged metal spike). The barricade had sliced cleanly through his dress shirt as if it were cling film.

By the time he found Charlotte, her eyes unfocused and half of her covered in what he thought was her own blood, he had all but forgotten about his own little accident. She hadn’t responded to him calling her name, and just when he thought she was about to reach for him in recognition, her eyes rolled back in her head and she passed out, cold.

Tom had no other thoughts in that second other than getting Charlotte out of there, into a car, and to hospital. But there were so many people still running around, so many people lying along the now-sullied red carpet, that he knew it would be a trial getting her to medical attention. Swallowing thickly, he’d taken a deep breath and summoned as much of an imposing presence as he could muster, despite the circumstances, scooping Charlotte into his arms and hauling her against his chest.

It helped that the gunshots had stopped; Tom assumed the person or people responsible were either
being hauled away or dead (he hoped the latter), and he gathered another small amount of courage at these thoughts, striding with long, purposeful legs toward the first ambulance he could find. The attendants were overseeing two teenagers: one young man with a broken arm and his date, who was clearly in shock – teeth chattering and face the color of skimmed milk.

Tom had enough presence of mind to take two steps back as the girl leaned forward and vomited copiously all over the pavement. He felt bad for her and her boyfriend, but his only goal in that moment was to see to Charlotte, his throbbing arm be damned.

“I need this young woman checked over for gunshot wounds right now, please,” Tom directed, being mindful to stay polite but firm. His directive to the lead ambulance attendant might’ve gone unnoticed, but the man looked up, recognizing “that voice” (as Charlotte liked to call it sometimes), and his eyes went wide. He sprang into action.

“Mr. Hiddleston, sir, I’m so sorry! I didn’t know it was you at first…let’s get her onto this gurney so we can do a check,” the attendant spoke rapidly. He cleared a space for Charlotte, stepping to the side so that Tom could carefully lay her onto the equipment as undisturbed as possible. She was still completely out.

“I fear she’s been concussed,” Tom confided. “And I’m equally worried that some of this blood on her might be her own.” A chill swept through him as he considered the possible implications of the paramedic’s once-over. Watching carefully as the gentleman gently moved Charlotte in tiny, fluid motions, running his hands over and under her clothing, Tom felt a first wave of nausea hit his system. He swayed a bit where he stood.

“Sir?” A second paramedic approached him from around the other side of the ambulance.

Tom reached out to place a hand against the vehicle, steadying himself.

“Sir, let’s get you seated for a moment while we check your wife, okay?” The woman guided Tom into the ambulance beside the gurney, beside Charlotte.

My wife, Tom mused absently.

His thoughts drifted in and out as the female tore his shirtsleeve to assess his own wounds. For an unknown reason, tears began filling Tom’s eyes. Perhaps he was going into shock. Perhaps the tears were because two attendants were now cutting off Charlotte’s gown, and an oxygen mask had been placed over her mouth and nose. When a warm blanket was placed over his shoulders, Tom’s thoughts came back into focus. The female paramedic crouched down in front of him, checking his eyes and assessing his general state of mind.

“Do you know where you are, sir?”

“Yes of course,” Tom sighed, feeling very sleepy and upset. “I’m at the V&A in England. There’s been some sort of attack…a shooting,” his voice cracked. He turned around to the gurney, where Charlotte’s modesty was now preserved by a blanket of her own.

Thank goodness they’ve covered her up, Tom thought to himself. He swiped at a stray tear making its way down his cheek.

The male attendant that was seeing to Charlotte gave Tom a thumbs up, which he assumed meant no gunshot wounds found. He then moved around the gurney to speak with Tom, urging him inside the ambulance so the back doors could be shut. “She’s definitely out cold, Mr. Hiddleston. Nothing else is wrong – all that blood must have been from people brushing up against her and,” here the
attendant looked down at the floor for a moment, “from people being shot nearby. We’d like to get her evaluated in A&E and then monitor her for a bit, CT scan and all that. Here’s a sick bag in case. You’re looking a little peaked.”

He handed Tom a small paper bag, which Tom almost refused.

So they were headed to hospital after all.

It only took two turns of the ambulance before Tom emptied the contents of his stomach into the emesis bag.

The faint taste of bile was still in his mouth as he watched the nurse finish dressing his cut. She was being extremely careful, making sure the bandage was adhered properly with no chance of air or dirt getting in. The longer she took, the more agitated he became.

“Might you be able to direct me to the CT lab, please? I need to see to someone,” he asked the nurse. She was packing up her supplies, preparing to start assessing whoever was in the A&E cubicle next to Tom. Stopping what she was doing, she squinted slightly at Tom.

“Unless you’re family, I can’t really allow you to leave here and go up there.”

He didn’t think twice before the lie was out of his mouth. Hell, the woman didn’t even know who he was – how would she know whether or not he was married?

“My wife Charlotte has suffered some head trauma and I’m anxious to see if everything is okay,” he explained. His worry was so genuine and all-encompassing that the nurse didn’t even question the validity of his statement.

“Of course, sir. Take the lift up to the third floor and head right. The signage will lead you to CT from there.” She gave him a faint smile and turned on her heel to attend to what Tom figured were more injuries from the scene of the shooting.

Grabbing his tux jacket, Tom hurried to the lifts and winced as he put the garment back on, if only to hide his ripped dress shirt and bloodied forearm. The minute it took for his ride to arrive was one of the longest of his life, and although he considered himself to be a positive person, the list of concerns he had about Charlotte’s well being grew the longer he was apart from her. By the time he’d gotten himself to the third floor and was examining the signs for the CT labs, he was thinking things like paralysis and brain damage and permanent amnesia. Not a person prone to hysterics, his jump from concussion to more serious conditions unnerved him. The jump also made his still-tender stomach clench, much as it had earlier in the ambulance.

Tom had no idea where to begin looking for Charlotte, but some blessed deus ex machina had a doctor and two nurses wheeling her down the hallway toward him.

And she was conscious.

Fear rooted Tom to the spot momentarily. Would she know who he was? Who she was?

He was close enough to see her eyes filling with tears when her gaze caught his, and a softly gasped “Tom” slipped from her mouth. She reached for him. He could have cried.
“There’s my best girl,” Tom crooned, relief flooding him as he clasped both of her hands with both of his. He continued the walk down the corridor alongside the gurney, seeing nothing and no one else but Charlotte Hamilton – alive, free of bullets, and cleaned of most of the blood she’d had on her. She’d been given a pair of mint-colored scrubs to change into, presumably because her navy blue Givenchy had been stained and cut beyond repair. He didn’t look away from her sweet, tear-stained face as the attending doctor spoke to him.

“Your wife has suffered a mild concussion to the back of the head, sir. We’ve done our scans and can see no evidence of lasting trauma, but it would be wise for her to take it easy for several days. No strenuous activities for her – no reading, emails, watching tv, text messaging, et cetera. Let her nap if she needs, but if you find she’s sleeping too much or is having intense pain and nausea or vomiting, she needs to come right back.”

Tom was pleasantly surprised when Charlotte displayed the presence of mind to ask her own questions from her prone position.

“Should I have a headache, Dr. Stein?” She loosed a hand from Tom’s firm grip to wipe fingers across her forehead and temples.

The doctor nodded.

“For the next several hours, yes, Charlotte. Nothing some paracetamol and rest won’t fix. But if it gets worse, you are to get checked out immediately.”

“I assume I get to go home, then?” Charlotte turned her head slightly, eyeing the doctor as well as the nurses guiding them into the lift to return her to the land of the living. With a nod to the doctor confirming she could indeed leave, Tom spoke to his best girl.

“Yes, darling. We’re going to get you out of here and into a cab and home, where you’ll be good as new, yes?”

She nodded to Tom, recapturing his other hand with her free one, and she pressed her cheek to the backside of his warm palm. Charlotte maintained the contact until they were headed toward the exit of the hospital lobby. Shaking hands with the nurses after they’d settled Charlotte comfortably into a wheelchair, Tom left her for a brief moment to run outside and flag down a taxi. The evening hour was upon the city, and many people were out and about enjoying the start of a long weekend. Sometimes cabs were hard to hail at this time of night.

As Charlotte waited patiently inside the hospital lounge area, watching Tom try unsuccessfully to flag down a ride home – where had the Jag gone when the gunshots started? – she suddenly remembered all that had happened, and why she was currently leaving hospital.

The gory image of Aminta, part of her face missing, pressed itself against Charlotte’s mind as she thought back through each moment of the ordeal they’d only just escaped from a few hours ago.

The mist of blood Charlotte had walked through.

Seeing people sprawled unnaturally along the route of the red carpet, blood oozing and trickling from their bodies.

Not being able to find Tom.

The thud reverberating through Aminta’s body as it absorbed that fatal shot.

A sharp pain at the back of her skull, and Charlotte barely able to keep her eyes open when Tom
finally got to her.

And then all had gone black.

When Tom returned through the sliding doors moments later, taxi hailed successfully, Charlotte was breathing very shallowly, tears leaking down her face and nausea roiling in her stomach. “T–Tom,” she chattered, swallowing the saliva that was coating her mouth. “I’m g-going to be sick,” she moaned.

In a flash, Tom ripped off his jacket and held it out to her, just in time for her to retch into the custom McQueen. When she’d finished heaving, he quickly balled up the garment and deposited it into one of the trash receptacles near the door. Charlotte was mortified, still crying and shaking like a leaf.

“I’m so sorry, oh my god,” she whispered. Her cheeks were flushed with a combination of exertion and embarrassment, and she wiped her mouth shakily with the back of her trembling hand.

Tom knelt down in front of her, holding out his hands for her to take. She sniffled, putting her clutch underneath one arm and lacing her fingers with his. Slowly, testing her balance and strength, she stood up from the wheelchair.

_Maybe we need a little levity before I lose it, too_, Tom thought as he felt shakes wracking through Charlotte’s petite frame.

“Those earrings look divine with your scrubs, Lotte,” he teased conspiratorially. “I saw those nurses eyeing them envously.” He placed one of her free hands under his arm, much as he had earlier on the red carpet before the world went to hell in front of their eyes. Charlotte mustered up a soft, abrupt laugh, and then sniffled again, hiccupping every so often when she replied.

“They t-took them off me during the CT sc-scan but I made one of the nurses put them…put them back in wh-when they were done. Viv would k-kill me if I l-lost th-them.”

Leading her to the cab, Tom opened the door for her, gently guiding her down into the backseat. Before he let her go to close the car door, he asked her if she would be okay for a few seconds while he spoke to the driver.

She gave his arm the two-squeeze.

Shutting Charlotte’s door, Tom ventured forward to the driver and whispered a request to drive slowly and carefully, as both he and his companion were still in a state of shock and both had already vomited once in the last couple hours. The mention of vomit was all the cabbie needed to hear before he was promising Tom he’d be extra vigilantly. Thanking him for his caution, Tom moved to the passenger side in the back of the car and folded himself in beside his little Lotte.

Her eyes were closed, and while her face looked somewhat serene, he could still see her pulse fluttering wildly in her throat. Her hands were shaking, clasped together, and her breathing was still shallow. Her color hadn’t returned much, either. Tom didn’t feel in much better shape.

“Lotte, darling,” Tom leaned into her and spoke in as deep and soothing a tone as he could create. “I’m feeling a little anxious and I need for you to breathe with me, to help me, alright love?” She nodded, eyes still closed. She reached out and patted Tom on his knee, a gentle touch that clenched his heart.

_Bless her_, he thought, _she’s been through the wringer and is still trying to comfort me_.

“In through our noses,” Tom coached, and they inhaled as deeply as they could, together. “And out
through our mouths.”

Charlotte followed his example, matching him best she was able, breath for breath. They continued like that for several moments, with only the sound of passing traffic, the soft strains of the radio, and the click-clack of the taxi’s turn signal breaking the silence. Tom didn’t take his eyes off of Charlotte. He found it was much easier to stare at her, to get his fill of her beautiful, healthy face, when her own eyes were closed, unaware.

“Tom?” she finally asked, when they were nearing her flat in Soho. He reached for her hand again, rubbing his thumb along her knuckles in a soothing gesture. She turned toward him and opened her eyes, yet she refused to look directly at him.

“I’m so sorry I ruined your McQueen jacket back there,” her eyes filled with ashamed tears again. Tom pulled Charlotte against him gently, chuckling softly at her admission. She was warm in his arms, and he could feel her heartbeat steadying itself after their breathing exercise. When she sniffled again, he realized she thought he was laughing at her. He kissed the top of her head, running his long fingers through her silky tresses, as he responded very quietly so only Charlotte could hear.

“Don’t tell anyone, Lotte, but once we got you situated in the ambulance at the V&A, the second the driver turned the first corner I had my head in a sick bag,” Tom explained. Charlotte moved to look at him, eyes wide.

After fleetingly searching his face, she noticed the bandages on his arm. “I didn’t even think to ask you, Tom! Are you…is everything ok?” Panic again colored her face.

“Shhh, Charlotte. I’m fine. Got a cut on my arm and I was worried sick about you, but I’m fine. Quite a situation, wasn’t it?” Tom reassured her. Charlotte blushed even deeper when Tom looked at her, and he realized she was working some of the events out in her mind. She finally gathered enough courage to look him in his startlingly blue eyes.

“Did you…carry me to the ambulance?” she asked quietly.

Tom just nodded, turning away from Charlotte’s gaze to look at the floor. He didn’t know why, but he suddenly felt almost naked. Vulnerable. As if he’d just given something away that Charlotte wasn’t supposed to have. He masked the feeling with as much lighthearted humor as he could, not for the last time that evening.

“I always wanted to be Kevin Costner’s character in The Bodyguard,” he winked confidently.

“Does that mean I get to sing ‘Queen of the Night’?” Charlotte giggled. Her quiet reply made him smile; at least some of her humor was returning.

“You do have a good voice – so it’s been said – although I’ve never heard it,” Tom accused. “But you’re certainly welcome to sing it in my shower.”

Confusion blanketed Charlotte’s face when the cab stopped outside her flat building. “But why would I sing it in your shower, Tom? I’m home,” she countered. Shaking her head free of the question, Charlotte began to gather her things and made to open the cab door, preparing to get out. Tom moved a long arm across her to grab the door handle instead. “No you don’t, darling. You’re to stay here while I run up and gather some of your things. You’re coming back to Hampstead with me,” he intoned.

There was a finality in his voice that made Charlotte think twice about disagreeing, but she still did so. “Tom, I can’t possibly,” she started. Digging in her clutch for her wallet so as to pay the fare, she
continued to balk at Tom’s comment. “I’m filthy, I’ve embarrassed myself by throwing up all over
your expensive clothes, and I’m going to be a huge burden on you what with needing medicine
every few hours…” she trailed off.

Tom ignored her, snatching her keys from her bag before she could stop him.

“Hey!” she protested, but he was already halfway out the cab door. Once again anxious and resigned
to her fate – alone with Tom in his house – Charlotte slumped back against the headrest, feeling her
headache sharpen just slightly.

She had been to his lovely home in Hampstead Heath a handful of times, but usually with Luke for
work-related things, or for a smattering of family events with Emma and Diana. Tom was home so
rarely anyway that Charlotte could count only a small number of times when she’d been there with
him by herself. Usually she was at his place to retrieve things he needed while he was out, or to
prepare for his return from a press tour or shooting schedule overseas. The rest of the time they were
flung all over the continents, far and wide, working alongside one another and living out of suitcases
in separate hotel rooms.

The last time Charlotte had been at Tom’s, Jacqueline ended up there, too. That evening had not
ended well.

It was a late night of work for Tom and Charlotte, and they’d both returned to his place for a quick
bite so that they could nail down the rest of his schedule for the month. Plane tickets needed to be
booked and travel arrangements made, so over Chinese takeaway, the two of them coordinated
calendars, schedules, and bookings. Apparently Tom had been ignoring Jacqueline’s texts. He didn’t
let Charlotte know about this, so by the time Jacqueline came barging into Tom’s foyer, finger
pointed accusingly at her, Charlotte put two and two together.

Tom had canceled a date to continue working.

In short, the night ended with Charlotte covered in lo mein noodles all down her shirt, and Tom
taking Jacqueline into the living room, growling at her to apologize to his personal assistant and
dearest friend.

No such thing happened; Charlotte instead hastily scribbled a note for Tom, thanking him for dinner,
and saw herself out.

How I loathe that woman, Charlotte thought to herself as the cab continued to loiter. Her eyes
opened a few minutes later with the sound of the passenger door opening, and Tom bounded back
into the car with a large overnight bag, presumably filled with lots of Charlotte’s personal items.

She gaped at the full-looking carrier. “How long are you planning on making me stay, Thomas?” she
asked, bewildered. She was masking her embarrassment with carefully crafted indignation at the fact
that Tom had probably gone through her clothes and undergarments. Tom merely smiled and kissed
Charlotte on the cheek, placing the packed bag on the floor between them.

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Charlotte on the cheek, placing the packed bag on the floor between them.

“Until I see fit to let you go home,” he responded smartly. “You’re concussed, my dear. I mustn’t let
you out of my sight,” he waggled his eyebrows and twirled an imaginary mustache above his lip.

Charlotte rolled her eyes, feeling self-conscious about being placed under Tom’s vigilant care for an
unnamed period of time. And then she thought of something.

“What’s Jacqueline going to say about all this?” Charlotte smirked, feeling as though she’d won.

“Jacqueline isn’t going to say anything, because you’re ill and it’s my turn to take care of you,
personal assistant woman,” Tom retorted. “Plus she’s out of town.”

Charlotte huffed loudly, looking out the window at the nighttime glow of traffic lights and marquee announcements whizzing by. After a few moments, the motion made her eyes water and her temples throb. She dropped her head into her hand and closed her eyes.

“Lotte? Something the matter?” Tom’s tone was suddenly worried again. She felt his hand on her shoulder, could sense the heat of his touch through the thin fabric of her loaned scrubs. “Headache is getting worse, I’m afraid.”

Tom rubbed the nape of Charlotte’s neck soothingly, trying to will the unpleasantness away from his best girl, but he could see from her tight grimace that she would need medication as soon as they got to his house. Her color was draining again.

“Darling, are you feeling ill again?” Tom queried. He wanted to give the cabbie as much notice as possible if Charlotte needed to be ill outside of the car. She shook her head no, but she began to cry again.

She wasn’t feeling ill, but she was overwhelmed. The evening’s events had left her anxious, vulnerable, in pain, and now she was to be alone with Tom in an unfamiliar situation – and he was saying he would take care of her!

As if to add to her list of things to be worried about, at that moment Charlotte suddenly remembered that James had dumped her mere hours ago in a last, scathing text.

*He couldn’t even do me the courtesy of calling me,* she opined to herself. *And to think I’m worrying about planning a trip with him when there are apparently psychotic shooters everywhere!*

Scoffing quietly, Charlotte had no idea that Tom actually heard the sound.

“What is it, Lotte?”

Instead of answering Tom, Charlotte bucked up and searched for her mobile in her clutch. It had miraculously survived the evening undamaged. Thinking perhaps James might have seen news coverage of the shooting at the Victoria & Albert, Charlotte swiped to her home screen in search of a phone call or message from him.

She had a couple missed calls from her family, and a text each from Emma and Luke expressing their relief that she and Tom were okay (Charlotte assumed Tom had been in touch with them at A&E).

But nothing from James.

*At least I deleted his messages so Tom won’t see them,* she thought.

“Lotte, darling?” Tom prompted again. The cab was slowing to a stop outside his home, dark and imposing with its gated front. She didn’t want to get out. Who knew what could be hiding in wait for them outside the safety of the car? Her heart began to slam against her ribcage, a light sheen of sweat beading along her neckline and across her forehead. The headache she had ratcheted up in tension even more than it had earlier.

“I’m…” she started, ashamed at what she was about to admit to Tom. He paid the fare and thanked the driver before turning his attention fully on her, grabbing her bag. She took a deep breath and decided to just get it over with.

“I’m scared to get out of the car. It’s dark. And I need to call my family and I’m afraid of being alone
here with you because it’s weird and James dumped me via text before we left for dinner a few hours ago.”

Tom did the exact opposite of what Charlotte expected. He turned from her quickly and got out of the car, closing his door. In mere moments, though, he was at her door, opening it and reaching in for her. She barely remembered to thank the driver before Tom hauled her out and into his arms, embracing her in a hug that lasted just a second too long for her comfort. He said nothing.

Her bag thrown over his shoulder, Tom’s hands and arms were free to guide her gently along the sidewalk to the threshold of his property. “Take one more step, my girl, and the dark will be gone.” She did as he asked, and Tom’s floodlights clicked on, illuminating the entire property that was visible in front of her. The brightness of the lights made her eyes water, but she was thankful she could see every previously dark crevice and corner.

Tom continued to hold her hand in his as he fumbled with a keypad and led her through the gated entryway. With each measure he took, Charlotte felt herself relax minutely. “Keep walking with me, darling. Almost there,” Tom coaxed, slowing his pace so that Charlotte was comfortable and in no danger of swaying on her feet. “I’ll get you inside and you can call your mum and dad to let them know I’ve got you safe with me, okay?”

All she could do was nod. Odd, she thought, I’m so used to leading him around.

She released a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding and she stepped into Tom’s house, the familiar scents of his living space washing over her. He closed the entryway door with a click and went about securing the alarm system. Green lights flashed, which Charlotte deduced to mean that the property was successfully alarmed. Turning his warm gaze on her, Tom gathered her bag in his hand and reached out to lead her down the hallway, continuing to talk to her.

“I’m trying to dispel your concerns one after another, my little Lotte,” he intoned. “You’ve no reason to feel ‘weird’ being alone here with me. You know my home has always been yours too, right?”

She took his outstretched hand and gave the two-squeeze. Then she placed one foot in front of the other and followed him down the hallway.

“Let’s get your things situated in the guest room, love, and then you can call your parents. I’ve gotten you your clothes and undergarments, and I’ve collected your favorite bath items so you can get cleaned up.”

He could see her blushing at his mention of her bras and panties. If he was honest with himself, he had flushed slightly in her flat as he went through them, imagining seeing her clothed in just the scraps of lace and silk that were enticingly laid out before him in the drawer. That’s why he’d taken so long at her place; he wanted to pick out beautiful things for her but was still trying to be mindful of her comfort.

Jacqueline never crossed his mind – until Charlotte brought up her name in the cab.

Leading her into the combination guest bedroom and bathroom, Tom sat Charlotte’s bag on the queen-sized bed and reluctantly let go of her hand. He gave her a quick tour of the room, and showed her where the towels and flannels were stored in the bathroom linen closet. He was pleased with himself when Charlotte rifled through the items he’d packed for her.

Apparantly he’d gotten some of her favorite comfortable clothes and pajamas, and remembered all her favorite scents of shampoo, conditioner, and body wash. He’d even had enough wits about him to remember her toothbrush, glasses, and phone charger.
“Wow, Tom,” Charlotte teased, feeling slightly more relaxed seeing her own things around her, “were you making a list in A&E?” She picked out a comfortable tshirt and pair of pajama shorts and began rifling through the underwear he’d packed (some of her prettier ones, she noted).

Tom never answered her question, instead choosing to step forward and place a long kiss on her forehead. He caught her hands in his and took a step back to look Charlotte in the eyes. “I’ll leave you to call Mac and Helene,” Tom said quietly, referencing Charlotte’s parents. As he padded quietly out of the bedroom, he turned at the door and fixed Charlotte with a pleasurable gaze.

“James’ bad decision is my good luck.”

And then he was gone, shutting the door behind him.
Who Do I Have All Over Me?

Chapter Summary

Charlotte gets cleaned up - with Tom's help.

Chapter Notes

I really liked writing this chapter, you guys. Am hoping you enjoy the balance of sweet and UST. As always, I want to hear everyone's thoughts. This is the most unintentionally sexy thing I've ever written.

Also, a gentle reminder that OCs are fictional and I don't know or own Tom Hiddleston. But judging from the things I write about him, you can probably guess what I'd like to do to, with, and for him. Yum.

Love you; thanks for reading.

Calling her parents was both terrifying and comforting to Charlotte. Would they ask her questions about what had happened? What if they weren't reachable and she couldn't let them know she wasn't badly hurt? She wasted no time dialing their home number, perching on the edge of the guest bed and listening to the line ring once, then twice.

“Charlotte? Are you there, love? Are you okay?”

Her dad’s voice. She had never heard such a wonderful sound.

“Hi, daddy,” tears were already spilling down her cheeks at the sound of Mac Hamilton’s worried tone. “I’m okay.”

She could hear him exhale in relief, shortly followed by the sound of her mother picking up and exclaiming her joy.

“Oh my love! Your father and I were so worried! It’s all over the news…we kept getting more agitated the longer we didn’t hear from you! Are you alright?” Helene Hamilton was crying, too.

Charlotte sniffed a moment and got her breathing under control, wanting to tell her parents everything and nothing at all about what had happened to her and Tom. She wiped her nose and was about to start into an abridged version of the evening’s horror when her mother piped up again.

“Is…is Tom okay, Charlotte?”

Warm gratefulness to the fates filled Charlotte’s heart at the fact that she could reply in the affirmative.

“Yes, mum. Tom got a little scraped up trying to get to me, but he’s fine. We’ve just…returned from hospital.”
Please don’t go into hysterics, mum, Charlotte prayed.

“Hospital? What happened to Tom, Char? Or was it…oh my god something happened to you!”

Helene was about five seconds from losing it, very loudly, on the other end of the receiver.

“Mum,” Charlotte breathed, trying to remain calm and barely succeeding, “I got a concussion. That’s all. They gave me a CT scan and I’m staying with Tom so he can monitor my sleep and headaches.”

Helene stayed quiet for a moment, as did Mac. They were most likely silently conferring with one another through an elaborate system of eyebrow raising and hand motions.

“Do we need to drive down, sweetheart?” Mac asked. “We could be there in three hours. Just say the word…”

“No, daddy. I’m all right. Tom was with the doctor when he discharged me and he knows what to watch for, how much paracetamol to give me…everything’s fine.”

Helene piped up again. “Have you let James know you’re safe, darling? I’m sure he’s been worried sick about you!”

Apparently not.

“Oh for god’s sake, Helene,” Charlotte’s father interrupted. “As if that man ever gives my firstborn the time of day! Sweetheart, I’m just glad you’re with Tom in his house. It’s secure, isn’t it?”

“Yes, daddy.”

“Good girl. You tell Tom how much we appreciate him helping you through this…”

Charlotte’s father kept talking, but she tuned him out slightly when a soft knock on the bedroom door alerted her to Tom’s presence. He hadn’t changed out of his clothes, but his shirt was partially unbuttoned and pulled out from his trousers. His hair looked like he’d run his fingers through it several times since she saw him moments ago. He looked exhausted.

“I come bearing gifts,” he smiled warmly at her, whispering so as not to interrupt her very one-sided conversation. She smiled thankfully when she saw his offering. Placing a small glass of water and some painkillers on the dresser by the door, Tom then motioned for Charlotte to give him her mobile.

“Mac or Helene?” he mouthed at her silently.

“Both,” she giggled. Tom was in for it.

She listened in as Tom began speaking to her parents, downing her pills and draining the glass of water in one go. Her head was pounding exponentially worse than when she was in the cab.

“…Yes, sir. She’s hanging in there. Yes…no, not at all. CT was clear, according to the attending. Oh, Helene, not to worry. You know Lotte is my best girl,” Tom winked at her as he said this.

Smiling, Charlotte headed with her personal things to the shower, wanting to ease into some hot water to lessen the tension in her skull. She didn’t know how long Tom would be occupied on the line with her parents, but she trusted he would know what to say to convince them driving down from Leeds was unnecessary. They would just dote on her to the point of insanity, anyway.

Placing her sleep clothes onto the counter of the bathroom sink, Charlotte went about organizing her toiletries for a long, hot shower. She turned on the tap, letting steam fill the room, and used the loo
while she took off her jewelry.

*Mustn’t lose any of this,* she smiled thoughtfully.

As warmth wrapped itself around her, Charlotte began to strip off the sterile green hospital scrubs she’d been loaned. The fabric was itchy against her skin, and she could smell the faint trace of cleaning supplies and the tang of hospital stench in the fibers. The scrubs pooling at her feet on the floor, Charlotte stood up to her full height and glanced in the mirror while she began to unhook the lacy, strapless bra she’d worn with the navy Givenchy.

And then she got a good look at herself.

Bruises covered her ribcages, abdomen, and hips, most likely due to the numerous collisions she’d suffered trying to duck and cover at the V&A. Peeling down her scalloped lace underwear slightly, Charlotte observed even more contusions and discoloration. But the bruising wasn’t the worst part.

Although the nurses in A&E had done their best to get Charlotte cleaned up, unconscious as she was, they hadn’t removed all the blood. On her face, yes. But the rest of her? Not so much. Close inspection under bright light revealed a thin coating of it in small patches along Charlotte’s neck, her right arm, and dried along her side, presumably where she had dragged a dying Aminta toward safety, unsuccessfully.

And just like that, the thought of Aminta’s bloody, lacerated face slammed itself forward into Charlotte’s mind again. She could recall the thick, sticky flow pouring from the woman’s face, bits of stringy muscle hanging down her jawline.

*How much of this blood is Aminta’s?* Charlotte thought, feeling her stomach lurch again.

*Who else do I have all over me?*

Zoning further out, Charlotte’s mind replayed the repetitive rat-a-tat-tat of the bullets, relived feeling the mist of red death settling onto her person.

*Oh god.*

Frantically turning on the taps of the sink, Charlotte tried to scrub away at the dried splotches of blood along her body.

*I’m never going to get it off me.*

Tears began flowing freely from her eyes as her stomach gave another agonizing turn.

*I’m never going to get these dead people off of me!*

Trying to scrub herself and not vomit at the same time, Charlotte let out a terrified sob, scratching at her neck and shoulder with the hottest water she could stand. A loud bang on the bathroom door startled Charlotte even more, causing her to cry harder, scrub faster. Tom burst in, and taking one look at the state his best friend was in, he rushed to her and cradled her shaking, heaving form in his arms.

“Darling, I’m here,” he grabbed her face in his hands and forced her to look at him. “Charlotte… sweet, *shhh.*”

Wrapping his arms around her, rocking her very gently side to side, Tom tried to bring her round from whatever state of mind she’d fallen into.
“Lotte, my love, calm down, keep looking at me…” he mimicked the breathing they did in the car earlier and she tried valiantly to match his respirations.

“Th-there’s s-so much blood on me, T-Tom,” she stuttered, tears still leaking copiously from her eyes. “I c-can’t get it off…”

His heart broke, seeing the panic and desperation in Charlotte’s eyes, how small and vulnerable and afraid she looked. Her body shook. She tried to pull away from him and he knew she was wanting to continue clawing at herself. He had a choice to make, and the war within him could only last so long.

_Undershirt_ Should I leave her alone in here to shower, where she won’t feel violated? Where she might harm herself more? Or do I help her into the shower and make sure all the horror of this day is washed away?

She made the choice for him when she broke free of his embrace to empty her stomach – again – into the toilet bowl. And Tom was able to see, moments before he rushed to hold her hair back, that her undergarments were soaked through in places with blood.

_Underwear_ So much for getting her in the shower with her modesty covered.

He wanted her to see no traces of blood, if he could help it. As he guided her into a standing position, giving her a towel to wipe her mouth clean, Tom recognized that his dearest girl could not do much alone this evening. Not only did she not have the fortitude, but she no longer had the strength, either. Taking a deep breath, Tom masked his embarrassment at the situation and took charge, being as dominant as possible.

“Charlotte, my love, we’re going to get you out of these underthings and get you into the shower, alright darling?”

She didn’t even protest as he unhooked her bra. It was as though she wasn’t even with him. Being as gentle as possible, Tom slid the lace away from her body, making every effort to avoid staring at her rounded breasts. Despite her condition, the state of her body, and her ruined hair and makeup, he had to stifle a gasp at her sumptuous flesh naked before him.

He felt like a depraved creep when he stiffened slightly, his McQueen pants tightening.

_Goddamnit_ he cursed himself. _This is Charlotte. Not some woman you’re bedding. Treat her with respect!_

Blessedly, Charlotte had enough presence of mind to slide her panties down her legs, holding onto Tom’s shoulder with one shaking hand as she stepped out of them and bravely looked him in the eyes, fear and fatigue etched within her own. She whispered so quietly he barely heard her.

“I’m s-sorry I look so awf-ful and you have to…d-do this.” She dropped her gaze to the floor when she finished speaking, folding her arms over her chest and crossing her legs best she could while standing.

Eyes widening at her comment, Tom shook his head vehemently as he shucked his trousers, dress shirt, and undershirt, adding them to Charlotte’s pile of clothes on the floor. Finally standing awkwardly in his boxers, still internally fending off the tightening below his waistband, Tom pressed on. His best girl needed him to be strong. Gathering Charlotte’s hands in his, he walked backward to the enormous shower cubicle, never breaking eye contact with her. She followed slowly, her breath hitching in her throat every so often.

_Don’t look away, she coached herself. You won’t see the blood if you don’t look away. Look at your_
“There’s my girl,” he coaxed, pulling her into the steamy shower with him. “We’re going to get you all cleaned up, Lotte.”

He gathered her into his arms, turning so she was partially underneath the hot spray. He ran a gentle hand up the length of her neck, rinsing traces of blood as he went, and tilted her head back easily, gently. “Close your eyes, sweet. Let’s get your hair washed, okay?”

She leaned backward, seeking the warmth of the water, and nodded minutely in agreement. One broad hand along her lower back anchored her, establishing that Tom wouldn’t let her slip, or fall. When her long hair dripped neatly down her back, Tom tilted Charlotte forward again, into the cradle of his chest. Not wanting to frighten her, but wanting to calm her before his next move, he resumed his earlier rocking motion as she pillowed her head against him, listening to his heart while her tears dried.

“May I wash you, Lotte? I’m not trying to be forward or brazen, here,” he explained, “but you’ve not the strength to do it yourself. And I’ll make sure all the blood is gone, love. Okay?” On and on he rocked her, the humidity curling wisps of his ginger hair around his ears. He made no other move until Charlotte gave acknowledgment, acquiesced to what needed to be done.

“Mm hmm,” she mumbled.

She seemed content, curled against his chest, her tiny palms splayed against his pectorals, and he knew her medication was kicking in. Moving carefully around her, Tom began with Charlotte’s long hair, working equal parts of her favorite shampoo and conditioner into the now obsidian-looking strands. He was careful to make quick work of it, but at the same time he moved slowly enough to ensure she didn’t get any soap in her eyes.

Finding small flecks of blood here and there at her hairline, Tom massaged the traces away and washed Charlotte’s hair out thoroughly. She stirred slightly as he finished, to his relief and pleasure.

“Tom?” She flicked some water out of her face as he moved back around to her front.

“Yes, darling?”

“My head feels a little better,” she smiled at him, making eye contact briefly, cheeks flushed with the heat – and perhaps a little embarrassment now that she was more calmly aware of her surroundings. Impulsively, although slowly, she reached out to run hands through Tom’s wet hair, then rested her fingers on his shoulders.

I should get out, Tom realized worriedly. His boxers were in danger of becoming uncomfortable again soon, if she kept smiling that way at him.

She’s naked and…oh god…wet.

She may have been his best and closest friend, but she was still a very attractive woman, and Tom was a hot-blooded man (science and all that stuff).

“Are you okay to finish, love? Now that you feel a bit better?” Tom almost stuttered, moving away from Charlotte so as not to make her feel threatened.

Blushing, brought back to herself after the medication started working, Charlotte nodded, keeping eye contact as if her life depended on it.
Don’t look down. He’s practically naked right in front of you.

“Yes, Tom. If…if you could just do me one favor, please.” He stepped forward, immediately cupping her hipbones with his hands. The gesture was too familiar, but neither of them flinched at the contact. Gripping her by the arms would have startled her, he reasoned to himself. Tom searched her face, ready to agree to whatever demand she placed upon him. Charlotte spoke shyly.

“Could you just make sure…the, um…blood on my side and part of my back is gone…please?” She pointed in the general area with which he needed to involve himself, then reached for a flannel and her amber-scented body wash. He swallowed thickly, murmured the most chivalrous “of course” he could muster, and then took the soapy cloth from her, motioning for her to turn this way and that as he tenderly scrubbed the remains of the day from her supple skin.

Tom had to bite back a groan when, as he worked, she leaned her forehead and upper body against the shower wall, arms raised above her head in a pose of complete and utter submission to his ministrations. The swell of her breasts pushed gently against the droplets of water clinging to the tile. A noise of sleepy satisfaction passed her lips and he almost dropped the flannel.

I need to get out of here, he scolded himself again. The boxers were definitely bunching uncomfortably.

Doing a quick, sterile once-over of the various sites of blood spatter previously on her form, Tom deduced that Charlotte Hamilton was indeed clean and gore-free from their arduous evening out. Rousing her from her prone position against the wall with a gentle pass of his hand along her right shoulder blade, he made to exit the shower as quickly as he could before things got any more… difficult.

“All good, darling. I’ll let you finish,” he handed her the cloth, his head swimming with visions of her wet curves, his nose filled with the scent of her luscious shampoo and that amber body wash. She accepted the flannel, nodding shyly but thankfully at Tom, watching him almost stumble out of the shower. When she determined him to be safe, she turned away and finished her ablutions, watching his retreating form through the foggy glass of the cubicle door.

Ever the gentleman, she smiled. Her headache continued to ebb.

Tom practically ran to the master bedroom, wet boxers chafing painfully against his unwanted, unwished-for erection. He felt ashamed, as if he was taking advantage of Charlotte’s naked and vulnerable state somehow.

But she needed your help, he justified, remembering the blind terror on her face when he barged into the bathroom to find her scrubbing her skin raw.

Rushing into his own bedroom, he grabbed a clean pair of boxers and a soft shirt, as well as some pajama pants.

A quick shower will take care of this, he thought. And then I can get her situated in her bed and hopefully get her to sleep for a few hours.

But he wondered if she would be able to sleep successfully. He hurried through his own chilly shower, thinking banal thoughts, until the tendrils of desire were out of his system. Toweling off and dressing quickly, Tom moved back into his room to see his phone shining on the bed with a new text
Baby, are you okay? I'm SO worried about you!

It was Jacqueline.

He hoped she hadn’t seen much of the news or she would be barging her way back into town and into his house, wanting to play nurse or some other ridiculous diversion. He responded quickly, wanting her out of his hair. He had other things to worry about.

I’m fine, love. Had a bit of a scrape but everything is ok. Am exhausted and going to sleep. Love you.

He thought that would be it, but she messaged right back.

Should I come over? Do you need anything?

Yes, he needed something. He needed Jacqueline to leave him alone so he could tend to his concussed assistant. Tom felt that Charlotte was in the clear, but the fact that she’d vomited twice in the course of the evening was still concerning to him.

No…just need some rest. Can I call you in the morning?

Her reply took a couple of minutes. Either she was driving to him (oh god, no) or she was figuring out how to word her ire at not being invited over. Tom was halfway down the hall to Charlotte’s room when his phone quietly vibrated in his pocket again. Before he went into the guest room, he checked the message, hoping a potential disaster could be avoided.

Is Charlotte with you???

He wiped a hand over his face. Whatever way this conversation went, the end result would surely be bad. He pocketed the mobile, ignoring the jealous waves pouring out of it. He needed to check on his best girl.

Although sleepy, Charlotte seemed like a new person when Tom peered in the door to find her. She was seated comfortably on the edge of the bed, toweling her long hair into soft waves. All traces of blood were gone, and her bruises were shielded by what looked like the softest off-shoulder t-shirt and shorts ever created. Hearing the door creak, she looked up suddenly, catching Tom smiling at her. She broke into her own grin at the sight of Tom’s mussed hair and sleep pants.

“Are those tiny little William Shakespeares all over your trousers?” she laughed hoarsely. “I haven’t seen those on any of our trips."

He chuckled a quiet “ehehe” and nodded, pleased that Charlotte was cognizant and relaxed. The reptilian part of his brain registered that she looked beautiful.

Her brow furrowed for a moment and then she spoke again. “They’re glowing…I think you have a call.” When he hesitated, staring at her, she nodded.

“It’s okay, Tom. I’m not exactly going anywhere. I’m sure you need to talk to Jacqueline,” Charlotte reasoned. “I heard from James, anyway.”
Tom’s heart sank. *So that’s why she seems in a better mood.*

His phone continued to buzz and light up, so he excused himself into the hallway to put out whatever fire he’d unknowingly started with Jacqueline.

“Yeah, Jacq?” he answered, weariness conveyed in his voice. Jacqueline’s shrill tone woke him right up.

“Is she there with you? Why didn’t you answer me? Are you two even *working* right now?” He could hear her irate breathing on the other end. She sounded like a pug trying to breathe through a straw.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Tom put on his most patient voice and attempted to talk Jacqueline down – not for the first or, he figured, last time.

“We had a bit of an evening, Lotte and I,” he started. Jacqueline snorted rudely.

“What the fuck is even going on? Don’t try to tell me you two are *working* at this hour. Don’t lie to me, Thomas!”

Jesus Christ, he thought. *Here we go again.*

Tom waited her out for a few more moments while she spewed her vitriol, accusing him, then Charlotte, then both of them of inappropriate behavior and unsavory collusion. As usual, when she tired herself out, Tom responded, hoping she would hear sense. He had no patience tonight for tiptoeing. He was to the point.

“Jacqueline, Charlotte suffered a concussion and some pretty severe trauma at the awards dinner tonight. She was sprayed with a lot of blood from people hit nearby, as I’m sure you’ve heard about on the news, and one of her closest, oldest friends and colleagues practically died in her arms. I had to take her to hospital, Jacq.”

She said nothing, yet he could still hear the gears working in her brain.

“Why was that your responsibility, Thomas? She *does* have a boyfriend!”

He’d made some bad choices in his life, but at that moment, Tom wondered why he’d ever forged a relationship with this cold, insensitive woman speaking to him. His anger grew, remembering the events of the evening.

“So, let me get this straight, Jacq. You wanted me to *abandon* a shooting spree scene, leave Charlotte *unconscious by herself* laid out on the concrete, and try to flag down her boyfriend via *mobile* while I’m bleeding through my clothes?”

More silence.

“Well, no, but…” she struggled, backpedaling.

The growl that Tom gave over the line would have normally aroused Jacqueline Silver to no end, but in this instance, it actually frightened her.

“I suggest you call me in the morning, and think *very* carefully about what you want to say to me then, and with what tone you’d like to do so. If you’ll excuse me, I have to go tend to my *best girl.*” And he hung up.
Charlotte was ensconced comfortably under the duvet of the guest bed, lounging on the pillows with eyes closed, when Tom reentered the room. He padded over to the bedside, turning off the bright overhead light on his way and instead flicking on the softer, mellow-lit bedside lamp.

*Is she asleep?* He wondered.

He fought the sudden urge to brush his fingers through her long, soft waves of hair. Just as he reached out, she popped an eye open, smirking as she realized how startled he was.

“So I take it your conversation with the missus didn’t go well?” Charlotte asked, reaching out to poke Tom in the arm when he sat beside her at the bed’s edge. He shook his head, rolling his eyes and hoping Charlotte wouldn’t press him for any further information. She didn’t. Instead, she changed the subject quite abruptly.

“Thank you for helping me, Tom,” she looked down and blushed a little. “I know we’re…close, you and I, but…I’m sorry if that was awkward in there,” she gestured to the bathroom. Tom leaned forward to press a soft kiss on her forehead, then her eyelids. She hummed in pleasure, as if the act soothed her head.

“My best girl needed me,” he responded simply. “Are you feeling tuckered out, my sweet little Lotte?”

As if on cue, she yawned, stretching under the covers with feline grace and lowering herself further into the soft, warm cocoon. Nodding, she pulled her arms out from under the covers and reached for Tom, gesturing to him for a hug. Pulling him into her embrace, she pecked him softly on the cheek, laughing softly when he playfully rubbed his beard against her jaw.

“Thank you for everything,” she whispered in his ear.

One more kiss to her brow, and he leaned back, taking her hands in his own. She felt warm, and looked content. The worst had passed.

*And they had got through it together,* he thought happily.

“Get rest, darling, and wake me if you need anything at all, yes?”

She gave his hands the two-squeeze in reply, and uttered a soft “goodnight.”

As he turned out Charlotte’s bedside light and left the guest bedroom, Tom made his way quietly through the house, checking doors, locks, and engaging security system panels. The fatigue of the day’s events was finally almost too much for him to bear, and it took the last of his strength to make it to his room, where he collapsed into bed.

Little did he know that sleep would be a near impossibility in the coming hours.
You Are NOT to Leave This Bed

Chapter Summary

A (mostly) sleepless night is had by all.

Chapter Notes

Over 1,000 hits on this story and we're only at Chapter 4! Thanks for the love, everyone. I hope you're enjoying Tom and his best girl. We're still in slow burn territory but I promise I will make it worth the wait. OMG this is so sweet I might have cavities after writing it...

Thanks for all the great comments and convos. Keep ’em comin!

Wanted to make sure you’re ok.

It wasn’t much, but it was something to go on.

Charlotte knew she was foolish to feel the ray of hope that James’ text afforded her, not long after she emerged from her shower. But however aloof he still was, the tone of this message was exponentially nicer than his previous parting comments to her.

Maybe there’s a chance we can work this out, she thought hopefully.

How sad for her that she even considered the possibility, after what the man had already put her through. At times like these, though, when she was craving any attention from her boyfriend – ex, she reminded herself – nearly anything he said to her would do. She would take aloof. She would take disinterested.

It took her no less than twenty seconds after she saw the message to send him one in reply, not being careful to guard herself. She always showed her hand to James, even though it backfired spectacularly more often than not.

I’m okay. Got hurt badly enough to go to A&E in an ambulance but everything is fine now.

James wasn’t so quick to return her text. This bothered her, obviously. Why wouldn’t he respond immediately after finding out she had been to hospital?

She ignored the voice in her head when it replied with “because he doesn’t care.”

By the time Osprey did reply, his response threw Charlotte.

Who went with you in the ambulance?

The answer should have been obvious to him, but as usual, he wanted her to spell it out. So she did, but couldn’t help herself when she reached out to him. Old habits.
Tom. He was hurt also. Do you think we could have lunch or dinner tomorrow?

She waited for James’ reply, giddy at the thought of a possible mealtime reconciliation, when Tom padded quietly into the guest room, looking clean and relaxed. She rarely saw him so un-energized, and realized that he had been through as much emotional trauma as she. His wild hair would have normally caused her to giggle, as it tended to get unruly when he grew it out – she loved it best like that, longer and wavy – but then she noticed his pajama pants and had to fight the urge to bust out laughing. She nearly succeeded.

“Are those tiny little William Shakespeares all over your trousers?” Looking down at his bard-clad legs, Tom gave his trademark little laugh and gazed mirthfully back at Charlotte to nod, relaxing as he took in her sleepy, beautiful appearance. Although she was sitting on the edge of the guest bed fully clothed – albeit in shorts and her softest off-shoulder shirt – Charlotte felt positively naked at the receiving end of Tom’s smile. It wasn’t that he was leering at her, or making a show of roving his eyes over ever inch of her that he could find, but she felt completely bare in that moment. And yet, he’d seen her completely unclothed and covered in blood in the shower.

Tom’s gaze was interrupted when Charlotte noticed his Shakespeare trousers were glowing; pointing this out to Tom, he frowned at the implications of her statement. She could see him warring with himself; Charlotte needed only one guess as to who was calling.

“It’s okay, Tom. I’m not exactly going anywhere. I’m sure you need to talk to Jacqueline,” Charlotte reasoned. “I heard from James, anyway.”

She put aside her brief flash of jealousy at Jacqueline’s call and focused on the thought that she would be hearing back from James and smiled, imagining a pleasant lunch or drinks and dinner, where he would rethink his hasty decision to dump her. Charlotte watched Tom grimace apologetically and excuse himself into the hallway.

I wonder if I’ll be able to hear Her Highness squawking through the phone, Charlotte mused.

It didn’t take long for her to hear some muffled commotion as Tom spoke with his girlfriend, but when she strained to listen more closely, her own phone beckoned to her on the bedside table. She hadn’t checked it in the last couple of minutes and she needed to see if James had responded to her mealtime request. Even though Dr. Stein explicitly instructed Charlotte to avoid eyestrain after her head injury, she couldn’t help herself.

But just as she situated herself under the covers and reached for her phone, Tom reopened the bedroom door and wandered back in, looking politely irate. He was so lost in his thoughts that Charlotte closed her eyes quickly, playfully wanting to trick him into thinking she was already asleep. She sensed the bright overhead light being turned off and could hear Tom’s slow, careful footsteps approaching the bed. A pleasurable jolt settled in Charlotte’s stomach when she smelled Tom’s clean, masculine scent nearing her. Feeling mischievous, she waited a few seconds and then smirked, opening one eye to glance at him, startling Tom away from what he’d been about to do – stroking her hair.

“So I take it your conversation with the missus didn’t go well?” Charlotte queried, and Tom sighed dramatically, sitting gingerly beside her on the edge of the bed. He was so lost in his thoughts that Charlotte closed her eyes quickly, playfully wanting to trick him into thinking she was already asleep. She sensed the bright overhead light being turned off and could hear Tom’s slow, careful footsteps approaching the bed. A pleasurable jolt settled in Charlotte’s stomach when she smelled Tom’s clean, masculine scent nearing her. Feeling mischievous, she waited a few seconds and then smirked, opening one eye to glance at him, startling Tom away from what he’d been about to do – stroking her hair.

His irritated heart softened as she thanked him for helping her, and then he proceeded to blush in embarrassment as she recounted how self-conscious she’d been during the ordeal. But it was second
nature for him to reach out and soothe his best girl, kissing her forehead and eyelids softly. Tom wasn’t sure if it was his imagination or not, but he swore he felt Charlotte relax even further at his gentle touch. He hoped so. She’d been through so much today.

Like a tiny kitten, Charlotte yawned suddenly, stretching, reaching out for Tom in silent permission for an embrace. He did so without hesitation, gathering her into his arms and playfully scratching his beard along the sensitive skin of her cheek and neck. With a kiss to his cheek, Charlotte whispered, “Thank you for everything,” in his ear.

Tom returned her affection with a last brush of his lips against her forehead. “Get rest, darling, and wake me if you need anything at all, yes?” She gave his hands the two-squeeze in reply, and uttered a soft “goodnight.”

Watching him retreat from her room, Charlotte was filled with the longing thought that she wished all men were more like her Tom, barely acknowledging to herself that she included James in that statement. Despite feeling this way, a small glimmer of excitement flitted in her chest when she was finally able to reach to the nightstand for her mobile, seeing that James had indeed finally replied to her earlier text. Instead of agreeing to meet her for a meal or drinks tomorrow, however, James was fixated on the other part of her previous message.

*I should have known you’d go with him. And let me guess – are you with him right NOW?*

Her eyes watered; whether it was from the strain of reading or the tone of James’ message, Charlotte couldn’t say. Probably both. She sighed, resigning herself yet again to the fact that she’d have to defend her actions. Most of them weren’t her fault; she’d been unconscious. But as ever, James had a way of making Charlotte feel that everything was indeed her own fault.

*I was concussed and Tom had to get me to hospital. The doctor and nurses who attended me insisted I not be left alone so that I could be watched for worsening headaches and vomiting.*

Dread filled Charlotte’s heart and stomach at the turn her conversation with James had taken. At this point, her request for a meal with him would probably be discarded, forgotten.

*Oh so OF COURSE you’re at his place, aren’t you? Isn’t that convenient? And you wonder why I dumped you.*

Charlotte’s head began to throb, but she couldn’t resist trying to make things right – again. James knew that was her weakness, Charlotte always trying to make amends for the millions of slights he conjured from thin air. He loved using that weakness against her, it seemed. She was almost through tapping out a plea, begging him to calm down and to please meet her so they could talk, when another message of his came through.

*Maybe once he finally realizes how off-putting you actually are he’ll come to his senses.*

Flushing in anger, but also embarrassed at James’ insinuations, Charlotte nearly threw her phone but was saved at the last moment by one last text. Curiosity always won out.

*What a disappointment you’ll be to him in bed, if you haven’t been already.*

She went ahead and threw the phone onto the floor anyway, tears streaming down her face. As if she hadn’t been traumatized enough today, on top of James breaking up with her, now she had to fight that inner voice in her mind, agreeing with everything James said. How off-putting she was. How James thought she was probably already physically involved with Tom…

*But I’m not,* she whined in frustration. *I would never do that to someone I love.*
The problem was, if love felt like what Charlotte took part in with James Osprey, she wasn’t sure she wanted anything to do with it.

*Especially since you’re a frigid disappointment,* the nasty voice in her head hissed again.

A painful ache began in Charlotte’s chest at the sudden thought of Tom finding her to be a disappointment – in any way – but then her face grew hot when she followed the thought through to its intended conclusion: that she would never be able to please Tom, or herself, in bed – just like James said. Jarred, she stopped herself.

*Tom is my best friend,* she reasoned, mortified. *I could never even think of him like that!*

It was no secret that Charlotte had a small frame of reference when it came to sex. James was her first, and she was very reserved about aspects related to physical love. Her minimal experience, coupled with being constantly browbeaten romantically, gave Charlotte little courage or satisfaction in the way of carnal knowledge. The irony of the situation was that James actually painted her as some sort of whore for Tom, even though she had no intentions of ever being unfaithful to James despite his meanness. He was the one who’d bedded another woman…or possibly even women. It wasn’t at all unlikely that the pediatric nurse was just one of many.

Head throbbing, mind racing, and emotions fuming, Charlotte retrieved her phone from its place on the floor and turned it off, burying herself deep within the sanctuary of Tom’s guest bed. A flick of her fingers and the bedside lamp extinguished itself, leaving her in silent darkness. Her eyes adjusted and Charlotte could feel herself relaxing, the lack of light and reading easing some of the pain in her skull. A few hours ago, she wouldn’t have known how to sleep with all the fear and adrenaline coursing through her body. But now, exhausted and resigned, she fell into an almost instantaneous slumber.

According to Tom’s bedside clock, Charlotte’s screaming began around 2:47 the next morning. The sound was so shrill, so terrified, that he woke immediately from an uneasy sleep and jerked his head toward the glowing numbers.

Charlotte, and he, had slept for less than two hours.

Stumbling quickly out of his bed and tearing down the hallway, Tom didn’t bother being quiet as he flung open the door to the guest bedroom. He knew he would find Charlotte, awake and sobbing. Her gasping breaths could be heard throughout the house. She was fully seated up in the bed, covers thrown back, head in her hands. Shoulders shaking, she was hiccupping so hard that Tom feared she wasn’t getting enough oxygen. As Tom turned on the bedside lamp, the room flooded with warm light and Charlotte looked up, aware that she was no longer by herself. Unexpectedly for him, she took one look at him and cried harder. He was at her side, gathering her little frame in his lap in moments.

“Shhhh, my sweet,” he murmured, rubbing her back with one hand and running his fingers gently through her hair with the other. He brushed the hair out of her eyes and cupped her chin, tilting Charlotte’s head back so he could survey the damage: tears, fear, and exhaustion.

Charlotte was able to take her first deep breath as soon as she looked into Tom’s eyes. Reflexively, her arms wrapped around his shoulders and she buried her hands in his thick curls, feeling as though he was the only thing that could tether her safely to reality.
“Yes, love. Look at me,” Tom ordered, keenly aware that in her anxiety-ridden state, she would obey him out of a searching need to have order, imposed control. He turned her slightly so she was facing him, and he spoke even more softly.

“Breathe, Lotte. Breathe with me,” and he again mimed the deep in-through-the-nose, out-through-the-mouth method from their cab ride. Her gray eyes never left his blue ones, and she obediently breathed with him, tremors still occasionally wracking her body and her fingers tightening, then releasing, in his hair. At one point, Charlotte caught herself watching Tom’s mouth as he exhaled with her, and in what she would later call a moment of madness, she imagined the taste of his lips, the slick feel of his tongue. This thought unfortunately caused her breathing to once more become erratic, and she had to look away.

“No, doll,” Tom cajoled her with a finger under her chin, turning her back to him. “Stay with me, little Lotte.”

Charlotte finally settled, sleepily laying her head against Tom’s shoulder. This gesture of complete trust caused Tom’s arms to tighten around her, and he softly kissed the top of her head before doing what he knew needed to be done.

“Were you having bad dreams, lovely?” he rubbed a strong hand in soft circles along her back, and he felt her nod. She sniffed once, quietly, and Tom felt a warm little splash on his shirtsleeve as a few tears escaped Charlotte’s eyes. Continuing his close contact, Tom quietly asked her a few more questions, trying to get a grasp on the situation without making Charlotte panic anew.

“Are you in pain?”

She shook her head and heaved a small sigh.

“Are you afraid?”

She burrowed more tightly into him with a muffled “yes.”

“Do you feel safe with me here?” He punctuated this last query with a long press of his lips to her hair once more, and his heart skipped a single beat when she murmured her honest answer.

“Very.”

She had started to scratch her fingers through his hair, along his scalp, absentmindedly while she responded to him. The action was oddly self-soothing, and it made Charlotte feel as though she was comforting Tom from the aftereffects of her nightmares, too. The sensation caused Tom to shiver imperceptibly, and he closed his eyes for a few moments to enjoy Charlotte’s ministrations. She very well could have lulled him back to sleep.

“Do you want me to stay in here with you, love?” was the last question Tom asked. Unfortunately, it snapped Charlotte out of her comfortable trance, and she froze for a second, just before gently disentangling herself from Tom’s hold. Moving backward onto the bed, she wiped a dainty hand over her face, tousling her hair in the process, and gave him a wan smile.

“I’m okay now, Tom. Go back to bed.”

He hesitated, not moving from his position on the bed, but watched her as she elegantly folded herself back under the covers, settling against the pile of pillows. “If you’re sure…”

Charlotte nodded, once again starting to succumb to the immense fatigue overwhelming her senses. Her eyelids became heavy and she lazily ran the tip of her tongue along her bottom lip, shooing Tom
off the bed with a flick of her wrist. Tom stood, surprising himself when he realized he didn’t want to leave Charlotte alone. She looked so sleepy and fragile…

“Tom, I’m fine. Just had a bad dream. I promise I’m okay,” Charlotte murmured.

Nodding, with a small smile on his face, Tom took one last look as Charlotte turned off the bedside lamp, extinguishing what had been yet another intimate moment between them. He carefully made his way to the door, listening to his best girl arranging herself under the covers, and as he made to walk into the hallway, he quietly explained himself to her. “I’m leaving this open in case you need me.”

He liked feeling needed by her. It was an unusual sensation, a role reversal, as he so often needed her in his day-to-day line of work. Hearing Charlotte’s affirmative hum, he faced the walk back to his room and hoped that they would both get more much-needed rest.

The second noise that awoke Tom in the night was not Charlotte’s screams, nor was it her heaving sobs. It was her meek, sleepy voice, calling softly but insistently for him.

The clock this time revealed the time as 4:22.

Fearing she was ill, or once again trying to talk herself down from a manic episode of nightmares, Tom rushed back to the guest room, only to see Charlotte hunched over in pain.

“Darling…?” Before he could rush to her side, Charlotte helplessly moaned her need for medication and water. She’d cried so much that she was practically dehydrated.

Moving efficiently in the dark, with the last tendrils of sleep still faintly grasping him, Tom headed for the kitchen where he retrieved another helping of paracetamol and a small glass of tepid water. Upon returning to the bedroom, Tom found Charlotte once more hunched – this time in a fetal position – desperately trying to massage the pain from her forehead, neck, and temples.

“Lotte, sweet girl,” he roused her with the endearment, kneeling down on the floor at her bedside. She gratefully sat up, gingerly, and took the tablets and water that were in his outstretched hands. As soon as his hands were free, Tom moved quietly to the bathroom, where he ran a clean cloth under the hottest water. Charlotte shakily placed the drinking glass on the bedside table and leaned her aching head back against the downy pillows, eyes closed, when she felt the dip of the mattress beside her.

“Keep your eyes closed, love,” Tom instructed. She did so; she had no energy otherwise, and to keep her eyes open now would mean dizziness and more nausea.

The groaned sigh of relief that escaped Charlotte’s mouth when Tom pressed the warm cloth to her eyelids and forehead went straight to his groin.

Stop it, he told himself. How lecherous can you possibly be at a time like this?

Charlotte actually sat up and leaned closer to Tom, burying her face in his warm shirt, and took his hand, replete with warm cloth, pressing it against the back of her neck at the base of her skull.

“Fuck,” she murmured in relief. And then, “pardon my French.”
She laughed for just a moment and Tom felt her smiling against him. Her hands both eventually found their way back to tangle in his hair, a position she was coming to realize felt comfortable and loving to her. If she could thank Tom no other way for his care, she could at least extend the same affection to him that he showed to her.

When the flannel became cool, Tom gently moved away from Charlotte to return to the bathroom sink, flooding the material with more steaming hot water. Upon his return this time, she crawled into his lap. It occurred to her that she should be embarrassed, crowding him and invading his personal space – even though he was one of the most touchy-feely people she’d ever known – but he had what she needed in spades: warmth for her aching head and a calming presence for her frightened soul.

Tom, on his part, gladly accepted Lotte into his lap, cradling her against him and once again wiping away some of the discomfort of her head and neck with the hot cloth. She would turn her head every few moments, a sign that he should wipe along her temples, or return to the nape of her neck. Her deep, even breathing was a sure sign that some of the intense pain was dissipating.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” she whispered as he ran the cloth lightly along her eyelids. “I’m so sorry I keep waking you up,” she apologized.

He wouldn’t have it. “My best girl needs me.” He traced her neck lightly again. “And I will always come when she calls. Any better?”

She snuggled against him, breathing a soft “a little.”

“Let’s do another, shall we?” Tom moved towards the bathroom for a third time.

“One more, please,” Charlotte leaned back heavily against the pillows again. An additional benefit of the paracetamol in her system was that it helped to make her sleepy again. She was nearly dozing when Tom returned, sitting beside her prostrate form to brush the hot cloth against her dully-pulsing head. Her breathing evened out, and as Tom gave one more pass over her relaxed face, she appeared to have dropped off completely.

Moving from the bed as slowly and carefully as possible, Tom returned to the bathroom to leave the flannel by the sink. She hadn’t moved from her position or stirred as he made his way back out of the guest room again, and as an afterthought, he quietly whispered to her in the dark from the threshold of the room.

“You should be in my bed, Lotte.”

He didn’t know why he said it – and he hadn’t meant it in any sort of inappropriate sense – but he knew they would both feel much better if she was with him, the both of them sequestered together from the horrors of the outside world. Like the coward that he was, though, he’d only murmured the notion when he felt sure she wouldn’t hear him.

As Tom left, Charlotte, in that pleasantly hazy ether that exists between sleep and wakefulness, wondered whether or not she had dreamt his words.

He would have been regretful about his anger at 6:01 am, but by the fourth time Charlotte had woken up, crying and calling out, Tom had had enough.
There’s a simple solution to this, he growled to himself.

He was angry he hadn’t done it sooner. He was irrationally angry that Charlotte didn’t ask him for it.

Strangely quiet for the amount of ire rolling off of his exhausted person, Tom stalked – for the final time – down to the guest bedroom where Charlotte was once again sitting up in bed, shaking and crying. The products of another horrific nightmare.

He said nothing as he padded straight to the bed and leaned down, peeling back the covers and scooping his Lotte into his arms, turning right back around and carrying her down the hall to his own bed. When he lightly kicked his bedroom door shut, Charlotte made a slightly stifled squeak in the back of her throat and held tighter to him.

Wanting to impress upon his best girl just how serious he was that she stay safe and cared for in his room – in his bed – and that this “I’m fine alone” business was over, Tom carried her around the perimeter of the bed to his side, where he sat down with her still curled around him. Turning and lying down with Charlotte pressed against him, he could hear her ragged breathing and practically feel her heart thudding against his own. The small sliver of watery dawn light that shone into the room revealed Charlotte’s eyes to be full of a fresh round of tears.

In a panic at both her latest round of dreams and the closeness of Tom, Charlotte tore herself from him to lay flat on her back, throwing an arm over her eyes as she shook and cried. Her breathing became more labored the longer she keened, and Tom could physically see her agitation: body stiff, eyes leaking with her imagined terror. He could not afford to be meek and polite with her anymore this night (or day, as it now was).

She needed rest. He needed rest.

The only way to comfort her now was to keep her close and reinforce that he had her, that he would watch over her even in his own sleeping state.

“You’re tired… and I’ve kept you up all night.”

James is right about me, her own mind retorted.

She hadn’t realized she’d actually whispered that thought aloud, too.

A low growl emanated from deep in Tom’s chest, and before he could stop himself, he surged forward, bracing the top half of his body atop Charlotte, resting his forearms on either side of her. He stared at her, not so much with fury at what she’d said, but with anger that she felt bad about needing him. And about whatever nonsense James Osprey had convinced his best girl of.

“We’re going to nip this in the bud right now.

Leaning forward so his nose slightly grazed hers, Tom spoke very lowly, very authoritatively. Charlotte’s hands instinctively moved from her sides to press against Tom’s torso, fearing that he might climb completely on top of her in some moment of animalistic rage.
“Don’t you ever apologize for needing me, darling. Listen to me, Lotte,” he ordered quietly, when she began to turn her head away and push on him slightly. To his credit, he raised up a bit more to give her some breathing room, but he was crowding her space on purpose. He wanted her to understand that he wasn’t going to be turned away because of her embarrassment, because of her needing something.

She turned back to look at him. Her breathing was shallow, fear etched in her features. Her harsh blinking every few moments clued him in that she was still seeing the awful images behind her eyes.

Aminta. The blood.

“You’re staying with me until we’ve both had our fill of sleep, love. I’m going to keep you safe in my bed and you’re going to get your rest even if I have to hold onto you for the next eight hours and soothe you from nightmares every fifteen minutes. Do you understand me? You are not to leave this bed unless I’m carrying you.”

When she didn’t respond, didn’t do anything other than hold her breath and stare at him with those wide gray eyes, Tom continued.


She did as she was told.

And before long, her hands once more found their way into Tom’s long russet locks. She shortly resumed breathing normally, looking into Tom’s eyes and running his thick strands through her fingers. He kept his eyes trained on hers, willing her silently to trust him.

After a few long moment, Charlotte removed her hands and raised her head up to meet Tom’s face, still hovering protectively over hers. She kissed the tip of his nose, and softly conceded to his demands.

“Okay.”

Tom wasn’t awoken any further in the wee hours of the morning, or the early afternoon, until he was roused from slumber by slight movement at his side. He first registered that he was very warm, and that there was a bit of weight pressed against him. Where normally he spread out in his bed to accommodate his tall, lanky form, he was currently immobilized to one half of his mattress. Opening his eyes and lifting his head imperceptibly, Tom registered the reason for his warmth and semi-incapacitation: his best girl, curled against his body.

Her long, wavy hair was draped along his chest, her cheek pressed to his neck and her hands lightly clutching his shoulders. One long, bare leg stretched across his hip to tangle between his splayed thighs.

He was hard as stone.

Trying to maneuver Charlotte gently away from him, Tom only succeeded in rousing her from her hard-earned, deep sleep. As the various points of her body brushed against his, Tom stifled a groan and bit his lip until he tasted blood. The shame came flooding in, a split second later.

*You have to stop thinking about Lotte like this.*
That was easier said than done when his best girl stretched languidly against him, tilting her head up in a very embarrassed – yet adorably coy – manner. She was stunning. Tom couldn’t help it. He wrapped his arms around Charlotte and did a two-squeeze around her body, kissing her forehead and letting himself relish her closeness, if only for a fleeting moment. She hummed against him as he dropped the smooch onto her still slightly painful head, and then broke away to give him some space in the large, luxurious bed.

He took a moment to regain his composure, teasing her.

“Sleep better with me, yes?”

Except he wasn’t really teasing. He wanted to be responsible for her satisfaction and comfort.

She sat up in bed, a deliciously bare shoulder peeking out from the top of her sleep shirt, and smiled demurely as she stared in his azure eyes.

“Much.”

Tom winked at her in reply, rolling over on his side toward her, to take inventory of her current state. He let his eyes linger fleetingly on her lusciously bare legs, crossed Indian-style. He’d never really given himself permission to admire Lotte before.

“Did you wake more in the night?” he murmured, clearing his throat.

She rocked a little, side to side, and reached out to tuck a curl of his hair behind his ear.

“Maybe once more,” she started. It took her a moment to finish her thought, as if she was self-conscious. “But you were right there, and you curled me into you and lulled me back to sleep.”

He hadn’t remembered that part; perhaps he really was that exhausted. It did explain how she was draped atop him when they awoke.

“Do you feel like you need more painkillers, love?” He closed his eyes as a small hand once again found its way into his hair to scratch softly at his scalp.

“Maybe in a little while,” Charlotte intoned, laughing softly as Tom leaned into her touch.

Blissfully unaware of the time, Tom continued to enjoy Lotte’s ministrations, savoring the idea of being alone with her, ensconced in his bed. But when his mobile rang shrilly, breaking their shared trance, he came to terms with the fact that it was well after noon, and Jacqueline was calling, presumably to try and patch things up after their row last night.

*She never runs her fingers through my hair,* Tom thought reluctantly.
Charlotte begins to realize that she might be more traumatized than she originally thought.

I just finished this you guys - I've been writing for SIX HOURS. This one's longer than usual but…I just love this story so much! Have a BUNCH more UST.

I love ya! Send me a message!

Charlotte laid back down in Tom’s sumptuous bed, stretching herself out along the soft, cool sheets. She’d finally slept well and had woken up practically on top of Tom. She giggled quietly to herself at the memory of his face upon waking: blushing, embarrassed Tom. And she’d felt a slight hardening against her leg that was stretched out across Tom’s hip.

Poor guy, she laughed. I definitely made that awkward.

Charlotte noted how chivalrously Tom peeled himself away from her, to distract from his – she suspected – normal morning erection, instead turning the focus on her: how she’d slept, if she had any more nightmares, whether she needed more paracetamol.

Mirth danced in his eyes when she basically admitted that he’d been the cause of her settled, deep sleep. And although he didn’t remember it specifically, she was perfectly able to recall the one time she’d awoken in his bed.

Startled after another dream of Aminta, Charlotte found herself roused by Tom, who immediately cradled her into the warmth of his arms and arranged her along his body, tightly secured from any demons still trying to get at her. It took no more than a few minutes of feeling him running strong hands along her arms, back, and hips before she nodded off.

Tom had always been tactile as long as Lotte had known him, a friendly and outgoing person. But the shooting at the V&A seemed to heighten his affectionate nature towards her.

That’s what a good friend would do for someone who’s hurting, she thought.

A small part of her hoped that if Tom was feeling even a fraction of the inner turmoil she was that her presence and soothing touches might’ve helped him, too.

As she mused to herself about her sweet Tom, the man in question was walking through the house, greeting the afternoon, and returning Jacqueline Silver’s dozen texts (delivered sporadically through the night, he’d explained to Charlotte) with a phone call. Tom closed the bedroom door on his way out, and this signaled to Lotte that maybe he needed some privacy. She wondered if there would be
another round of shouting like there was last night. Insanely curious but not wanting to be a rude houseguest, Charlotte ignored her desire to eavesdrop on the phone call and instead quietly made her way back to the guest room to retrieve her things and shower, hearing the faint strains of Tom’s gravelly voice echoing from the kitchen. She wanted to get back to her flat today and work on a few upcoming projects for him so they would be ready for the impending press tour and possible festival appearances.

Little did she know that when she tiptoed out of the bedroom and down the hallway, back turned from the kitchen, Tom watched her retreating form the entire way.

“Look, you know I don’t like getting like that, Tom, but you must see how inappropriate it is to be shacked up with your assistant in your house. Can’t you at least agree with me that it’s wrong?”

Jacqueline Silver was on a tear.

To her credit, she was attempting to try and be polite, but as usual, she failed spectacularly. What had started as a wonderful afternoon – Tom waking up snuggled with his best girl – quickly devolved into another round of going on the defensive with Jacqueline. As soon as his mobile alerted him to the real world (the one that unfortunately existed outside of his bedroom), Tom knew he would spend the rest of the day trying to pacify his girlfriend.

While he’d let her know last night that they would talk in the morning, apparently Jacqueline had spent the majority of the night driving herself to paranoid distraction. The text messages read like a soap opera script, flitting from one emotional tactic to the next:

*I can’t believe you hung up on me, Tom! What the fuck is wrong with you?*

*Charlotte had better be gone tomorrow because WE have plans and if I have to come over there and haul you out of the house myself I WILL DO IT.*

*Would you like to see my new lingerie, baby?*

*When I see you tomorrow I promise I’ll make it so worth your while…*

*Oh so now you’re not even going to answer my texts? I can’t believe how badly you treat someone you supposedly “love”.*

*Why don’t you just call me in the morning when you’ve figured out what your REAL priorities are?*

She exhausted him. And he dreaded the phone call, but he needed to make it. He’d promised they would talk today and he needed to test the waters, especially if they were still going out to that early dinner with her parents. So there he was, listening to Jacqueline justify her previous night’s behavior, half-paying attention to her whining, jealous complaining, when he heard his bedroom door squeak open.

The radiant antithesis of his girlfriend tiptoed gracefully down the hallway, not noticing Tom could see her long, gorgeous legs. He drank in her form greedily, remembering the warm feeling of her pressed against him through the early morning hours. He could still smell faint traces of her amber scent, and he took in the shining waves of her long, dark hair.

*Goddess,* he smiled to himself. *I’m so lucky to have her in my life.*
Once she was no longer in sight, Tom finally tuned back in to Jacqueline’s harsh pleas for understanding. She threw him a scrap: a half-hearted apology for her insinuations and her unreasonable behavior the night before, and he agreed to forgive and forget if she would come back to the house after dinner and apologize to Charlotte personally.

Regrettably, that tidbit of information caused the phone conversation to elongate another 10 minutes as Jacqueline fumed, loudly, that Charlotte would still be in Tom’s home.

He would be damned if his best girl was leaving anytime soon.

Charlotte felt infinitely more capable of enjoying the extravagance of the guest bathroom and shower since she’d slept and had all traces of yesterday removed from her person. She was still quite bruised, and very stiff from all the physicality of escaping a mass shooting.

*What an odd thing to be able to say now,* she realized. *I’ve escaped a mass shooting.*

Her head still beat in time with her heart, however dully, and she found herself fixating once or twice on Aminta Brightman’s death. But other than all that unpleasantness, Charlotte took a long, hot shower and contemplated some of the exciting things she was going to go home and plan for.

Tom was preparing for a press tour for his latest film that would take him – and her – around the world at a breakneck pace. She loved traveling with him, learning and trying new things with him. He was always game for anything, and he never let his best girl feel excluded. To anyone who would listen, Tom referred to himself and Charlotte as “a packaged deal.”

She also had to get the both of them ready for a few prestigious film festival appearances, where Tom would be recognized for his standard of excellence in acting. More and more, directors, producers, and fellow colleagues were coming out of the woodwork to compliment Tom publicly on his professionalism and dedication to his craft. Charlotte couldn’t have been prouder. She told him as much, as often as possible.

The one time she’d dared do the same for James, at a dinner that recognized him as one of the top surgeons in London, he curtly explained that approval from someone in the entertainment industry didn’t mean all that much. She hadn’t praised his work again.

Finishing her shower, feeling renewed and full of energy, Charlotte stepped out of the shower cubicle and wrapped herself in a large, fluffy towel. She noticed that her bloodied hospital scrubs had been removed – probably sometime in the night when Tom was in.

*He thinks of everything to protect me.*

A light knock at the bathroom door startled Charlotte, who was still wrapped in her towel, hair dripping slickly onto her shoulder. Tom made a comical show of entering the bathroom with one hand over his eyes, the other hand holding a small cup of water and a dose of paracetamol for her to take. Charlotte just laughed at his silliness, but when he dropped the hand from his face to make his way to her, the fun-loving expression on his countenance vanished.

“Oh,” he half-stuttered. “I thought you were dressed!”

He handed her the painkillers and water, both of which she swallowed gratefully. Her renewed sense of energy made her feel slightly cheeky in the presence of her sweet caretaker. She turned this way
and that, modeling the towel just a little until Tom’s cheeks burned a soft pink.

“You barely gave me any time to reply after you knocked,” she teased him. “Plus you…already saw me naked.”

Tom blanched a little, not wanting his best girl to think he’d taken advantage or copped a feel. “I promise I didn’t look, Lotte,” he stammered, getting agitated when she crossed her arms in front of her. He started backing toward the door, ready to bolt. She moved forward toward him, continuing her charade of being upset with him – for an imagined slight. By the time she had Tom pressed against the door of his own guest bathroom, she winked, stepping back and laughing. He sagged in relief.

“I’m teasing you, Tom,” she explained, leaning her head to one side to tousle some of the water from her still-soaked hair. “I wasn’t in any sort of right state of mind to take care of myself last night. You took such good care of me. No one else ever has.”

He was about to scoff at that statement when he remembered something Charlotte had whispered aloud in his bed last night.

“James is right about me.”

Tom had absolutely no idea what Charlotte meant by that statement, and the fact that she was surprised she’d said it aloud in his bed, after she confessed she felt like a bother, definitely made it seem that he wasn’t meant to hear it. Obviously this intrigued him all the more.

“Lotte, sweet, you get dressed and then I’d like to talk to you, okay?” he asked, opening the bathroom door and stepping out. “Come into the kitchen when you’re done, darling.”

Looking confused but agreeing, Charlotte nodded and smiled at Tom, who left her to her routine of dressing. When she came into the kitchen several minutes later, clothed and with a full face of makeup, Tom’s heart sank.

*She looks like she’s going somewhere,* he mused dejectedly. *I hope she’s not going to leave just yet.*

He had made coffee, and Charlotte gratefully took the steaming mug he offered to her, groaning softly in pleasure when she sipped the strong brew. Tom made it just as she liked – black, one sugar, and a dollop of hazelnut creamer. She tried to ignore the racing of her heart when he handed her the cup, their fingers brushing.

She perched herself on his kitchen table, legs dangling playfully and toes wiggling as the painkillers worked their subtle magic and the caffeine flooded its way through her system. Charlotte wore a stylish, casual outfit – another one Tom had hastily chosen – that was one of her favorites. He’d seen her wear the dark leggings and clingy cashmere sweater dozens of times, and knew she loved them. It was only natural that he added them to her overnight bag when he went scouring through her dresser for clothes he knew she would want. If she was put off by the amount of clothes Tom packed for her – and he’d carefully folded in at least a week’s worth – she didn’t say anything. She merely sipped her coffee, continuing to run fingers absentmindedly through her drying hair, waiting for Tom to speak with her about whatever was on his mind.

*He probably needs you to pack up and leave, so it’s good you’re going home.*

“Lotte,” Tom started, looking down into his coffee cup in a moment of what seemed to be great introspection. “You murmured something last night when you were falling asleep in my bed.”

Charlotte searched her brain but couldn’t remember what Tom was talking about; she’d been so
agitated and fatigued that the entire night was a blur – one that she was mostly glad to forget.

“I…don’t really remember all that much, Tom. What with the meds and the fatigue…” she enumerated. Placing his coffee mug in the sink, Tom made his way over to sit beside Charlotte on the kitchen table, pressing himself to her side and tilting his head toward her slightly. He didn’t want to scare her off, so instead of standing in front of her, the sitting arrangement made more sense.

“You said ‘James is right about me’ right before I got you to stop crying and you agreed to stay with me.”

*Oh, damn, Charlotte remembered. Had I really said that out loud?*

“What did you mean by that, Lotte?” Tom looked pained. “What could that man possibly be right about in reference to you?”

To buy herself precious seconds, Charlotte cleared her throat and then looked away from Tom’s searching gaze, taking a few warm sips of her coffee. She knew what she’d meant, but it certainly wasn’t something she wanted to share with her Tom. Even if he was her closest friend. It was too humiliating.

Standing up and moving to the sink to deposit her mug beside Tom’s Charlotte sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose and looking out the window at his back garden. “Would you mind if I took a rain check on that, Tom? It’s really nothing…” she trailed off, turning back to face him. She squeaked in surprise to find that he’d stealthily made his way to her while her back was turned, and he was right in front of her now.

“Will you ever tell me?” Tom wondered aloud.

Charlotte smiled, but the emotion didn’t quite reach her eyes. “It’s not important, Tom,” she rebutted quietly, eyes averted. She kept thinking about James’ cruel words.

_Frigid bitch._

...what a disappointment...

...how off-putting you actually are...

“I actually need to get out of here and go home, Tom,” Charlotte suddenly continued. “There are a lot of things I need to prep for your press tour and festival appearances.”

Tom was upset that his best girl felt she couldn’t confide in him – were James’ words really so awful, so cutting, that she couldn’t talk about them? Tom couldn’t imagine what in the world the man could find wrong with Charlotte.

_Damned fool_, he thought bitterly.

She made to leave the kitchen, looking agitated and wan for what seemed like the millionth time in the last 24 hours. Tom spluttered out a request before he could stop himself.

“Lotte,” he followed her, reaching out and grasping her shoulder lightly. She froze.

*I wish he would stop asking me about James_, she thought.

“You don’t have to leave, darling,” Tom swallowed thickly as she turned back to him, those enchanting gray eyes staring into his face. “I feel as though you’re running out of here,” he finished
lamely, not able to say what he wanted to in that moment. It didn’t help that he needed to get ready to
meet Jacqueline for dinner very soon.

Cancel, a voice in his head hissed. He desperately wanted to. The thought of a dinner out with
Jacqueline, despite how lovely her Midwestern American parents were, didn’t appeal to him at all.
He wanted to stay locked in the house with Lotte, making plans for their press tour.

Cuddling in my bed.

Charlotte elected to continue her trek to the guest bedroom to gather her things. This hurt Tom, who
felt as though she didn’t want to be in his presence any longer. Perhaps she too had plans tonight?
With James? He felt sick.

“I’m not, Tom. I told you,” she explained as he followed her into the bedroom, watching as she
began folding her pajamas and collecting her toiletries. “I have work to do, and I’m sure you need to
go meet Jacqueline for something, don’t you?”

She knew him well. It wasn’t enough that she could read the guilt at leaving her written all over his
face, but that she also knew he would be paying for spending all his time with her the previous night.
Jacqueline would see to it.

He sat on the edge of the bed while Charlotte packed her things, feeling at once jealous that she
might be seeing that Osprey idiot later and also feeling disappointed in himself for letting her leave.
Another emotion possessed him entirely when Charlotte suddenly stumbled, slightly, appearing to
lose her balance. He rushed to her, steadying her with firm hands and savoring the feel of her against
him once more.

“Still a little dizzy, I’m afraid,” Charlotte lamented. She kept packing, though.

What the hell are you doing, man?

Tom felt pulled in ten different directions. He couldn’t let her leave. He couldn’t force her to stay
here. He also couldn’t ditch Jacqueline again or there would be a fresh round of hell arriving at his
door later. Angry with himself, Tom decided that he could at least muster up some of the dominance
he displayed last evening to try and encourage his Lotte to recuperate in the house awhile longer.
Hopefully she would stay long enough for Tom to return – alone – from his dinner and he could
convince her to stay another night with him.

Just until she’s feeling better, he told himself.

“Darling, I know you don’t want to hear this,” Tom began tentatively, raising a sheepish eyebrow at
her when she stopped packing to stare at him. “But I think we need to keep you here a little longer.”
When she made to scoff at his suggestion, he turned bold.

“The dizziness concerns me, lovely. And I can see that you’re still sensitive to bright light. You’re
walking gingerly too. Are you sore?”

“Tom, I’m fine,” she reiterated. She couldn’t fool herself into thinking he wanted to keep her there
when he had Jacqueline to attend to. She would only be in the way.

“I’m sure you are, Lotte. But for my peace of mind, would you at least consider taking a little nap
here before you go home this evening?” He was near to begging.

When she seemed to war with herself, he dug in a little deeper. “You scared me half to death last
night, darling. The least you can do is make it up to me by taking care of yourself...”
Charlotte moved past Tom to retrieve her mobile, turning it on after its long, silenced sleep. She made no move to respond to Tom while the iPhone booted back up.

“I’m going to get dressed and ready to meet Jacqueline and her parents for a quick dinner. You let me know what you’ve decided to do when I’m finished getting ready, okay?”

She tried being mad at him – without really knowing why – but when he took one of her hands and placed a kiss atop it, all she could do was comply. When Tom stepped out, Charlotte looked through her mobile.

James hadn't sent her any other messages.

Tom felt secretly pleased with himself as he arrived at the restaurant, pulling up to the curb and smoothly handing his keys to the valet. He’d managed to convince Charlotte to stay awhile longer in the house – safe and tucked away – and he also managed to avoid picking Jacqueline up for their meal. He’d contacted her parents to say he was running a little late, citing his traumatic experience last evening as the reason why he wasn’t quite himself. By the time he informed Jacqueline that she’d have to make her own way to dinner, he had her parents on his side and she could do nothing about the situation.

*If she wants to see me, it’s on MY terms.*

He told none of the parties involved that he was running late because he’d tucked his best girl back into his bed, speaking softly to her and encouraging some more rest with loving strokes of his fingertips along her forehead and cheeks. She was asleep in minutes. It was hard not to dwell on this new power he seemed to have over her. But then “power” wasn’t really the word for it – it was more of a sense of comfort that Tom felt he gave Charlotte. She’d proven as much when she slept through the remainder of that morning and afternoon in his arms, barely stirring except for a stray nightmare that ended moments after it began.

And so it was, with a combination of delight at putting off Jacqueline for a few more precious minutes, and the prospect of returning home to his Charlotte, that Tom sat down with the Silver family for what was hopefully to be a short dinner.

Jacqueline’s parents were lovely, and whenever they were all together Tom always had a hard time understanding how two kind and gentle people had created such a self-absorbed narcissist. But while David and Marianne may have been polite and kind, they had also recognized Jacqueline’s talents as a jazz protégée from her earliest years. Tom suspected there was more to the couple beneath the surface than they let on. Most likely, they were two driven people hell-bent on seeing their precious only child succeed in the cutthroat business of music.

If either parent recognized just how nasty Jacqueline could be, they’d never let on to Tom, even after the newness of his relationship with their daughter faded. Jacqueline didn’t help matters when she pretended to be an all-around supportive partner (who never got jealous, ever, of anyone or anything) in front of her parents. It really left him no out to excuse himself whenever the four of them met. Granted, that didn’t happen often, as everyone was based in the States.

Somewhere between the entrée and after-dinner coffee, Tom started becoming agitated. The conversation hadn’t lulled all evening and he felt sure the Silvers would sit and chat as long as he let them. Jacqueline was sneakily sending him bedroom eyes every chance she got, and Tom was
beginning to wonder how, exactly, his evening would end. Would Charlotte still be there? Would Jacqueline throw herself into his car to ensure she’d get him alone for an evening?

*What’s going to happen if these two see one another at my house again?*

He vaguely remembered the lo mein travesty.

Tom took a moment to check his phone, seeing that Charlotte had texted him an hour ago letting him know she was on her way back to Soho and that she would call him tomorrow. She wanted to ask him some questions about items he needed for the press tour.

“Is everything alright?” Jacqueline asked, leaning over to not so discreetly read Tom’s text messages.

He was relieved that the two women wouldn’t run into one another; he was sad that he looked to be spending his evening with the wrong one.

“Everything’s fine, Jacq. Charlotte seems better, I think,” Tom added, just to spite her. He mentally patted himself on the back when Marianne asked after Lotte, seeming genuinely concerned for his assistant’s welfare. Jacqueline threw back the rest of her coffee, irritated, and put her arm around Tom’s shoulders.

“Well, we should be going then, shouldn’t we?” Jacqueline asked him, trying the bedroom eyes once again.

Her parents signaled for the check, and Tom balked at David’s offer. The older gentleman wouldn’t hear of it.

“Any man who treats my daughter as well as you deserves a nice dinner once in awhile!” Mr. Silver boomed above the din of the restaurant atmosphere.

*Any man who can successfully deal with your daughter without needing psychiatric evaluation deserves a vacation,* Tom parried in his head.

He thanked David profusely and stood up, pulling out Jacqueline’s chair for her. The short bandage dress and obscenely high heels she’d chosen for the dinner did absolutely nothing for him.

His mind flashed back to an image of Charlotte the night before, curled up against the pillows in the guest bed, wearing her tiny shorts and that tantalizing off the shoulder t-shirt. She was light years ahead of Jacqueline in every way: class, beauty, and kindness. Why had he not realized all of this years ago? She was his best friend and had been with him through it all, and yet he’d chosen to date women like Jacqueline? He needed to end things.

His heart wasn’t in the right place, but awful as she was, Tom didn’t want to be cruel to Jacq. He would take her back to his house, have a heartfelt talk with her, and drive her home. He got a good look at David and Marianne one last time as the left the restaurant together, knowing in all likelihood he’d never see either of them again.

He hoped.
Jacqueline knew something was wrong when Tom got her into the car, being oddly quiet instead of his usual talkative self. He hadn’t really been all that animated at dinner, she thought, but she chalked that up to the stress of his situation at the awards dinner the other night and having to take care of that assistant who was always in his hair.

The drive back to Hampstead took a few minutes in the evening traffic, and Jacqueline smiled at the fact that Charlotte must be out of Tom’s house since he was taking her back to his. He wouldn’t dare insult her by bringing her back when little Lotte was still there, nosing around and making eyes at him.

He held Jacqueline’s hand absently as he weaved the Jaguar through the lanes of traffic, paying more attention to the road signs and taillights than Jacqueline’s wily attempts to seduce him.

She failed to realize she had a piece of asparagus in her teeth. That probably didn’t help things.

When they pulled up to the house, the entire place was ablaze with light. Tom was confused. He didn’t remember leaving so many lights on, and Charlotte would have left long before sundown. He wasn’t sure what to make of the situation but couldn’t come up with an exit plan in time. Jacqueline was already climbing out of the car and heading to the front door.

*It’s a good thing I never gave her a key,* he thought.

He made sure the security gate was intact and disarmed the front door as he let Jacqueline in, following behind and resetting the security system inside. The beeps that normally followed a successfully armed home were drowned out by Jacqueline’s loud curse as she entered the great room off the foyer.

“What the fuck?”

Her obnoxiously loud heels clacked into the room as she spoke again.

“Why are you still HERE? You were supposed to LEAVE.”

Tom now had two gigantic problems on his hands. Not that the women in his life were problems, per se, but…well, one of them certainly was.

A screaming Jacqueline and a crying, cowering Charlotte greeted him as he walked the rest of the way into the great room.

Ignoring Jacqueline completely, Tom rushed over to the couch where Charlotte was hugging herself, tears flowing freely down her face. Her makeup was completely ruined and her eyes were swollen. How long has she been here like this?

“Lotte, my girl, what happened?” He knelt down and reached out to grab her hands, rubbing his thumbs along her knuckles. He ignored the loud scoffing noise that came from the other side of the room.

Charlotte wouldn’t look at Tom, because she was so focused on Jacqueline’s ire. Tom could see Charlotte working up the nerve to explain herself to Jacqueline and his heart broke. She didn’t need to justify anything to Jacq.

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” Jacqueline huffed, rounding the couch to face Charlotte. “A grown woman bawling her eyes out like a child, wasting MY boyfriend’s time.”

“Jacq…” Tom started. He hadn’t moved from his place at Lotte’s feet.
But she wouldn’t quit. She tore off her shoes and threw her purse onto the floor beside Tom.

“Little Lotte…always crying out for attention from Tom,” she laughed bitterly. “This time literally. Well sweetie, guess what?” Jacqueline sat on the couch beside Charlotte and got in her face, pointing a finger right between her eyes. “It’s my turn now. You need to go.”

“JACQUELINE.”

“What, Thomas? Don’t you get it? Your little assistant is in love with you and she will do anything, FAKE ANYTHING to get you to pay attention to her.” Jacqueline sat back, laughing. She was almost hysterical.

Charlotte pulled her hands from Tom’s grasp and buried her face in her hands, not knowing what to do. She had tried to leave, but as soon as she stepped out of Tom’s house earlier, she started to panic. She needed to apologize to Jacqueline.

“I’m s-“ she started.

“Don’t. You. Dare.” Tom grasped Charlotte’s face in his hands, forcing her head up to look at him. “Don’t you fucking apologize to her. Or me,” he growled at his best girl.

Turning to Jacqueline with rage in his eyes, he made no move to separate himself from Charlotte.

“Get your things and call a cab, Jacq.”

She looked stunned, thinking she was actually in the right at deserving her time alone with Tom. When Jacqueline didn’t move, Tom became even angrier.

“Go wait outside. NOW! I don’t want you in my house!”

Still not moving from her presumably lofty position, Jacqueline choked out a gasp when Tom suddenly bent forward, picking Charlotte up from the couch, and wrapped her arms and legs around him as he carried her out of the room. He made it to the master bedroom when he heard the front door finally – blessedly – slam.

“Bite,” Tom crooned softly at Lotte. She opened her mouth and accepted the tiny piece of fruit he’d speared with a fork for her. He ran a hand through her slightly tangled hair as she chewed on the berry slowly, the first food she’d eaten all day.

As it turned out, Charlotte had indeed tried to leave the house just as she’d said – and was in fact on her way out the door when she texted Tom to say she was leaving. She explained to him, sitting there in his bed, that once she set foot outside, overwhelming anxiety gripped her. She felt too out in the open, she said. Too exposed. And then the remembering started all over again.

Tom felt sick at hearing how Charlotte had re-armed the house and sat, crying and shaking, on the couch for three hours. She didn’t want to spoil his dinner with Jacqueline and her family, she said. When it became dark outside, she only moved from her spot to turn on every light in the main floor of the house. “So I could see if anyone was trying to come after me,” she’d explained.
Charlotte tried to apologize again and again, not only feeling guilty for having a panic attack, but also for angering Jacqueline and believing all the horrible things the woman said to her. Tom wouldn’t hear of it. He only insisted that she get herself calmed down and that she needed to eat.

“What would taste good, my lovely?”

“I’m not very hungry,” Charlotte whispered, still trying to get a handle on her racing heart and frayed nerves.

“How about you get yourself cleaned up a little and I bring us some snacks, yes? Go and change your clothes and wash all that makeup off of you so I can see my sweet girl’s face.”

She didn’t answer him straightaway, but seemed to be embarrassed – needing to ask him something.

“Lotte?” Tom prompted.

She swallowed thickly and looked at her Tom, wiping traces of tears from her cheeks. “I…I c-can’t leave right n-now, Tom,” she admitted. Shame colored her face and neck.

He gathered her into his arms once more. “Oh, my darling. You’re not going anywhere. You’re going to go change your clothes and then come right back here to our bed.”

Tom didn’t realize until later, as he prepared some small bites of food for the two of them, that he’d said our instead of my.

Charlotte surprised herself a bit when she actually ate the food Tom fed to her. It wasn’t a lot, but it was more than she thought she could manage after feeling out of breath and nauseated with panic for several hours. She thanked and thanked Tom for taking care of her, marveling at the small array of things he’d brought back to the bedroom for her to sample: some sliced fruit, tiny bagel chips, and a little bowl of cinnamon sugar porridge. The warmth of the latter actually settled in her stomach and calmed her from the inside out.

Between bites, Tom distracted Charlotte by telling her about some of the places they’d be visiting during the fast-approaching press tour. Before she knew it, she was full and exponentially more relaxed than she’d been all evening.

Tom cleared their dishes and Charlotte retreated down to the guest bathroom to brush her teeth, completing her nighttime ablutions and feeling relief that she would have Tom next to her, keeping her safe for another entire night.

My sweet Tom, she sighed.

Turning off the lights and retreating back to the master bedroom was another animal altogether, though. Darkness seemed to be a fast trigger for Charlotte, as she’d found out that evening, and her heart started racing once again as she stumbled her way down the hall.

Tom found her curled in bed, shaking once again, and he could see the tears this time were borne out of frustration and fear.

Gritting her teeth, Charlotte ground out her anger as he turned out the bedside light and immersed her in the darkness she was trying to escape.

“Come here, darling,” he crooned softly. “Nothing will harm you.”

He pulled her to him, continuing to talk to her. “The house is safe, Lotte. I’m here. I’m right here.”
When she didn’t cease her shaking and the tears continued, Tom laid her gently on her back, much as he had the night before when he’d finally brought her to his room. Resuming the same position, he braced himself partially atop Charlotte’s fractious form, stroking thumbs along her cheeks and resting on his forearms, watching her beautiful face struggle with the weight of all that her mind was trying to process.

“We’re going to breathe again, lovely. Can you do that for me?”

Despite her trembling, Charlotte nodded and attempted deep breaths in and out with Tom. He continued with her for several minutes and although the crying abated, she still shook with tremors every so often, especially when she heard the house settling or a car door outside in the street. Still poised above her, Tom leaned closer and closer to her face, their breath intermingling as he worked to calm her respirations. She eventually settled wide eyes on his mouth.

“Good girl,” he whispered as she gradually relaxed beneath him. Her eyes flitted back up to his, then returned to his mouth.

“Good girl,” he kissed her, full and deep on the mouth.

Her arms found their way around his neck, fingers burying in his soft hair.

“Good girl,” he repeated, pulling away to lean down and lift up the hem of her shirt, revealing the still-bruised skin there. He placed a soft kiss to her right ribcage.

Then moved to kiss the bruised flesh beside her navel.

Then gently tugged down the waistband of her sleep shorts to press a kiss to her discolored hipbone.

He finished his attentions by readjusting her clothing and returning to Charlotte’s mouth one last time.

“My good girl.” And he kissed her mouth until she relaxed against him completely, ready to sleep safely in his arms.
It would have been a lie for Tom to say the rest of the night was wholly unpleasant. Sleep was difficult for him, and he wrestled with the knowledge that Charlotte would need convincing about seeking professional help for her trauma. Would she agree to therapy? Would she be in denial about the situation?

But the handful of times she woke him, involuntarily, during the night, he lazily and lovingly kissed her back to sleep. The affection was astounding in its effectiveness: a few slow, warm kisses to her face and mouth and she settled against him each time.

In the final instance when Tom was pulled from sleep, he found Charlotte breathing erratically, fresh from another nightmare, and she was pulling him toward her, fingers clutching in his hair to pull his mouth to hers. It had become less about calming her nerves and more about comforting one another with gentle kisses, a lick of his tongue against her lips, and deep sighs issuing from her throat.

To keep Lotte relaxed, Tom began speaking very quietly to her as he placed a light trail of kisses over to her ear and down the sensitive skin of her neck.

“Lovely,” he breathed lowly, “I think we should call a therapist.”

Charlotte shuddered slightly as Tom nipped gently at her exposed collarbone. “Does that sound like something we need to do?” Tom continued, working his way across her sternum to lick a little stripe inside her suprasternal notch. Her hands tightened in his hair convulsively.

“Yes,” Lotte agreed, turning her head so Tom could have unmitigated access to the other side of her neck. He took full advantage, moving his mouth slowly up the velvety flesh toward her earlobe.

“You’re so good, darling,” he purred into her ear. “And I’ll be with you the whole time, yes?” Charlotte pulled his head away from her so she could look in his eyes and nod. He gifted her with a warm smile, leaning down to kiss her swollen lips one more time before arranging her against him.

She woke no more in the night.
In fact, Charlotte’s dreams changed – whether she was thankful about it or not, she couldn’t be sure – to vivid images that were nothing like the bloodbath her mind had obsessed over recently. No, these images were completely centered on the man sleeping by her side, the man who had so boldly and sweetly crossed the line of their friendship when he’d put her to bed.

Images of Tom, naked and rock hard, pressed against her and staring into her eyes.

Tom, suckling feverishly at the tips of her straining breasts while she clutched at his broad, strong shoulders.

Tom, playfully biting along her sides and inner thighs, growling possessively all the while, turning her over to sink his teeth into the plump flesh of the crease where her bottom met her thigh.

Tom, staring at her with hooded eyes as he tongued her swollen clit, holding her legs open with warm hands.

Tom, slowly snapping his hips against hers, his thick length sliding tightly in and out of her wet heat, watching her as though he wanted to devour her.

By the time she awoke to the light of late morning, Charlotte Hamilton was flushed with pleasure, hips pressed into the bed and her pussy aching. She could feel how wet the dreams had made her just from the slick warmth in her panties.

Tom was nowhere to be found.

Turning to glance at the clock, Charlotte saw it was barely nine in the morning. Had she been alone in her flat, she would have enjoyed stretching out in her bed, alone, to touch herself teasingly until she shook and writhed in ecstasy. More often than not, that was the only way Charlotte Hamilton sated herself.

Frigid…

She dismissed James’ voice from her mind with a shake of her head, rational thought taking over.

If Tom was able to get you this worked up from a few kisses, she mused, you might not be so frigid after all…

Smiling shyly at the thought, rubbing her thighs together under the sheets for a bit of pleasurable friction, Charlotte turned toward his empty side of the bed and inhaled Tom’s comforting scent. She wanted nothing more than to stay there all day. But then she remembered what she’d agreed to in the middle of the night – meeting with a therapist. She wasn’t naïve enough to think that her emotional trauma was “nothing” and that it would pass on its own. The signs were all there: heightened anxiety, trouble sleeping, vivid nightmares, feeling startled…her not wanting to go outside. She knew she needed to be seen, to talk with someone who could help her work through what she’d endured.

And Tom will be there with you, she thought. Just the knowledge of his presence calmed her. And then a small bit of irony made her smile: she used to joke, in the early days of her assistance to Tom, that her presence was all it took to soothe his restless energy. Whether he was preparing for an
interview, a walk down a press line, or was trying to pack a suitcase for an extended trip, Charlotte
Hamilton merely stood near him and he appeared to relax and focus. She’d never expected the
opposite to be true, but here it was.

“Little Lotte,” a voice behind her purred, and she startled slightly before turning to find Tom staring
at her, tracing the outline of her covered body with those gorgeous blue eyes. Blushing slightly at the
new level of intimacy between them – both real and dreamed – Charlotte smiled sleepily up at Tom
as he walked to the bed with a tray in his hands.

“Brought you the last of the paracetamol, my lovely girl, and some breakfast.”

Her stomach growled loudly and Tom laughed, kissing her hair and placing the tray in front of her.
There was hazelnut coffee, buttery cinnamon and sugar toast, and more fruit that had been carefully
washed and cut.

“What’s all this for?” Charlotte asked, smiling as Tom pulled her back against his chest, encouraging
her to eat. She picked up a piece of the sparkling, sugary toast and took a bite, relishing the sweet
spices and the crunch of the bread. Tom brushed his lips against Charlotte’s ear, whispering.

“I like taking care of you, darling. It brings me pleasure.” He kissed the shell of her ear and she
giggled, shivering at his voice and touch.

As Lotte slowly ate the meal laid out before her on the tray, Tom was content to sit back against the
headboard of the bed and hold her, stroking her hair and running his hands up and down her arms.
Every few minutes he would bury his face in her hair and breathe deeply, inhaling her scent and
humming his approval in the back of his throat. When she’d finished eating, Tom grabbed the tray
and placed it on the floor beside his side of the bed, turning back to Charlotte – who was about to
reach for her mobile.

Tom assumed she was checking for messages from James, and the burning ember of hatred flared
quickly to life in his belly. He barely let her grab the iPhone before hauling her backward into his
lap, Charlotte squeaking out a surprised gasp. Without second-guessing himself, Tom lightly sank his
teeth into Charlotte’s jugular, feeling her drop the phone onto his bed and go slack in his arms. He
growled at her, only half jokingly.

“Don’t call him.”

Charlotte huffed out a laugh, reaching behind her to scratch reassuringly through Tom’s curls, as she
told him what, exactly, she was doing. She didn’t miss the fact that her nipples had puckered against
her shirt and a fresh burst of wetness poured forth from her sex at Tom’s aggressive behavior.

“We’re going to look up a therapist for me, Thomas,” she giggled.

Picking up her phone, she barely deigned to notice that there were no more messages from James.
And then she realized she absolutely didn’t give a fuck. Much of it probably had to do with being
kissed within an inch of her life throughout the previous night.

No longer fettered to her ex, Charlotte sighed in relief as she scrolled through her phone, searching
for a locally certified trauma specialist. Tom had gone strangely quiet behind her.

“How about…this one? Dr. Rochester?” she queried, turning in Tom’s lap to hand him her mobile.
He’d gone still, and when she looked in his eyes she saw that his pupils were blown and his tongue
was licking his bottom lip, her voice died in her throat.

“I can smell you, darling,” Tom moaned, taking the phone from her and throwing it with a soft
Charlotte was about to ask what he meant when it dawned on her.

And then her mind involuntarily reverted to the image of Tom’s mouth between her thighs.

He moved so that Charlotte was laid flat against the bed, hair fanned around her head like a halo and lithe body arranged across the mattress. Stretching out beside her, Tom leaned forward to capture her mouth in a searing kiss as his free hand traced along the soft skin of her left arm, then the patch of flesh peeking out from the hem of her shirt.

“Is it…for me, Lotte?” he asked, looking unsure of himself – something that he was rarely capable of. Her answering blush and smile told him all he needed to know.

When she reached up to run fingers through his hair, lightly scratching at his scalp, he moved to press himself atop her, dropping his head to her shoulder and sucking lightly at her neck.

“Ooh,” she breathed.

“Did my kisses help you last night, lovely?” He took her earlobe between his teeth. She shuddered, nodding at his question.

“Does this help soothe you, my darling girl?” he asked, grinding against her carefully so as not to overwhelm her. She hummed her affirmation against his warm mouth when he pressed a deep kiss to her lips.

“Mmmm, my sweet Lotte…you taste like sugar,” Tom practically purred. He had begun to rock his hips just a fraction, pressing himself against her heated center.

She raised her own hips to meet him without even realizing what she was doing.

“You’re so,” he licked at her bottom lip and she opened for him, tangling her tongue with his in another kiss, “responsive, darling. My good girl.”

As soon as he said that word, responsive, Charlotte broke the kiss, looking away from Tom. Despite all evidence to the contrary and the feelings coursing through her, Charlotte replayed James’ cruel taunts in her head again. Her pleasure died immediately. Tom sensed the change in his best girl, watching the light extinguish from her eyes. He wasn’t sure what the cause was – had she had another flashback of sorts? Had he been too forward? Moved too fast? She’d only just ended things with James – or so Tom thought.

*Maybe they’re still trying to work things out,* he thought bitterly.

He was working himself into a furor when Charlotte turned to face him again. She was so quiet when she spoke he almost didn’t hear her.

“You think I’m responsive?” she asked softly, eyes wide.

Confusion flooded Tom. Of course she was responsive – he could see, hear, and smell how excited he’d made her. It filled him with pride and not a small amount of lust.

“Lotte, sweet, it’s very obvious to me that you are,” he crooned, kissing her forehead and pulling her across the bed with him so that they were snuggled up beside one another. “What gives you the idea that you’re-’”
And then he figured it out.

He didn’t even have to ask the question before Charlotte was nodding her head, seeing from his facial expressions that he’d put the puzzle pieces together.

“‘Frigid’ was the word he used most frequently,” she whispered, tears clouding her eyes. “‘Disappointment was his second favorite, followed closely by ‘off-putting’.”

Tom was shocked. Angry, definitely, but shocked. How could someone think this beautiful, kind woman, this sweet and sensual darling girl was frigid?

“Lovely, surely you know that can’t be true?” Tom asked, rubbing a calming hand in circles on her back. She sniffled prettily, looking up at him with gray doe eyes.

“It could be,” she murmured. “He wasn’t satisfied with me…” she drifted off, spacing out and most likely remembering more of James’ criticisms.

“Kiss me, Lotte,” Tom ordered quietly. “Right now.”

She obediently did so, loving the warmth and affection Tom breathed into her. He didn’t rush – it was as if kissing her was something he planned to do all day.

When he broke from her, she was breathing a little heavily.

“My sweet girl, you’re not frigid. If you could see you right now – cheeks flushed, breathing labored, pupils enlarged – you would know that the only reason James Osprey called you those things is because he’s a sorry excuse for a man.”

She made to interrupt Tom but he gave her a look and held her tighter, causing her to keep quiet. A throbbing heat settled between her legs. Tom rolled back on his forearms to kneel above Lotte, resuming the position of trust and protection he’d taken several times in the last 36 hours, and continued to try and eradicate the damage James had done.

“I bet, my darling, because you’re such a good girl for me, that if I slipped my fingers down your luscious little tummy and dipped them into your panties you’d be soaked with want, yes?”

Charlotte gasped, contracting at his words and tone. She bit her lip, chest heaving, as Tom continued to stare at her, dragging those long, aforementioned fingers down her torso.

“All my best girl needs is some tender loving care, doesn’t she?” his index and middle finger grasped the waistband of her satin sleep shorts, starting to tug gently downward.

Charlotte could barely breathe. The anticipation of Tom’s hands touching her so intimately – of finally being loved by the one man who treated her like a precious possession – made her lightheaded with need.

And then the doorbell rang. Punctuated with a series of loud, irritating knocks.

Charlotte tried to occupy herself in Tom’s kitchen: cleaning up from their breakfast, scheduling an appointment with Doctor Rochester for the following day, taking stock of his kitchen’s contents so she could make him a nice dinner for all the trouble he’d gone through for her. He was thus occupied
in the foyer with Jacqueline, yet again.

*She just won’t quit,* Charlotte thought sadly.

The fact that Tom hadn’t outright dismissed Jacqueline as soon as he saw her on his front doorstep didn’t bode well. And sure enough, he’d let her in so that she could hassle him loudly and rudely. Their conversation went on and on to the point that Charlotte actually convinced herself they’d reconciled and she was going to be asked to leave at any moment.

Charlotte scoffed at herself. *How could you practically offer yourself up to him like that? And now he’s out there with Miss Tall and Perfect.*

Miss Tall and Perfect managed to stalk to the kitchen, moving past Tom, to discover Lotte hiding away between the sink and the oven. Charlotte could see the woman’s eyes widen at her loved-up appearance: still in her sleep clothes, hair mussed and lips swollen. She had a little bit of beard burn on her neck and clavicles from Tom’s facial hair. Jacqueline chose to mask her ire with belittling comments.

“How much longer are you going to be here, huh?” she screamed in Charlotte’s face. “Still trying to use your little trauma to get close to him again? Unbelievable.”

She spat at Lotte, who moved just in time to hear the soft *splat* of the gob of spit hit the linoleum.

Rounding on Tom, who’d arrived in the kitchen looking apologetic and harried, Jacqueline let loose.

“Fucking the help now, are we? You cheating bastard! I can’t believe you would stoop so low as to sleep with HER! Pathetic little bitch!”

Tom was about to let the full measure of his rage fly – to finally end Jacqueline Silver’s reign of terror once and for all – when Charlotte straightened from her position against the kitchen counter and sauntered past Jacqueline. It was hard for Tom to miss just how attractive and poised his best girl looked in that moment: natural, beautiful, a classic grace about her.

When she’d passed the threshold of the kitchen and moved into the hallway near the master bedroom door, Charlotte turned back to look at Jacqueline – for what would be the last time – and spoke firmly but quietly.

“I’m sorry Jackie, but I couldn’t quite hear you just now. I was too busy thinking about all the sex Tom and I are going to be having.”

Jacqueline Silver watched, stunned, as Charlotte proudly walked the rest of the way to the guest bedroom, where she slammed the door and commenced going about her day.
Standing underneath the hot jets of water in the guest shower, Charlotte marveled at how brazen she’d just acted. She couldn’t believe she’d said that to Jacqueline!

*My parents would be ashamed,* she thought.

Shock aside, the embarrassment never came. Instead, as she rinsed her hair and washed her now-pink skin, Charlotte felt immensely proud that she’d stood up for herself. Being an assistant, sometimes Charlotte experienced people talking down to her, or taking advantage of her services. But in all the years she’d worked aside Tom, he made sure she was never shamed or abused. Granted, things were a bit more difficult to maneuver when the abuser in question was romantically involved with him.

And Charlotte had seen fit to stand up for herself – and her Tom. If she couldn’t protect him from that awful woman, at least she’d helped end whatever toxic relationship they’d had. What she *did* regret was that Tom witnessed her insinuation about them having sex – and she was too flustered after telling Jacqueline off to stick around and observe his reaction. She was sure he thought her to be crude, or worse – that he would definitely be put off by her declaration.

*Off-putting,* as James phrased it.

Lotte finished the rest of her shower, feeling increasingly downtrodden as she toweled off, dusted on some light makeup, and changed into a pair of her favorite yoga leggings and a gray knit one-shoulder sweater that brought out the whorls of gray in her eyes. Wanting to procrastinate even more – avoiding Tom for a bit would surely help – she went ahead and worked gentle curls into her hair, coaxing soft waves with her fingers. When she had nothing else to do but return to the kitchen and face him, Charlotte took a deep breath and made her way out of the guest room into the hallway.

Tom was leaning against the kitchen counter, a fresh mug of coffee in his hands, watching her walk down the entirety of the corridor.

He looked like he wanted to eat her.

*Or he could be so disgusted with me that he’s about to toss me out, too.*

She didn’t have to wait long to find out. As soon as she was within reach, Tom placed his coffee cup on the counter and lunged for her, trapping her in his arms and grinning almost evilly.

“Your Loki is showing,” she squeaked, unnerved as Tom continued to rove his eyes over her: the shine of her hair, the tender curve of her exposed shoulder and neck, the pout of her full lips. He moved his face closer to hers, still leering, as he pressed her body flush against his.

“My little minx,” he purred. “Giving away secrets about all the sex we’ll be having,” he chuckled lowly in his throat.

Charlotte stuttered, trying to back out of Tom’s grasp. She was already in backpedaling mode. He wouldn’t have it, pulling her to him so he could place a long, open-mouthed kiss against her lips. He felt her melt immediately, but she still broke from the kiss to gasp out her rebuttal.

“N-no, Tom. I’m sorry. I faked all of th-that for Jacqueline. You can’t possibly want me that way after having d-dated someone as gorgeous as her. I just wanted her gone. I know you’re only helping
me through the tough time I’m having at the moment.”

Tom gently lifted Lotte up and onto the counter, trapping her with an arm at both of her sides. His mischievous grin vanished and he turned serious.

“Who’s my best girl, Charlotte?”

She hesitated several seconds until he gave her a stern look, at which she blurted out, “Me.”

“And who runs her hands through my hair when we’re both frightened and holding one another?”

A second “me” echoed through the kitchen.

“Who washed all the blood from your beautiful body, darling?”

“Y-you,” she stammered, not sure where he was going with this.

“And who do you want in the middle of the night when you have a bad dream and need to feel safe?” he began caressing her cheekbone with his thumb.

“You, Tom.”

“Who are the two idiots we don’t need to spend a moment more thinking about, Lotte?”

She smiled slightly at his emphatic use of the word idiots.

“James and Jacqueline.”

“Correct, lovely. Now tell me,” he continued, whispering the next question right against her lips, feeling her panting breaths against his mouth. “Who’s the lucky man who gets to prove to Charlotte Hamilton that she’s not a frigid disappointment?”

She didn’t – couldn’t – answer. Her shame ran too deep.

So Tom continued. “Let me rephrase, my sweet girl,” he intoned, stealing another kiss. “When do I finally get to start making love to you?”

Lotte gasped, heat flaring in her belly at Tom’s question. But then years of being belittled at the hands of another man – she refused to use his name any longer – brought her back to her senses.

“I don’t…I can’t…” she couldn’t even finish her train of thought before she became so flustered and embarrassed that she buried her face in his chest, a few hot tears slipping from her eyes.

Tom immediately switched from his role as playful seducer to just her Tom.

“Oh, my love,” he whispered, tilting her chin upward with a finger and wiping her eyes gently with his thumb. “Not to worry, darling. Have I moved too fast, sweet?”

Charlotte nodded, suddenly even more self-conscious.

“Then let me change that last question for you, my little Lotte.”

“Okay,” she murmured meekly.

“Who loves you very much, more than he could have ever hoped to love anyone?”

Her eyes widened in shock. Surely he’s not serious…
Seeing her struggle – again – to accept his words, he nodded at her encouragingly as she found the bravery to speak.

“My Tom.”

Enveloping her into a hug, Tom exhaled in relief at Charlotte’s answer. He gave her body a two-squeeze and, to his delight, she returned it.

The rest of the afternoon was a relaxing, affectionate affair. Not wanting to overstep his bounds – and not wanting to overwhelm Charlotte or scare her off since his declaration – Tom contented himself with just being with his best girl, kissing her and hugging her every few minutes.

They talked over the game plan for the next morning, when they would both start their therapy with Dr. Ryann Rochester at a private practice. Not wanting Charlotte to feel singled out, Tom honestly confessed that he was feeling aftereffects from the shooting, too. He knew he would benefit from talking to someone just as much as Lotte would.

Tom watched Charlotte prepare a roast and vegetables for their dinner, distracting her every so often with a lingering touch, or stare, or heated kiss. He marveled at the ease with which she prepared the meal, warmth in his heart at seeing her so at home in his kitchen.

“Surely you knew I could cook,” Charlotte laughed, catching Tom once again staring as she seasoned and trimmed, peeled and herbed. “I didn’t just bring you takeaways for when you’d arrive back in town.” She stuck her tongue out at him playfully.

“You’re wonderful,” was all Tom could manage. Her beauty, intelligence, and capability made him so proud. Add in the fact she was trying to be strong after one of the most harrowing torments of her life, and he wanted to sweep her into his arms and keep her there for ten lifetimes.

After they’d eaten, hours later, Charlotte determined that her head had been feeling much better, and that she wanted to snuggle into bed and read. She always kept a running list in her head of the books Tom owned that she wanted to delve into.

“Would that be okay?” she asked Tom shyly.

In the most sincere voice she’d ever heard him use, he said, “Anything you want, my love.”

*I don’t think I’ll ever tire of hearing that,* she murmured quietly to herself.

By the time the two were finally situated in Tom’s bed – our bed, he’d corrected her – Tom let Charlotte know he’d heard her earlier utterance.

“I’m glad you won’t tire of hearing me say ‘anything you want, my love,’ because I’m going to do anything – try anything – within my power as the man who loves you to make sure you are plasured, satisfied, and sure of your body’s perfect obedience to me.”

And with a boyish, sexy smile and a soft kiss on her lips, he amended, “But only when you’re
ready.”

Lotte reached for his hand and gave a gentle two-squeeze.
Tom and Charlotte begin therapy - at the doctor's and at home.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this is late, loves. This one took me awhile to sort out. Hope it's worth the wait… this is officially the LAST chapter before the SMUT begins. We're almost there. Thanks for being patient!

Gimme those comments ;)

Tom’s physical gestures of affection were quickly proving to be a tried and true method for helping to coax Charlotte out of her anxious moments, whether she was asleep or awake. All it took was gentle, tactile redirection, and Charlotte was able to focus on Tom kissing her softly, rubbing her back, looking into her eyes and talking to her.

Charlotte thought this partial “cure” was a fluke; Tom thanked the gods above that being able to touch and kiss the woman he’d finally admitted to loving was actually helping her in some small way.

But kisses and loving glances weren’t going to cut it.

Dr. Ryann Rochester’s private practice specialized in therapy and psychiatry for people who had experienced many different levels of trauma: workplace violence, military-related distress, and domestic abuse among them. Charlotte had chosen Dr. Rochester for her specialty; she wasn’t naïve enough to think she didn’t have some sort of PTSD related to the shooting. And she felt better about going to therapy with a doctor who focused primarily on issues like hers.

The only problem was, Charlotte was terrified to even take a few steps out of Tom’s house to get into the car.

The night that she’d tried to leave Hampstead on her own, while Tom dealt with the Silvers, had not been a fluke. Every time she even thought about setting foot outside the protection of Tom’s home, Charlotte started into a panic. The anxiety was acute and sickening, and no matter how badly she wanted to receive guidance for her issues – from one of the best, most respected doctors in the field – the fear and panic that crippled her when she tried to leave with Tom was unbearable.

“This is so foolish,” Lotte cried to Tom, as he shut the front door quietly for the third time in a row that morning. “I can’t believe how stupid I’m being about literally putting one foot in front of the other and walking a few steps to your car.”

If Tom was honest, he’d been a little surprised, too. But then again, Charlotte had been holed up, mostly with him, for several days, and the level of comfort she felt at being alone with him in
Hampstead was something she hadn’t yet experienced in any other environment.

“Darling girl, I hate to be a brute about all this, but we’re going to be late for our appointment if we don’t get you into my car soon. I know this is frightening for you,” he beseeched, holding out his hands to Charlotte, “but this is the first step – literally – you must take. I’m here to help you, my love.”

A few days ago, Charlotte would have honestly thought Tom could cure her of her ailment – he had kept her so safe and loved that she swore he was all she needed to overcome her trauma. But even his loving, coaxing words weren’t getting her out the door. When Tom began to look agitated, Charlotte’s eyes filled with tears.

Why couldn’t she just set foot outside and get into a car?

It would take mere seconds. And then Tom wouldn’t be mad at her. James’ voice echoed in her head again, which surprised her, since she hadn’t thought about him with any seriousness in the last several hours.

Such a disappointment…

A small sob escaped Charlotte’s quivering mouth, and Tom was instantly broken from his semi-impatient reverie by the door as he waited. With wide eyes, he reached out to Lotte, thinking she was beginning to panic even more.

“N-no,” she stammered, wiping her eyes with her thumbs. “I know I’m b-being stupid and I can t-tell you’re mad at me for not being able to g-get out the d-door.”

Instead of a loud verbal reply that she was expecting, Tom scooped Charlotte up to murmur very softly in her ear, urging her to hold on tightly.

“I’m going to close the door behind us, lovely. You just hold onto me and close your eyes until we get you safe in the car, okay? Everything is fine,” he murmured, maneuvering them together through the threshold of the front door and securing the alarm system before making his way to the Jaguar parked in the drive. Charlotte kept her eyes closed through the entire exchange: down the path, into the car, as he buckled her in and closed the door. She only opened them when she heard the soft whump of Tom’s door, turning to look at him gratefully as he started the ignition.

Instead of a smile, Tom gifted her with a stern look.

He thinks you’re absolutely childish and a total nutter, she opined to herself.

“If you ever dare call yourself stupid in my presence again, sweet Lotte, you’re going to have a very sore bottom. I promise you won’t be able to sit for a week. Furthermore, I can see in your face that you think I’m upset with you, but you know better than that, love. Don’t you?”

She nodded wordlessly, heat flooding her at Tom’s dominant tone. He grabbed her hand and raised it to his lips, pressing intermittent kisses to her fingers and knuckles the entire way to Dr. Rochester’s office.

When they were pulling in to the car park near the building, Tom turned to Lotte to gauge her response to what was next: getting out of the car. She was white, and he could practically see her trembling in place.

“I’m going to come around and open your door, Lotte, and you’re going to get out. Is that clear, darling?”
She nodded very slightly, face still ashen. Tom was now electing to approach the situation with a tactic that had worked earlier in the week: exerting some control over Charlotte so she knew that he only had her best interests at heart and would do what was necessary to keep her safe. “

When we’re out, you’re going to take my hand and I’m going to wrap my arm around you so that nothing can surprise you or get to you, yes?”

Another nod.

“Do you trust me, Charlotte?”

She whispered a shaky “yes.”

“Good girl. Let me kiss you for a moment?” He’d asked this of her so that he could once again mimic what had already worked so well for them back at the house – affection and closeness, coupled with Tom being “in charge” of the situation. She practically fell into his arms over the prospect of momentary relief.

Placing a series of long, soft kisses to her lips, Tom smiled into Lotte’s mouth as he once again felt her relaxing against him. Moving a trail of tiny kisses across her cheek to her ear, Tom whispered positively.

“Ready, darling? We’ll be fast. Here we go.”

The long and short of the first session with Dr. Ryann Rochester, BACP-certified therapist, was that Charlotte did indeed suffer from mild PTSD. The fact that the woman classified the experience as “mild” only made Lotte feel worse – imagine how she’d be feeling if this was worse than mild!

A potent combination of escaping death and failing to save her colleague and dear friend Aminta Brightman were the chief culprits of Charlotte’s condition. But by the end of the first session, in the last few minutes of their discussion, Dr. Rochester suggested something to Charlotte that clicked in her head immediately.

“I know we’ve covered the root causes of this particular post-traumatic scenario, Charlotte, but I think, observing you and Tom here today, that there’s one additionally pivotal reason why you’re dealing with such trauma after the fact of the mass shooting,” Dr. Rochester mused.

“Oh?” Charlotte blew her nose politely; she’d spent much of the session crying and wiping tears out of her eyes: byproducts of having to tell the entire story, of reliving the night’s events – in totality – one last time.

“Do you like Tom?”

The question was idiotic in its simplicity. Looking bewildered, Charlotte suddenly burst out laughing at the idea that her feelings for Tom, which grew exponentially every day, could be summed up as “like.”

“Obviously I do, yes. We’ve…” here Charlotte blushed a bit and fiddled with a piece of lint on her sweater, “become something of an item since all this happened.”

Dr. Rochester nodded, as if she was in on a secret that Charlotte didn’t know. Tom looked just as
confused as Lotte felt in that moment.

“Normally, I would say that a relationship forged out of trauma could be a false one – out of some sense of loyalty to the other person, perhaps for saving a life, or for simply being a part of the same experience,” the therapist continued. “But you and Tom have known and worked together for quite some time, from what you’ve both shared with me here today.”

Neither Charlotte nor Tom understood where this conversation was going. Dr. Rochester paused briefly, as if considering whether or not to continue with her line of thought.

“Charlotte, do you think…” she reasoned carefully, “it’s possible that-”

And then it clicked right into place for Lotte. “I’ve loved Tom all along?”

Charlotte didn’t know where the words came from, but she suddenly understood what the good doctor was getting at.

“Yes,” Dr. Rochester continued. “And that this trauma forced you into a legitimate examination of your feelings. I’m suggesting that some of this post-traumatic stress is now stemming from the fact that you very well could have lost Tom, too.”

That brought a fresh wave of tears for Charlotte; Tom himself had to brush a few from his eyes as he saw the depth of feeling his best girl was admitting to.

“Something else to think about, at least, as to why you’re continuing to feel so affected,” Dr. Rochester smiled.

Tom broke into the conversation, wanting to approach some strategies for how best to help Charlotte. “We will be traveling in a few weeks’ time, Dr. Rochester. I want Charlotte to be able to go with me, as I do need her more than you could ever know,” he smiled. “But I also understand that this is not a short, easy road to travel.”

Dr. Rochester smiled, nodding. “Well, you two, let’s look at some rational thoughts regarding what’s happened. First, it’s good to remind one another that you’re both alive and relatively unscathed from the attack, for the most part. A daily affirmation of some sort, like that, can help you both to ground your thoughts and stay positive.”

Tom reached out and grasped Charlotte’s hand tenderly; she gave a light two-squeeze.

“Second, though you’ve both said you’ve largely avoided news coverage of the shooting, we do need to remind ourselves that the gentlemen responsible were apprehended, and then chose to take their own lives. Their threat to you no longer exists. As for why they did it…well, there are sick people all over the world.”

Charlotte shuddered, thinking about all the possible contact she would have with humanity during the multi-city press tour.

“But it’s important to remember that people are largely good, and for every act of malice - like what happened at the V&A – there are a handful of acts of kindness. Much like the one you extended to Ms. Brightman in her last moments, Charlotte.”

A wan smile graced Lotte’s face, followed by Tom giving the two-squeeze this time.

The doctor continued her suggestions, recalling Tom’s discussion at the beginning of the session about the physical element to Charlotte’s anxiety relief.
“Thirdly, I think it’s beneficial for you both to continue exhibiting physical and emotional affection with one another. Charlotte,” Dr. Rochester pointed at her, “moments when Tom kisses you or touches you bring you back to the present, as yet another grounding force. If that’s what you need to help you, I think that’s a wonderful coping mechanism.”

Just then, Tom mumbled something so lowly that Lotte didn’t hear him and the therapist had to ask him to repeat himself. Clearing his throat shyly, he did so.

“I said the affection helps me too,” he stared at Charlotte, face and neck coloring, but the heat of his gaze never faltered.

“Explain that, please, Tom,” Dr. Rochester urged.

“I don’t want to say this to make you feel guilty, or to diminish how serious your trauma has been, Lotte,” Tom spoke carefully, “but I’m also having some issues after what happened. I may not show the signs outwardly, but what happened affects me too.”

Before Charlotte could apologize profusely for ignoring Tom’s needs or feel bad about not realizing she wasn’t the only person who had suffered distress at the hands of two crazed gunmen, Tom put a hand up and silently asked Lotte to let him finish.

“I was about to say that the physical and emotional affection help ground me, too. I need both of those things just as much as Charlotte does,” he addressed the doctor.

Nodding her head, Dr. Rochester rounded out their first session. “Very good, both of you. Let’s continue with stemming panic and fear impulses with expressions of physical and emotional connection, then. That can span anything from eye contact and hand holding all the way to sex and massage.”

Charlotte was sure she was as red as a tomato.

Tom actually winked at her.

“I’m also going to write you a very low-dose prescription for an anti-anxiety medication, Charlotte. I’m not at all discouraging regular use of the drug, but it’s important that you use it as a last resort, generally. If you can’t seem to stem the fight-or-flight response using the other methods we’ve discussed, then opt for the Seroxat.”

She scribbled down the prescription and handed it to Charlotte, smiling. And then she wound down their session for the day.

“Charlotte – you feel safest with Tom, correct?”

She nodded, toying with the paper in her hands so both Tom and the doctor wouldn’t see how embarrassed she got, having her feelings for Tom displayed and discussed so freely.

“Stay with him. Make his home your sanctuary – as it sounds like you’ve already started to do. Help one another recover. And both of you enjoy this upcoming press tour! Keep me posted – let’s try and touch base once a week face to face if possible, and every other day minimum via phone or Facetime. Sound alright?”

Charlotte and Tom both thanked Dr. Rochester profusely, agreeing to keep in touch frequently during the first few weeks of therapy, if only so Charlotte’s progress starting the medication could be monitored. They also wanted a strong arsenal of tools to help them function during the press tour, which would be grueling regardless of their mental states.
By the time they were ready to exit the doctor’s office complex, Tom noticed Charlotte stiffening up, her body trying to steel itself for another trip to the outside world. He gathered her into his arms discreetly, pausing in the entryway to take her face in his hands and speak softly to her.

“Darling, I’m so proud of you. You’ve left our house. You’ve been in the car. You’ve made it into Dr. Rochester’s office. All safely, yes?”

Charlotte blew out a breath she’d been holding and nodded, latching her gaze onto Tom’s baby blues.

“That’s three new experiences today, alone. That’s wonderful!” he kissed her on the cheek, stroking strong hands along her back as he did so. “Let’s stop by the chemist and I’ll get your medicine, and then we can go to your flat to pick up some things, lovely.”

Charlotte took a few steps toward the door as Tom coaxed her forward, holding her hands and smiling in that heartbreakingly beautiful way she’d come to savor. But she still felt the clench of fear stroking her mind and gut with icy fingers. Her breath hitched as Tom opened the office door, continuing to guide her outside to the Jag.

“That’s it darling, almost there,” Tom murmured. “And I have a surprise for you when we get home,” he winked again.

Leaning in more closely to her, he began to tease her in a devilishly low tone. “My good girl… almost there…such a beautiful, sweet girl. And all mine.”

The combination of Tom’s very sensual voice and the prospect of a surprise helped abate Lotte’s anxiety enough for her to make it to the car. When she was inside the locked vehicle with Tom, the squeeze of anxiety released its hold on her. She was able to breathe freely, relaxing against the luxurious leather of her seat. And then a warm, sweet feeling filled her as she remembered something Tom had just said on the way out of the office.

“You called it our house,” she marveled, turning her body toward Tom as he drove to the chemist nearest her flat in Soho.

“That I did, my little Lotte. You belong with me, sweet girl. And anything that’s yours is mine.” The thought filled Charlotte with such pleasure, helped ease her tense mind and body so much, that she was able to rest quietly for the remainder of the journey, safely ensconced in Tom’s car. And the two times she reluctantly – but stubbornly – followed Tom to retrieve her medicine and some more clothes and work items from her flat, she was able to do so with just a bit less trepidation.

It helped that she was so eager to see what was waiting back at Hampstead.

“How…in the world did you…get this together?” Charlotte was dumbfounded, staring at the large picnic blanket and the enormous spread of food lovingly assembled on Tom’s living room floor. There were large throw pillows all along the perimeter of the picnic area, and tiny, scented tea lights were scattered here and there to give the room a more ambient feeling. Tom just smiled and took Lotte’s hand, directing her to lay her things on the couch and join him for what he deemed a “working lunch.”

Charlotte giggled, moving to kneel down onto the plush blanket, mouth watering at the array of foods: finger sandwiches, vegetable crudités and fruit salad, petits fours, and an actual bottle of
“Champagne,” Lotte tried again, picking up a piece of the fruit with her fingers and eating it ravenously, “how did you do this? Why did you do this?”

He sat down right beside her, half-cuddling her as he leaned with his back against the couch, and bit into a sandwich, mirth shining in his eyes. After swallowing the bite, he pulled her into his lap and placed a comically loud kiss on her neck, which set her to squealing.

“I did this with the help of magical food fairies because lord knows I’m not this suave and talented on my own,” he wiggled his eyebrows suggestively at Lotte. “And I did this because you needed a sweet little surprise so that I could indulge you and tell you how proud I am of you, especially after dealing with the last few days and starting therapy today.”

Charlotte pulled his mouth to hers for an appreciative kiss, before Tom continued.

“And for trusting me enough to get you safely out of and back into our house today, sweet.”

“I don’t deserve all this, Tom. I don’t deserve y-” Charlotte was stopped by Tom’s index finger pressed against her lips.

“Stop that, darling. Not one more word like that. You’ve taken great pains to be everything I need to be successful these last four years, and you’ve been my best friend and confidante. And now I get to treat you as you really deserve. To show you what a good man can be to you. And I’m going to spoil you,” here he reached for two crystal champagne goblets that just happened to be set out, “and spoil you, and spoil you.”

They toasted to the small progress they’d made courtesy of their combined strength and their first visit to Dr. Rochester. They toasted their upcoming press tour, which would be difficult but exhilarating. And then Tom thanked Lotte for being the most wonderful person in his life, right alongside the magical food fairies.

“They should be coming back anytime soon. I sent them off… I know not where,” Tom comically quoted one of his lines from Avengers, smirking at Lotte.

While waiting for these mysterious, magical food fairies, Tom and Charlotte ate heartily, revisited what they’d worked out in their therapy session during the morning, and did some additional work preparation for the press tour. Charlotte gushed to Tom that she was really thrilled about his latest project and that the tour would generate even more interest in what was surely to be one of his best performances to date.

“I’m just so proud of you all the time, you jerk,” she teased, sticking her tongue out at him. He playfully shoved a pretty pastel petit four into her open mouth and took a dramatic swig of the chilled Taittinger bubbling in his glass.

A knock at the front door startled Charlotte out of her chewing, but Tom merely got up and smiled, mouthing “food fairies.”

When she moved to go with him, Tom motioned for Charlotte to stay right exactly where she was.
“They like to surprise people,” he whispered.

Somewhat warily, Lotte waited amidst the remnants of their working feast. She trusted Tom to know who was at his door, but what if it was someone dangerous? She couldn’t help it. That telltale tendril of panic flared to life in her belly. But it didn’t last long.

“There’s my darling girl!”

The “magical food fairies” turned out to be Tom’s mum Diana and Emma, heavily pregnant and holding…a baby? Laughing in relief at the very welcome guests, Charlotte rushed over to embrace Diana and look questioningly at Tom’s younger sister.

“How do you have a baby, and yet still have a baby in your stomach, young lady?” Charlotte mock-scolded Emma as she sat on the couch, cradling the small bundle in her arms.

“We’re babysitting for a friend today, love,” Diana replied, eyeing the demolished feast on the living room floor. “I see the magical food fairies have done a bang-up job, Thomas.”

“Yes, mum, thanks to you and Emma!” Tom chuckled, and he moved his mother comfortably onto the couch where Emma and Charlotte were already seated.

“Lotte, my love, mum and I are so glad you are okay,” Emma choked, tearing up slightly, as it was the first time either woman had seen Lotte – or Tom for that matter – since the shooting. “I’m sorry I’m just a little bit emotional,” Emma apologized, “hormones and all that, you know.”

Charlotte just gave Em a quick hug, moving off the couch to embrace Diana, too.

“I want you to know, Diana, that your son has taken such exceedingly good care of me during all this – I’ve practically moved into his house and taken over his life!” Charlotte blushed slightly.

Diana didn’t miss a beat. Her response shocked Lotte.

“I couldn’t have asked for anything better, Charlotte. Whether he admits it or not,” Diana looked pointedly at Tom, “my son has had his sights set on you for many years. And you know we all consider you family already. Tom’s not the only one who loves you.”

Charlotte looked down at the floor, smiling sheepishly.

The baby suddenly began stirring and fussing in Emma’s arms, punctuating the sweet silence. “Good practice, I suppose,” Em said, trying to rock and shush the infant. “My friend Ella is having a day out with her husband so mum and I agreed to watch Amelia, here.”

“Well she’s adorable,” Charlotte cooed at the fussy child. “Can I take her for a moment?”

Emma nodded, passing off the little girl to Charlotte and sitting back, talking animatedly with Tom about his newest project.

Diana, with her keen mother’s eye, watched as Lotte stood up from the couch and walked around the room, soothing the child and speaking softly to her.

That girl is going to have a few of my grandbabies someday, she mused pleasantly.

Charlotte wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but she continued to walk slowly around Tom’s living room, rocking Amelia and whispering sweet nothings to her until she dropped off to sleep. When she looked up, Diana and Emma had moved into the kitchen, and Tom was sprawled on the
couch, staring at her with his mouth slack and an intense stare in his eyes.

Hoarsely, he said, “You know, my little Lotte, I’ve thought you to be unbelievably beautiful for many years, but seeing you now, with a tiny baby in your arms, I can say with certainty that you have never looked more gorgeous.”

Charlotte didn’t know what to say, but the comment sent a thrill through her and a shiver of pleasure down her spine. For the first time in a long while, she suddenly felt very flirtatious and sure of herself, a feeling she was almost completely robbed of in her last relationship.

Sauntering over to the couch to sit with Tom, taking care not to disturb the sleeping infant, Charlotte lowered her voice to a hushed purr as she leaned into Tom conspiratorially.

“I do believe that you and I can work together to make a baby eventually, Mr. Hiddleston, if we wanted one…”

Lotte watched as his tongue darted out to wet his bottom lip. Then, he leaned forward so his mouth was right near hers, whispering his reply.

“Will you be my good girl and practice with me?” he swallowed thickly, momentarily drowning in her gray eyes.

“I’m not very good at it, so I’ve been told,” Charlotte countered. The feigned hurt on her face wasn’t completely feigned. Amelia was stirring again slightly, and Lotte began to rock her gently once more.

Tom kissed Charlotte’s forehead as he gently placed a palm against Amelia’s little head, stroking the baby-fine hair there.

“My love, I will personally see to it that we prove that statement very, very wrong. And you’re going to see, yet again, just what a perfect pair we are together.”

Charlotte shuddered at the feral gleam in Tom’s eyes.

Quick as a flash, he returned to his normal jovial self when Diana and Emma came back in to the living room. Amelia needed a bottle and the two of them had some errands to run.

“Thank you both so much for all of this,” Charlotte gestured to the remains of the working picnic at her feet. She rose to hand the baby back to Emma and give both women long, appreciative hugs. “Em, I promise I’m returning the favor with your shower!”

“As long as I can sit and eat a piece of cake, I’ll be happy, Lotte,” Emma giggled.

Tom and Charlotte showed the ladies out, but not before Diana turned back to give her son a long hug. “I’m so glad you’re okay, Thomas. You’re my darling baby boy.”

Tom blushed, kissing his mum on both cheeks before helping her out the door. She took one last look back at Charlotte and mouthed, “Love you.” Charlotte’s heart melted. She mouthed it back.

Lotte was attempting to clean up what was left of the picnic when Tom stood in the archway to the living room, speaking forcefully to his best girl.
“Oh no you don’t.”

She turned, glassware collected in her hands, and gave Tom a querying look.

“Put those down, my love. Let’s relax a moment,” he sauntered over to Charlotte.

*He’s so bloody tall and handsome*, she crooned to herself as he reached her.

Tom moved some of the food and crockery aside to make more room on the picnic blanket, taking Charlotte’s hands and maneuvering her so she was lying down on top of the soft fabric.

“I need to check my best girl’s bruises,” he murmured, before kissing a light trail down her neck and lifting part of her sweater up toward her chest. She still had discolorations on her ribcage and tummy, and a reveal of her hipbone yielded the same results. Tom took his time placing a hot, openmouthed kiss on each contusion. Charlotte could do nothing but groan softly in her throat, hands automatically coming to rest in Tom’s wavy hair.

Kneeling down by Lotte’s waist, Tom placed long-fingered hands on her hips as he rested his chin atop her tummy, looking up at her through hooded lids. His voice when he spoke next reverberated through her.

“Are you feeling anxious, my love?” he quirked an eyebrow.

“No…” Charlotte replied breathlessly. Tom was very near the apex of her thighs – someplace he’d never intentionally been – and she was starting to feel the effects of the situation.

“If I were you,” he purred dangerously, “I would say yes to that question.”

He moved the hem of her shirt up again so he could swirl the tip of his tongue around Charlotte’s bellybutton. She bit her lip to stifle the gasp trying to escape her mouth.

“After all,” Tom continued, running his hands up her clothed sides and along the contours of her breasts, “Dr. Rochester told us we’re under strict orders to maintain as much physical and emotional contact as we can.”

Running her fingers through his hair, Charlotte gripped Tom’s locks abruptly and pulled him up to her, kissing him fiercely. His body found itself cradled between her thighs, and he ground down slightly as Charlotte’s tongue swept across his lips, demanding entrance.

“My good girl,” he purred.

They kissed lazily for a few moments, content to be pressed against one another, until Tom began speaking again, moving lower and lower until his chin reclaimed its spot on Charlotte’s stomach. She lovingly tucked some of his curls behind his ears as he spoke once more.

“I have a photo shoot this evening, darling, and I’d like you to come with me so we don’t have to be apart.”

He waited for any sign of hesitation on Lotte’s part, but saw none. Just relaxation at his loving, close proximity. So he continued.

“I promise I’ll get you there and back safely, and then I’d like to take you back into our big bed and try something with you,” he trailed off.

As he spoke, the fingers of his right hand crept to the waistband of Charlotte’s jeans, deftly undoing
the button and slowly unzipping the fly.

Still no hesitation from her. She breathed a sigh and stared unwaveringly into his eyes, hands massaging at his scalp.

“Would you like to try something with me tonight, my love?” he asked, as he carefully peeled down the front of Charlotte’s tiny lace panties, still encased in denim.

Charlotte could already feel how swollen and wet she was, and the sight of Tom’s elegant fingers hovering over her soaked sex made her ache. That was a new sensation for her.

“Answer me, my little Lotte,” he stared at her, awaiting a response.

All she did was nod.

As soon as permission was given, Tom delicately swiped the pad of his thumb right up against Charlotte’s slick, throbbing clit, just once. Her breath caught in her throat, head falling back to the floor and a guttural groan pouring forth from her lips. Tom smirked as her fingers clenched in his hair.

Quickly situating her underwear and zipping up her jeans, Tom sat up and back on his heels, making a nonchalant show of licking Charlotte’s sweetness from his thumb.

She blushed profusely.

Hauling her up to a standing position, Tom gathered Lotte close to him, kissing her forehead, the tip of her nose, and finally her delectable mouth.

“Until this evening, my best girl.”
That small half-pill I took must be working despite this, Charlotte thought.

She was seated snugly in the car that had come to collect her and Tom for his late-evening photo shoot courtesy of Harper’s Bazaar. Tom was splayed, as usual, across most of the back seat, legs akimbo. He had Lotte in a hold: right arm wrapped around her shoulders and left hand dangerously high on her denim-clad thigh. His warmth easily bled through the fabric.

Charlotte watched as Tom’s long, thin fingers absentmindedly traced little invisible whorls along the inside of her leg and then the top of her knee.

If it weren’t for this Seroxat, my heart would already be hammering out of my chest.

Shortly after that one – just one – delectable touch against her in the living room earlier, Tom had fled momentarily to his office to send a few emails before they left for the photo shoot. Charlotte, knowing that her next trip outside the comfort of Hampstead was just a couple of hours away, elected to try out the anxiety medication Dr. Rochester had prescribed. At first, she didn’t think half would be enough, but when she felt the soothing effects a half hour into taking the dose, she was amazed that such a tiny little blip of medication in her system gave her noticeable relief from the impending doom that was looming over her head.

And if she was honest, the prospect of Tom finally “trying something” with her later on didn’t exactly make her relax. She was so keyed up from his earlier attentions on the picnic blanket – and she was also nervous as all get out that James’ cruel words would creep back up on her during Tom’s ministrations – that her body and mind were pulling double duty in the fear and stimulus department.

The actual panic she was supposed to be facing, the aftereffects of the shooting, now seemed secondary to the prospect of Tom’s loving attention.

You’ve always had a thing for him, apparently, she mused as she changed her clothes and got herself ready for the shoot.
When Tom came into the master bedroom awhile later to ask Charlotte if she still wanted to accompany him to the *Bazaar* shoot, she was able to smile comfortably, mostly relaxed, and nod. She already knew he’d be capable of getting her into the car and getting her to the warehouse they’d be shooting in; it didn’t hurt either that the pill took the edge off her apprehension about being surrounded by stylists, dressers, tailors, and photographers.

Charlotte’s medicine kept steadying her body’s responses as Tom led her to the car and they made their way to the shoot. But surprisingly, as soon as Charlotte allowed herself to register just how close Tom was, and just how tactile, and that thing he’d done with his thumb earlier…she could feel her body warring against her just slightly.

**Arousal of a different kind.**

When they’d spoken with Dr. Rochester in the initial session that morning, the term had floated around in relation to post-traumatic stress disorder: “heightened arousal.” But Charlotte wasn’t stupid; she knew that the arousal referenced there was wholly different from the kind she was experiencing right now. And even if the Seroxat was dulling her body’s responses a good deal, she certainly wasn’t totally immune to Tom’s charms.

And was it just her, or had he suddenly dialed up the charm and sexiness after their brief little encounter in the living room? Sure, he was always handsome and smelled so good and looked even better, and they’d become overtly tactile and affectionate since the shooting and their revelations to one another, but she’d never experienced anything quite like this insistent throb between her legs.

Looking up at Tom from her seated position in the hired car, Charlotte smiled a small, shy smile as he caught her eye and winked, leaning down to kiss the shell of her ear very slowly. Goose flesh erupted all over her arms and legs, and Tom continued to place small kisses all along the contour of her ear until he whispered softly to her.

“How’s my best girl?” He punctuated that question with a barely-there lick to her earlobe. She shivered.

“Medicine is doing its job,” she replied, somewhat hoarsely.

“Good, my darling. I’m so proud of you,” he continued to soothe her in a low, even tone as the car wound its way toward the warehouse. “Are you sleepy, my love?”

Charlotte pondered a minute. Taking stock of her senses, she once again noticed that the half-dose was just enough to make her comfortable. She wasn’t drowsy, per se, but she was feeling pleasantly warm and comfortable. That is, if warm and comfortable meant wanting to take her clothes off and have Tom’s mouth and hands all over her.

“Not sleepy, no,” she smiled, taking Tom’s hand and sandwiching it between her much smaller ones. He hummed pleasantly in his throat as she ran the tips of her fingers along his knuckles and palm.

“That’s also good. Because my best girl is going to want to be awake later tonight when we play…”

Her sudden intake of breath at Tom’s suggestive statement was stolen as he pressed a quick but feverish kiss to her lips. They’d arrived at the warehouse. Charlotte knew, realistically, that although they were now a couple, she would need to remain professional during the shoot and act only in her capacity as Tom’s personal assistant. The idea of not being able to touch him or kiss him as she wanted in the next couple of hours was extremely disappointing.

*How have I survived these four years, before now?*
Tom must have been feeling the same internal struggle as he opened her car door and held out strong hands for her to take. In that moment, he was glad for his selfish need to touch his best girl, for as soon as Charlotte stepped out of the car and saw the small crowd of people, coupled with the various noises of the venue, he could feel her falter just a bit. It was unnoticeable to everyone else, but already Tom was becoming an expert at reading his little Lotte’s distress.

“Still okay, lovely?” he asked sweetly as they took slow steps toward wardrobe. “I can find us a quiet place for some kisses if you need me.”

“I’m okay, Tom. Just need a few minutes to acclimate,” Charlotte breathed steadily, willing the Seroxat to continue its work. She had a momentary reprieve when she spied Natasha, one of the same stylists that Tom had worked with on a shoot a few months ago. The girl smiled and waved at her; Charlotte knew there would be someone she could at least stand and talk to while Tom was otherwise occupied.

He continued to guide her, arm proffered for her slightly trembling hand, toward Natasha and the handful of others who would make him presentable for photography. When Charlotte reached everyone, they all murmured sincerely how glad they were that she was okay, and that if she needed anything, she had but to ask.

“I appreciate it, everyone,” she smiled, feeling slightly awkward with so much attention directed her way. Tasha distracted Charlotte from feeling further discomfort by leading her over to the racks and tables of clothes and shoes that the stylists would be choosing from for the shoot. There were several pieces by Ralph Lauren, as well as some D&G and Louis Vuitton.

“Everything is cut precisely to his measurements,” Tasha explained, and Charlotte could feel the warmth of another blush coming on. “He’s so well-proportioned that he’s really a designer’s dream,” Natasha continued.

Charlotte could do nothing but nod emphatically. She’d felt most of that proportion nestled against her as she slept each night, and the last couple of days, said proportion was also pressed between her thighs. She bit back a groan, looking at the clothes, as Tom’s earlier question echoed in her mind.

“Would you like to try something with me tonight, my love?”

Her mind began to marry those words with images of Tom suited up in the various couture laid out before her. The world continued to spin around her as she drifted off into a sensual reverie.

She had visions of peeling every tailored layer from his body.

She likewise had a fantasy of Tom, frantic to make love to her, still clad in the clothes and only able to undo his trousers before sheathing himself inside of her.

Clearly there was something depraved and wrong with her because James had never incited such wicked thoughts in her head before! She’d barely finished that thought when Tom strolled by her, discretely brushing a long finger against her cheek. In his wake, she turned to watch him walk to the photographer, ready for the shoot. Her breath hitched in her throat, eyes traveling from his Italian leather shoes to his undone tie and messy ginger waves. She could feel his glare into the camera from where she stood, wanting to be on the receiving end of such an intense gaze.

Sure, Tom had done much staring into her eyes in the last few days, but nothing like that.

If he would watch me like that as we…

She couldn’t stop the next deluge of images that crashed into her mind’s eye.
Tom cupping the back of her neck with one hand while holding her hip with the other, gaze fixed on
the pleasurable point where their bodies joined to and retreated from one another.

Tom hovering over Charlotte in bed as she touched herself, his gaze dark at the sight of her fingers
sliding along her slippery flesh.

*This Seroxat is top notch,* Charlotte joked to herself internally.

She’d never had quite this much…imagination when it came to sex. But then again, she’d never had
quite much of *anything* when it came to sex.

Tom had about four or five clothing changes during the course of the shoot, and each time he passed
by Charlotte – either going to change or coming back from having done so – he would place an
affectionate, but platonic touch on her person. He was trying to keep everything professional too,
after all. But the little two-squeeze on her shoulder, the caress against her neck that no one managed
to catch…the sweeter and more innocent his gestures, the hotter the fire in her belly became.

She wanted it to be later. She wanted to be at home. She wanted to be in their *bed.*

As if the gods saw fit to taunt Charlotte, Tom’s last look for the shoot was an immaculate black tie
look: a tailored tux, cummerbund, bowtie, polished shoes, cuff links, the works. She ignored the
small stab of fear in her belly that suddenly materialized: the last time he’d worn something like
that…

*Stop.*

Charlotte took deep breaths against the tiny ripples of panic that began to fan outward from her
abdomen to her extremities. She tried to focus on the way the stylists were changing Tom’s tux look
– removing the jacket, undoing the shirt to reveal a bare torso underneath, draping the bowtie messily
around his neck, unbuttoning the pants. But to no avail. The half of a pill was wearing off, and
Charlotte suddenly felt keenly aware of everyone in the room – and the possibility of anything going
wrong at any moment, here, out in the relative open.

Tom sensed her discomfort almost immediately and winked at Charlotte, trying to hold her attention
as two of the stylists placed their finishing touches on his ensemble. It worked momentarily, but he
was a good ways away from her, and couldn’t really get to her without causing a disruption to the
proceedings. They were almost finished, after all.

Raising an eyebrow, Tom looked at Lotte with concern in his eyes as if to ask, *are you okay for a
few more minutes?*

Keeping her eyes locked on his, Charlotte gave a half-hearted nod as she struggled to calm her
breathing and count down the seconds that they had remaining for this engagement. *Concentrate on
Tom,* she repeated in her head like a mantra.

He was doing his part to maintain eye contact, encouraging her with a subtle nod of his own head as
the photographer set up the final shots. *You can do this, Charlotte. Not much longer now.*

She should have been proud of herself in that moment for trying to self-regulate her body’s reaction
to the pill wearing off, and to the keen awareness of everything around her that afforded her. But all
was for naught, because someone decided, a few short seconds later, to back into an empty clothes
rack. The resultant *bang* and *CRASH* had Charlotte on the floor, curled into a ball, tears immediately
filling her eyes.

*Oh god…oh god…oh god it’s happening again…*
All thoughts of relaxed breathing and normal resting heart rate were dashed. The flurry of assistants and stylists around the rack didn’t help either – their commotion brought Charlotte Hamilton back to the bloodstained chaos of the Victoria & Albert, had the shots zinging past her ears and face, had Aminta’s ghastly pale face wavering in front of her vision. She was awash in the forceful tide of memory.

“Move, please…”

Charlotte faintly heard Tom’s voice, politely at first, but then more insistent.

“MOVE! I need to get to her.”

Strong arms wrapped around her and the first hit of Tom’s welcoming scent hit her nostrils. Her eyes closed as she was lifted from the floor, her head taking its place against his neck and her hands finding purchase in his hair. Tom felt Charlotte practically vibrating in terror as he moved her away from the curious group of people, his tone domineering and controlled. He not only faced the task of getting out of this engagement politely, but also of seeing to his best girl as quickly as possible.

It had been a mistake to throw her into this situation this evening – too soon for her to be surrounded by people, too soon to tell how long the Seroxat would last. He berated himself silently. It was lucky so many people liked and respected Tom, because they did whatever he asked in those critical, precious moments: they retrieved his things, they made sure his car was ready, and they were all gracious enough to be immensely understanding about what was going on right under their noses.

No one was gauche enough to ask what was wrong or if Tom could come back at a later time and finish. They simply went about their business as he and Charlotte made their exit.

With a terse yet respectful, “Drive, and quickly,” to his hired driver, Tom settled himself and Charlotte into the back of the car simultaneously. Seatbelts and safety be damned, he situated Lotte into his lap, arranging her so that she was flush against him, very tightly held in a position that left no room for intrusion from any harmful forces.

“Lotte, darling, eyes on me,” Tom coaxed. He was loud enough that she snapped out of whatever haze she’d fallen into, yet the tears and shivering still continued.

“Good girl, yes,” he continued as she locked tearful eyes with him. He immediately began their mutual breathing exercise and Charlotte dutifully tried to calm her own breathing enough to follow his lead. She wasn’t having much success.

“My love,” he continued to breathe deeply with her, “I’m not going to kiss you until you can calm yourself a little bit more for me.”

Her eyes widened, and his statement caused her to struggle again, pulse fluttering wildly in her throat.

Brushing a hand through Lotte’s hair, he shushed her forcefully – but lovingly – and continued breathing with her. He willed her to slow her heart, to deepen her breaths and cease her tiny gasps. It took a few minutes, the car sleekly speeding along underneath them the whole time, but Charlotte finally grasped one of Tom’s hands and placed his palm atop her breast, just over her heart. She continued to seek guidance in his eyes as her breathing steadied measurably.

Immediately, she was rewarded immediately with a probing, sensual kiss from Tom. He took his time, releasing her mouth for only a fraction of a second before deepening the kiss. The gentle touch of his tongue against the seam of Charlotte’s mouth earned him a soft groan, and she broke away
from him to speak.

“Oh...better...” she mewed before she was crashing her swollen lips against his once more. When he felt her involuntarily grinding down onto his lap as they continued their journey home – a journey that had gone from panic, to relaxation, to sexually-charged frustration in a matter of minutes – he knew they needed to stop so that he could take inventory of how she was feeling. After all, they were about to get out of the car; Tom wasn’t sure she’d be able to handle it given recent events.

He cradled her sweetly against him, rubbing her cheek and jaw line with soothing fingers.

“Lotte, sweet, we’re almost home. Are you alright to get out of the car?”

She was quiet for a moment as she looked up at Tom, feeling the car slowing to a stop in front of the house.


“Oh, my love. Let’s get you inside and have another half of the Seroxat,” Tom urged, smiling at her encouragingly as she agreed with his decision. She did fairly well, considering what had just happened – and it was still only the first day of therapy. Charlotte had done her best to put herself in a public situation. She had forced herself to do a bit of self-soothing in the car at Tom’s request. And now she was shoring up her courage again to traverse the darkness of Tom’s property to get back into the refuge of the house.

When they made it to the front door and entered into the foyer, Tom swiftly engaged the alarm system, turned on the nearest overhead light, and swept his sweet little Lotte into his arms.

“So, so proud of you, love. You keep surprising me and handling things so well,” he punctuated his praise with small, nibbling kisses.

“You’re still in your tux,” Charlotte finally whispered as Tom led her to the kitchen for a glass of water, and another half of her medication. He could have slapped himself for how ignorant he’d been.

Of course she’d associate a tux with what happened! It wasn’t just the clothing rack!

Watching her drain the glass of water, Tom offered Lotte his hands and led her to the master bedroom.

“I’m going to get rid of these clothes my darling, so we don’t have to think about them anymore.”

Charlotte nodded, sitting on the bed. She curled in on herself slightly as Tom removed the various components of the outfit. Every piece that fell to the floor had her mind considering revisiting when she fell to the ground on that fateful red carpet.

“I can see the gears turning, sweet,” Tom scolded good-naturedly. “Take a few deep breaths for me and let that medicine work, yes?”

Obediently, she closed her eyes and breathed as deeply and consistently as she could, imagining the tiny little pill dissolving into a billion particles and rushing through her bloodstream, sending calm clarity through her with every heartbeat. When Tom was down to his boxers, he cleared his throat for Charlotte to look at him.

Doing a cute little wiggle of his hips and bum, he began to hum “Bare Necessities” and grin shamelessly at his best girl.
Her exhale at that moment turned into a small laugh and a genuine smile crossed her face.

“Would you like to come into the bathroom with me, darling, or are you okay out here while I clean up?” Tom asked. He retrieved a clean pair of boxers from his dresser, then moved to lean casually against the doorframe as Charlotte gathered herself.

“I think I’ll change clothes, Tom,” she murmured. She looked embarrassed.

He walked over to her, raising her chin with his fingers so she looked him in the eyes. “Talk to me, Lotte. You know you can tell me anything,” Tom encouraged. Her eyes again shimmered with tears, and he thought she would hesitate, but she came right out with it.

“I ruined your shoot, and the evening,” she stammered, looking away so he wouldn’t see her crying for what felt like the fiftieth time that week.

Moving to kneel before her at the edge of the bed, Tom placed beseeching hands on either side of her hips, gifting her with a loving look. “You did no such thing, darling,” he intoned firmly, grabbing her hands in his. “You are never a bother. You never ruin anything. You are not stupid, or a disappointment, or any other negative word that’s ever been uttered about you.”

She had the grace to blush at his words.

“Change clothes, darling, and then come talk to me while I shower,” Tom asked.

Charlotte almost balked – sheer force of habit almost made her say something about being intrusive or bothering him – but she stopped herself, agreeing. Tom didn’t stick around for her to change her mind, instead electing to turn his back to her, drop his boxers, and stroll into the shower.

Oh fuck, Charlotte groaned.

It seemed that the brand new sight of Tom’s bare behind, coupled with those runner’s legs that went on forever and that broad back of his, was enough to dissuade her from staying away from him a second longer.

She was going to put on one of her cute, satin pajama sets that Tom originally brought from her flat, but she felt, after the evening they’d just had, that she wanted as much of him as she could get. So she rummaged in one of his dresser drawers for the softest shirt she could find – the blue one that was practically worn paper-thin.

Peeling off her clothes, Charlotte inhaled deeply as Tom’s shirt slid over her head and onto her chest and torso. He was still singing “Bare Necessities” in the shower.

When she set foot in the steamy bathroom, Tom could just barely see her through the fogged-up pane of glass. “There’s my girl,” he announced cheerfully.

It’s like he’s thrilled to see me, Charlotte smiled. She’d never experienced something like that before.

She went about brushing her teeth and preparing for bed. The rote mannerisms calmed her, somewhat.

“Would you be my best girl, darling, and get me some sleep pants, please?”

It felt so domestic and loving that she nearly cooed.

“Yes, baby.”
The endearment slipped out of her mouth before she could stop it.

Maybe he didn’t hear you, Charlotte prayed. Isn’t it too soon for all of that?

Moving to Tom’s dresser, she selected a standard pair of navy blue sleep pants, unfolding them partially (and marveling at how long they were). As she made her way back to the bathroom, she heard the water shut off and heard a small clink as Tom retrieved a towel off the rack.

Charlotte was wholly unprepared for the sight of him dripping wet in a towel.

She’d known him for several years, and they’d been in some close quarters before – hell, he’d even been wet and partially naked when she was covered in blood and out of her mind – but he was one thousand percent naked under that towel.

Tom, for his part, was equally stopped in his tracks, dripping water onto the floor where he stood.

“Is that my shirt, darling?” he swallowed. He never quite realized how thin the material of that shirt was, until he was faced with the clear sight of her nipples through the fabric. And her little panties – the same ones he’d moved down earlier in the day so as to run his thumb across her deliciously swollen clit – she was just wearing his shirt and those panties!

“Oh, um…yes…” Charlotte trailed off, thinking for a moment Tom was going to be upset with her for borrowing something without asking. She continued to talk, stuttering an apology. “I’m s-sorry, Tom. I just wanted to smell like you and have y-you wrapped around me is all…”

She realized she was backing out of the bathroom and into the bedroom, because Tom was slowly advancing on her, not saying a word. He didn’t hide the fact that he was roving his eyes all over her beautiful, curvaceous form.

The backs of Charlotte’s knees bumped against the end of the bed as Tom continued moving toward her, and he reached a hand out for the trousers Charlotte still held in her hands. She quickly handed them over, unable to look away from his predatory gaze. All she could do was sit and wait as he prowled closer to her.

I should be frightened, she thought. But it was her Tom. There would never be a reason to be frightened.

Keeping his eyes locked on hers, Tom slowly undid the towel around his waist, clearing his throat hoarsely when his erection sprang free and pressed against his clenching stomach muscles. Charlotte couldn’t help it: her mouth went dry and her eyes widened. Her best friend in the entire world – and now her boyfriend – was completely bare in front of her.

I don’t have much frame of reference but he’s definitely much larger than James, she noted.

“I’ll need to forego the boxers this evening, baby,” he echoed her earlier sentiment – he had indeed heard her say it – “because seeing you in my clothes with those gorgeously full breasts and your sweet little panties will have me hard for the rest of the night.”

She unconsciously licked her lips. Charlotte wasn’t one for admiring male genitalia; after all, it had never done much for her. But seeing Tom nude, seeing his…appreciation for her…she was very much turned on in that moment. It helped that the pill had kicked in, too. The relaxed, slight fuzziness was a warm compliment to the throb between her legs and the heat in her belly.

Tom stepped carefully into the sleep pants, being mindful of his engorged member, and whispered an instruction to Charlotte to get into bed and make herself comfortable.
“You’ve had a long day, lovely. And you’ve done so well,” he congratulated, moving around the room to clean up his clothes and situate the bathroom. When he finally turned out the bedroom light, Charlotte was curled comfortably under the sheets and duvet, turned toward him and admiring the planes of his chest and arms.

“I don’t know if this medicine makes me loopy or way too relaxed,” she smiled shyly, “but you, Thomas, are the most stunningly handsome man I’ve ever seen in my life.”

He laughed a throaty laugh that she found unbelievably sexy, and joined her in the enormous bed, gathering Lotte to him. “How’s my best girl?” he queried, running a hand through her hair and tracing the skin of her lower back under his shirt that she wore.

“Much better now.”

“So you’ve taken medicine, darling, but do we need to continue some therapy for a little bit?” Tom asked, brushing a barely-there kiss to Charlotte’s forehead.

She said nothing. He didn’t know if she was too tired, or not bold enough to ask, but he wanted her to bring up their conversation from the picnic earlier. Relishing the feel of her body against his, of those long, smooth legs stretched out in his bed – no one else’s – Tom allowed himself to drift comfortably for a few moments.

It was amazing how quickly his body sprang into action when Charlotte finally answered his question.

“I want to play.”

He thought she might be frightened – although he remembered she wasn’t a virgin. She was just vastly uninitiated in the pleasures of having an attentive, generous partner. Tonight would only be a small lesson for his little Lotte, but he was damned if she wouldn’t take her pleasure, even if it took him all night to help get her there.

Start slowly, he told himself. See where she takes you.

Charlotte was immediately responsive to all the familiar things they’d done – lots of kissing, tactile affection, and gentle swipes of his tongue along the sensitive skin of her neck and collarbones. Tom broke apart from their embrace every few minutes, offering encouragement and telling Lotte how beautiful and delicate she was. He marveled at the sheer responsiveness of her body to his touch and kiss.

“My darling,” he whispered sinfully as he maneuvered them so he was partially atop her, his bare chest pressing into her clothed front, “I’m so very curious to see if you’re at all liking my attentions.” He nearly purred the last part. “May I check, sweet?”

He leaned back a bit to run his left hand down the front of the shirt she wore, grazing her breast and continuing downward until he slipped his fingers under the hem and stroked the satiny flesh of her tummy.

“Y-yes,” Charlotte bit back a cry, eyes closing at Tom’s warm hand against her skin.

“I think we can only play if this shirt comes off,” Tom teased her, and she smiled coyly, sitting up so
he could help divest her of the offending garment. “You look so good in my clothes, lovely, but if you want me to be all over you in such a way, let’s opt for something better.”

Taking an excruciatingly long time, Tom laid Charlotte back down and proceeded to place a kiss atop her left breast, followed by her right. By his third pass, he began to swirl the tip of his tongue against her painfully peaked nipples.

He then spent several minutes placing spontaneous, wet kisses everywhere from her shoulders down to her hipbones. She moaned quietly, continually, hands clenching in his hair. Tom could feel Charlotte’s thighs reflexively parting for him with each new kiss dropped upon her.

“I’ve never told you this, Lotte, but I’ve spent many, many years wondering what your body tastes like,” he growled as he dipped his head to lave at her collarbone. A sharply-exhaled breath was all she could manage at Tom’s words.

“I’ve spent every working day with you for four years, thinking about how you might say my name,” he continued, “how you might plead it, how you might sigh it,” here he softly bit the underside of a breast, “how you would scream it.”

“Tom…” she breathed, slightly louder.

He moved down to her waist, where her lacy panties still clung to her hips. Looking up at her with devilishly delighted eyes, he continued his assault.

“I should be ashamed, Charlotte,” he licked a stripe along the skin at the top of her panties, causing her to sob a curse, “because I was actually pleased after you told me James called you those things, said you were frigid.”

When he looped long fingers into the sides of her panties, looking up at her for permission, she nodded feverishly. Pulling them easily off of her legs, Tom held them in his hand, then out to Charlotte as some sort of proof. She could see copious evidence of her slick arousal clinging to her underwear.

“I was so pleased, my beautiful girl, because I knew that that was an impossibility – that my best girl’s sweet body needed me to prove she wasn’t anything less than perfect,” Tom continued.

And then he delicately traced his tongue along the slick patch of fabric he held in his hands. A deep ache settled itself permanently between Charlotte’s thighs at Tom’s brazenness.

“Mmm, my lovely,” he tossed her panties to the floor. “You’re giving me much evidence already that you’re neither frigid nor a disappointment.”

Turned on past the point of caring what she looked like, or how desperate she was acting, Charlotte reached out for Tom to press himself against her once more, seeking out friction that she suddenly needed very badly.

“Would you like some of our therapy, Lotte?” Tom asked seriously as he nudged her thighs further apart with a gentle hand. He replaced said hand with a kiss to both of her thighs, inhaling her intoxicating scent as he did so.

She could barely form the words as Tom settled the long, dexterous fingers of his right hand against the small patch of curls between her legs. He waited patiently for her permission, dropping a kiss to her temple and staring into her wide pupils.

“Now, Tom… please,” she breathed.
He decided then and there she’d never looked or sounded lovelier than in that moment.

Charlotte’s hands settled above her head, tangled in her chocolate tresses as Tom swept his fingers lightly over her already soaked bud. Her hips moved reflexively, seeking out at much contact as possible.

“Will you come, my love, if I rub you right here?” he circled her swollen clit lightly, teasing her.

Mouth open, Charlotte only panted a soft, “Maybe.”

Tom leaned down to capture her mouth in a burning kiss before questioning her further. “Maybe, darling?” he was trying to find the touch and motion that would make her back arch off the bed.

“I…oh…rarely come,” she panted, “especially with…someone else.”

Her hips were rocking slightly, which Tom took as a good sign. He leaned down to close his lips around her right nipple, flicking his tongue against the areola.

She cursed again, prettily. Her hands had migrated from her own wavy hair straight back to Tom’s. He relished the gesture of possession.

“Then I need to find what you like best, sweet,” Tom continued gentle circles with the pad of his index finger, seeing Charlotte’s abdominal muscles clench every so often. “The rule in our house is that Lotte comes every time. Understood?” He punctuated the command with a nip to her neck.

“Y-yes…but,” Lotte stammered, trying to speak through the haze of pleasure, “it might…oh god…take me a…long t-time…”

Tom shushed her with another heated, open-mouthed kiss before divulging his plan to her, stroking her slick button all the while.

“Let me find out what my baby likes, love,” he murmured in her ear, “and then we’ll worry about time later.”

He settled lower on the bed, all but ceasing his attentions between Charlotte’s legs. Her head swam as she listened to his next instruction, wanting nothing more than for him to continue.

“Keep your hands in my hair, my love. And when you feel that I’ve found the spot and the pace you want, say my name.”

She thought he meant when he found the spot with his fingers.

So she groaned a rather loud, broken sound when Tom spread her apart and began to place slow, soft licks against her clit. The sound of Tom humming his own pleasure, too, made her bite her lip to keep from crying out.

It took him less than ten seconds to figure out that she was most sensitive and responsive to an up-and-down motion directly at the bottom and side of her little bundle of nerves.

“Oh fuck, Tom…” And he moved his mouth away from her, quickly mimicking the action of his tongue by swiping his long index finger into her gushing tribute to slick up and down in the exact same manner.

“Yes, my good girl,” he purred, keeping a constant rhythm and pressure at that exact spot, “there it is…”
Her back arched steadily and he could see, in the faint traces of moonlight, her taut leg muscles and clenching tummy.

“As for time, my lovely, if you’ll indulge me for just one second…” he trailed off, never stopping his ministrations but reaching over to the bedside table for his mobile.

Charlotte wasn’t paying any attention to the fact that Tom was dialing his phone, and she was past caring about anything that wasn’t Tom’s touch in that warm, wet, sensitive spot between her legs. She was shaking with pleasure, it was so strong.

Tom’s voice jolted her to awareness for a moment, but as he kept up his relentless pace, she could only focus part of her attention on him.


Charlotte wondered very faintly what he was doing, but he leaned down to kiss her brow reassuringly as he continued the phone call.

“I need you to clear those two meetings I have tomorrow morning, please. Charlotte needs me and I absolutely want to see to her completely before anything else,” he drawled, staring at her with a feral gaze the entire time.

She actually – surprisingly for her – felt the telltale clench deep in her belly as her body prepared itself for a climax.

Thanking Luke, Tom ended the call, winked at her, and tossed his mobile on the floor.

Leaning right into her face as his index finger moved faster against her drenched clit, Tom whispered devilishly against her lips.

“I don’t much care if I have to stroke you all night, sweet,” he purred, licking her lips. “You’re going to come if I have to clear our calendar for the week. If we’re on our press tour and you’re in desperate need of an orgasm that only I can give you, I will postpone, I will reschedule, I will beg forgiveness for being late.”

Charlotte held her breath, feeling the coil tighten almost to the point of snapping – violently.

Oh my god there’s no way, she thought. It can’t be this good.

“All I care about, my little Lotte, my best girl, my good girl, is satisfying you,” he continued, on and on until Charlotte thought she would burn up and explode.

“And whenever your luscious little body feels like coming, it will. No need to rush, sweet.”

“C-close,” she mewed.

Tom had never felt prouder – of himself or of his Lotte. He’d dreamed of this moment – of her holding onto him for dear life, lost in pleasure that only he wanted to give her. Tom added just a fraction more pressure to his touch.

She grit her teeth.

“Yes, sweet,” he continued. “Oh, how this beautiful body weeps for me.”

Charlotte began to pant softly. He wanted to consume her. Leaning right down beside her ear, Tom spoke in his deepest octave.
“Lovely, as soon as you come, we’re going to do this again. We’re not sleeping tonight until I’ve tasted my fill of you. And then you’ll want my mouth on your throbbing clit all the time.”

She came so hard that tears filled her eyes.
Carry on as Normal

Chapter Summary

Charlotte experiences moments of self-doubt, but Tom’s not having that. Ever.

Chapter Notes

I need new panties. I hope you will too…the press tour is going to be INFINITELY WORSE than what’s written in this chapter, though… ;)

Love you all. Message me!

Tom had never seen a more beautiful sight.

And considering his line of work put him in near-constant contact with the world’s loveliest, sexiest women, that was saying something incredible about his little Lotte.

How had he been so unaware of her all these years? Maybe he hadn’t been – maybe he hadn’t thought he had a chance with Charlotte. Maybe she would have rejected him.

Tom knew now that a turning point had definitely been reached.

His best girl was enticingly naked, splayed exhaustedly under the duvet of their shared bed. Loose chocolate waves fanned around her head, and the tip of a rosy breast peeked out from the sheets in which she was tangled. Her face was the picture of youthful calm – sleep had claimed her quickly last night.

*The combination of the Seroxat and that orgasm,* Tom smiled to himself.

He’d been so worked up by her responsiveness to him that Tom had planned on feasting from his best girl for much of the night; however, the sweet darling girl had fallen asleep shortly after he’d gathered her into his arms as she came down from what had obviously been one of the most pleasurable experiences of her life. It was the first night she’d slept straight through – no stirring, no dreams, no crying.

He was relieved for her.

Tom had a much different night, however. He slept fitfully, replaying the night’s seductive end over and over in his head. He reveled in Charlotte’s complete submission to him, her willingness to trust him with something that, from what it sounded like, she’d struggled with in her previous relationship. He wanted to do nothing else in life but prove to her, continually, that her body was *made* for him, that it would do whatever Tom asked of it.

Sinful pictures flashed before his eyes as Charlotte slept peacefully through the night. Shivering in delight, he imagined all the possibilities – endless sounds and tastes, position after position, city after city of the press tour…both of them continually seeking out relief and satiety in one another’s arms.
A devious, delightful plan formed in his head by the time sleep finally claimed Tom, hours after Charlotte dropped off.

Said plan was fresh in his mind when he awoke, hard as marble and blazing with longing for the sweet beauty by his side.

Yes, my love, this press tour is going to be unlike anything you’ve ever dreamed of...

Charlotte stirred slightly, the sheet that covered her moving down her body so that Tom was now afforded an unobstructed view of her full breasts, soft tummy, and the little patch of curls that still glistened with the slickness Tom had coaxed from her.

His hand was curling around his shaft before he even knew what he was doing.

Biting back a groan, Tom greedily observed every inch of his best girl, deciding it was his new mission to have her naked as often as possible. His long, thin fingers worked slowly from the shaft to the crown of his cock, squeezing every so often as he replayed Charlotte’s sounds from the previous night.

Her hands pulling his hair.

Her hips rolling languidly against his fingers.

Her taste…how he’d loved her taste. It had been sheer hell tearing his mouth away from her that first time, but he’d wanted to tease her past the point of longing and straight into full-blown need for him. He’d given sweet little Lotte no choice but to come.

Tom’s head dropped back against the headboard as he continued replaying last night’s encounter, his eyes closing of their own volition. Charlotte’s breathy sighs, broken moans and whispers replayed in his ears over and over again in a devastating loop. His hand worked harder.

Suddenly, a sharp nip at his hipbone brought him out of his frenzy, startling him. But the sight that met him when he opened his eyes only served to inflame Tom more.

Charlotte – the tiny vixen – had bitten him sharply on the hipbone, staring up at him with partially-glazed, mischievous eyes and a smirk on her face.

And then he saw her hands.

Lotte’s fingers were sandwiched between those plump little thighs – two fingers of her left sliding in and out of her core, and the fingertips of her right hand lightly tickling her clit. Tom froze, caught between embarrassment at being found out and enraptured with the explicit sight of his good, sweet Lotte fucking herself.

“Well go on then, big boy,” she purred throatily, eyebrow raising interestedly at his throbbing erection, “I want to watch.”

He wasted no time, continuing his self-ministration as he stared at Charlotte, who never took her eyes off of Tom’s stroking hand. When he let out a pleased groan, Charlotte responded by opening her thighs wider, turning her lower body so that Tom could see just what sort of effect he was having on his best girl.

He watched, rapt, as her small fingers disappeared into that rosy, swollen little pussy he’d attended to. When the fingers of her other hand stroked downward to gather a fresh coating of her juices, spreading her lips wide for him, his hips bucked uncontrollably. He reached out with a free hand to
lightly scrape his short fingernails up the length of her inner thigh.

“Goddamn it, Charlotte,” he growled through gritted teeth. A large bead of moisture leaked from the head of Tom’s cock, running downward leisurely against his fist. “I thought about having you all…fuck…night,” he breathed heavily.

Heat flared through Charlotte at his reactions, but when he laved at his lower lip with that sinful tongue of his, she leapt into action. Her response was to reposition herself closer against Tom – still while touching and exploring with those little fingers – and suck a rather large bruise on the pale, soft skin of his hip.

“Aughhhhh…yess…F-FUCK!” Tom stuttered, veins in his neck straining as thin, milky spurts shot onto his hand and clenched stomach muscles.

Charlotte’s stomach dropped and heat flared in her belly when she realized he’d kept his eyes locked on her face the entire time he was coming. The very thought of those intense, sexy eyes watching her…looking at her while she stroked her soaking core…

And then she stopped.

Point blank – removed her hands and covered herself up.

Confusion flared and heat died in Tom’s eyes as he quickly grabbed a tissue and cleaned himself up, scooting over the bed toward Charlotte worriedly.

“Darling love, are you okay?” he murmured, gathering her gingerly in his arms. “Did I frighten you? Was that…t-too much?”

Bless him, he’s so concerned, Charlotte thought sadly.

She struggled in his embrace a little, embarrassed. She would have loved to continue, but seeing Tom’s climax – seeing him finish – made her painfully self-aware. She was still trying to come…and he could see her, see all of her in broad daylight. What if he grew bored once his orgasm abated?

Disappointment…

Tom turned Charlotte away from him, pulling her behind flush against his front, sweeping the hair from her neck and nuzzling his mouth against her ear.

“Darling, I’m rather…embarrassed that was over for me so quickly,” he whispered sheepishly. He ran a warm hand down her hip and across her waist as he continued speaking. “You’re just so…gorgeous and perfect.”

A small voice reached his ears after his admission. He noticed the small shiver rack through Lotte’s body when he bit her neck softly and traced the backs of his fingers against her quivering stomach.

“I…it takes me s-such a long t-time…”

She’s self-conscious again, Tom frowned to himself. _How can someone so lovely feel so badly about herself?_

He turned her in his arms, doing his best to remain a gentleman instead of raking his eyes over every inch of her soft – and in some places damp – flesh. Placing a tender kiss on Charlotte’s lips, Tom soothed her in a whisper.
“It really doesn’t, darling,” he nipped at her lip, then was rewarded with a low moan. “I’m more than happy to keep telling you I don’t care how long it takes, my lovely. You shouldn’t rush such a beautiful body…”

He began crawling down the bed, gorgeously lean and gloriously naked, and he settled himself between Charlotte’s thighs, staring innocently up at her.

“Give me your hands, sweet,” he ordered in a loving but firm tone. She complied.

Lotte’s legs widened again of their own volition as Tom began sucking the stickiness from her fingers, the traces of their activities from moments ago making him groan in pleasure. He placed both of her hands lovingly at her sides when he was done, giving her a pointed look.

“Keep them there, Charlotte.” She nodded in agreement, watching as Tom lowered his head even further to her center. He placed a wet kiss to her right thigh.

Oh god…he’s going to do it.

“I’m going to lick you now, sweet. Nice and slowly,” he proclaimedlowly. “And I want you to hold off as long as you can.”

Fuck.

She had no time to do anything other than draw a breath before Tom moved his head forward, kissing the neatly-trimmed little nest of curls at the apex of Lotte’s thighs. He inhaled as a man desperate for oxygen, and she could feel the rumble in his chest as he moaned his satisfaction with her.

“…going to eat my best girl alive,” Tom purred, pressing his mouth against her swollen labia and sucking for just a moment when she stuttered for air, pressing her head against the pillow and closing her eyes. He uttered his last statement as his hands spread her legs wider, and she felt his breath against her wetness.

“Oh, my delicious Charlotte...”

The first stroke of his warm, wet tongue along her clit almost had her hands moving from the sheets to clutch in his hair, but she knew better – he’d told her to keep her hands at her sides. And she wasn’t about to disobey this man at all. Not when he’d already established a firm, languid rhythm against the swollen button of her sex.

“God,” was all she could cry out. Her hips were already moving, helped along by those large hands of his, pulling her into his wicked mouth.

“It’s Tom, my love,” he stopped momentarily, placing tiny kisses against her clit. “Talk to me. Be a good girl and tell me…”

Tom slid his tongue down to Lotte’s cleft, dipping inside her source and thrusting a few times before lapping a trail back up to her hypersensitive nub.

“I...can’t,” Charlotte moaned, fingers positively aching from gripping the sheets to avoid curling into Tom’s thick hair. “T-too…ohh...good…”

Tom stopped, smiling up at her, a feral grin on his face.

“I stop if you don’t tell me, lovely.”
He bit her clit very lightly, but she yelped, trying to move her hips from his face.

“Go on,” he whispered, winking at her. “Be a good girl and tell me…”

Charlotte was half-sobbing in frustration.

“C-can I please touch you, Tom? Please?”

He’d been pretending he was unmoved by the sight of his gorgeous girl taking her pleasure from his mouth, but hearing her beg to touch him almost did him in. Tom licked a slow, thorough circle around her clit as he nodded, never taking his eyes off of her.

He groaned loudly, right into her swollen, wet flesh, when her hands dove into his russet curls, holding his mouth to her heat and raking her fingers through his hair.

Although this caused him to momentarily forget his demand of Lotte, she did as he’d asked.

“Yes, Tom…oh god yes right th-ere…” she moaned, telling him what he wanted to hear. She held his mouth to her body, murmuring her appreciation that he was giving her exactly what she’d never been given. He feasted on her like a man starved.

“You’re so good, Tom…oh…you…k-keep licking…that…oh fuck…spot…that I l-like.”

“Mmmm,” he growled, pulling her hips to him in an up-and-down motion so she was practically riding his face, albeit lying down.

Seeking out pleasure made Charlotte brave. Whereas before, she would have never asked for anything – because it never got her anywhere, anyway – she propped up on one elbow, keeping Tom flush with her core with her other hand. Her new vantage point allowed her to watch as his tongue slid up and down in time with her hips.

“Am I being…a good…oh my god…girl, Tom…?”

He rested his forehead against Lotte’s abdomen, ceasing the pleasurable sensations between her thighs, and moaned softly, much as she had earlier. Instead of answering her right away, he very lovingly placed two of those divine fingers of his at her entrance and slowly thrust them into her molten heat.

“Fuck, lovely,” he cursed. He could feel her walls clinging to him snugly. “You’re my best girl…such a good girl. So wet for your Tom.”

He returned in a flash to suckling her swollen bud, gently pressing his digits in and out of her. It was as if he couldn’t help himself. The added stimulation and the sounds of him groaning against her had Charlotte focusing very acutely on the sharp-pointed pleasure emanating from her clit, right where Tom’s tongue swiped up and down. This was usually the part where she’d become extremely aware of how long it was taking her to climax.

And that killed it right there.

Once more, embarrassment overrode her body’s desire for relief, and Charlotte mentally curled in on herself. Her hips stopped moving and her hand went slack in Tom’s hair.

Now she was frustrated, wet, and mortified.

Last night was just a one-off, she admitted to herself.
He sensed the change immediately, carefully removing his fingers and climbing quickly up her body. Charlotte noted with a small amount of fear that Tom looked angry. He was quiet when he spoke, lowering his face to hers, right up against her mouth.

“Get in my arms. Now,” he punctuated the command with a forceful kiss, and Charlotte groaned when she felt and tasted her wetness on his mouth and chin.

Doing as she was told, she held onto Tom as he carried her, bridal style, into the bathroom, and placed her carefully on the floor mat as he turned on the shower spray. She watched, ashamed, while he fiddled with the temperature and adjusted the varying spray patterns to his liking.

**He’s never going to want to be with you again. Frigid disappointment.**

“Lotte,” he warned, moving to stand in front of her with a scolding look on his face. “I can see the gears turning. **Stop, lovely.**”

She nodded, accepting his outstretched hand as he led her into the steam and warmth of the shower cubicle. He gathered her into his arms for a hug, pressing every inch of himself against her. His arousal was a rather forceful reminder of what she’d just failed at.

“I’m willing to bet, darling,” Tom held her face in his hands, staring sternly in her eyes, “that you started thinking about things back there, yes?” he gestured to the bedroom.

She nodded, biting her lip, as the warm spray enveloped her body.

“That you were taking too long?” he continued to pry into her self-imposed defeat.

Looking at the floor, she gave a very faint “yes.”

“Turn around, back to me, and reach your arms back around my neck, sweet.”

She did as Tom asked, relaxing as the warm water hit her breasts and stomach. He swept the dampened hair from her eyes and coaxed her to lean her head against his chest. Charlotte gave out a satisfied little mewl when Tom crossed one arm across her breasts, but then his other hand tapped the insides of her thighs, signaling her to widen her stance.

“Since you seem to think you always need to be in a hurry, darling,” he explained, adjusting the flow of the shower’s pressure, “I’ll speed this up for you.”

He’d no more removed his hand from fiddling with the shower fixtures at the top and side of the cubicle when he slid his fingers between Charlotte’s legs, spreading her wide open so the heated water sprayed directly against her throbbing clit. He braced his chin on Charlotte’s shoulder, turning his head slightly so he could talk to her, hold her while she shook at the sudden onslaught of pleasure.

“Oh my… fucking god,” she cried, squeezing her hands behind her to hook at the nape of Tom’s neck. He licked her earlobe.

“I assume from your sounds that I’ve got the jets where you need them, lovely?” he laughed wickedly in her ear when she moaned out an elongated “yes” and widened her legs even further, bearing down slightly with her hips at the delicious sensations.

Plucking a nipple with his mostly-free hand, Tom continued to tease her.

“Haven’t tried this before, have you Lotte?” he kissed his way along her neck, teeth scraping the
sensitive skin there. She gave a breathless “no” in the same moment Tom turned the temperature dial just slightly hotter.

“Oh shit, Tom…” she keened. He continued spreading her labia wide, giving the water unmitigated access to the little nub that needed as much stimulation as it could get. Gritting her teeth, Charlotte could barely gasp out her surprise acknowledgment of the impeding orgasm bearing down on her.

“Coming…”

He held her against him as she worked through it, delighting in her shaking and feeling the contractions coursing through her center as he continued holding her open. The voice with which he responded to her was positively evil.

“I told you, lovely, Charlotte comes every time.”

When she was near hyperventilation, he backed her away from the spray, covering her swollen sex with a soft palm and encouraging her to turn around in his arms. She did so, body almost slack against him after the powerful release she’d just experienced. He smiled to himself when he felt her soft lips placing kisses along his pectoral muscle.

“Thank you…” she murmured, momentarily exhausted. Tom wiped the hair from her face and kissed her tenderly, betraying what he was about to do next.

“Oh, darling. We needed to get that one out of the way…”

He dropped to his knees, protected from the spray by Charlotte still standing – shakily – over him. She stared down at him, muddled from her climax, and ran shaking hands through his slick hair.

“…so that I can still see to you properly.”

And she watched in utter disbelief as he pressed his nose against her pubic bone and resumed dipping his tongue between her legs, much as he’d been doing mere moments ago. He’d given her only a couple of minutes to recover from the first orgasm, but her body was already welcoming the sensation of his tongue laving at her clit. It was softer than the pressure of the shower, and he was focusing his attention particularly well on that spot underneath her clit, tickling it with his tongue in that delectable up-and-down motion, just as she’d acquiesced to needing last night.

She braced one hand on the shower wall, the other lost in his long hair, and tilted her pelvis forward, back arched, so she could watch as his fingers spread her lips open and his mouth flicked unerringly at her now-reddened pussy.

And then he started to suck on her.

Charlotte found herself climbing the peak again, shocked that her body was about to hurtle itself off the precipice once more – and so soon. But the shower had stimulated her into a heightened state of arousal, and at this level, she discovered she didn’t need much extra to come again.

“Ha…ahhh…YES,” she moaned, shoving herself into Tom’s mouth as a second, smaller orgasm washed over her. He dug those long fingers into the curve of her hips, hands large enough that he was able to pull on her backside so she nearly smothered him.

When Tom slowed to small kisses and subtle little flicks of his tongue, Charlotte placed a palm softly against his forehead, laughing a little.

“No more, baby. Please.”
He stood up to gather her in his arms, chuckling and kissing her on the head.

“Look at you, my love. Begging me to stop making you come…” he reached down to tease her one last time, running his middle finger through her drenched sex. She cried out and moved away swiftly, sticking her tongue out at him playfully.

*She’s perfect,* Tom smiled to himself.

“And the Seroxat is doing well for you, Charlotte?” Dr. Rochester enquired. Charlotte nodded, holding Tom’s hand as she conversed with the older woman.

“I’m only doing halves if I need them. They do seem to calm me down considerably.”

Dr. Rochester made some notes on her legal pad and nodded, continuing Tom and Charlotte’s second session.

“Tom, how has Charlotte seemed to you since I last saw you two yesterday? I know it’s been a relatively short period of time, but what’s your take on things?”

Tom warred within himself at how to start.

“Well, Dr. R, we had a little setback yesterday evening,” Tom started. He felt Charlotte stiffen against him, but he rubbed a soothing hand along her back and felt her relax slightly. “We attended an outing last night and Charlotte did very well,” he looked sternly at Charlotte when she tried to disagree about the photo shoot. “But there was an incident with a loud noise and a lot of people.”

“Flashback?” Ryann Rochester queried.

“Yes,” Charlotte supplied meekly. “I ended up having a full-blown panic attack and Tom had to carry me out of the shoot. At least people were understanding…” she trailed off.

“And had you taken any of the medication before the shoot, Charlotte?” the doctor continued to probe about the situation.

“Yes,” Lotte nodded. “But as I said, I’ve only been doing halves and I had it several hours before the shoot. The dose wore off midway through the evening and then next thing I know I’m seeing Tom in similar clothes to what he wore at the V&A and then a clothing rack slams to the ground.”

She had a far-off look in her eyes as she remembered the sequence of events. Tom gave her a two-squeeze, keeping her little hand firmly in his. She squeezed back.

“Well, considering you’d only just started the Seroxat and therapy yesterday, I’d say that’s a big step for you – and Tom too – to go to a venue with lots of people and commotion. Frankly,” the doctor sat back, smiling warmly at Charlotte, “I’d be surprised if you hadn’t had a reaction there.”

Charlotte smiled wanly.

“Can I ask how you both resolved the situation?” Dr. Rochester asked.

“Well, we worked on several of the things you suggested from our previous meeting once I got Charlotte out of the warehouse,” Tom said proudly. He felt capable and needed, especially in service of Lotte and how he was able to calm her down. “Charlotte and I did some breathing in the car
together, and as soon as she was able to calm herself down – she did so well, Dr. Rochester – we worked with touch, and kissing. And then we were home and she was able to get another half of the Seroxat.”

Dr. Rochester nodded, adding some notes with her pen.

“Charlotte, do you think you need a higher dose of the Seroxat?”

Charlotte shook her head after pondering the question for a moment.

“No, Doctor. Half works well for me, and I don’t want to become dependent on it. Tom was able to help me relax and come back to the present while I waited for the medicine to start working. He talked to me and we carried on as normal,” she stopped, blushing.

“I can see that ‘carrying on as normal’ is making you redden a little, Charlotte,” Dr. Rochester smiled good-naturedly.

“We’re finding that physical and emotional closeness are working wonders for the two of us,” Tom finished. “Charlotte slept through the night last night, despite the scare at the photo shoot.”

Dr. Rochester seemed delighted at this turn of events. “Excellent, you two! Top marks for that,” she smiled. “Whatever the two of you are doing, especially if sleep is happening, I highly suggest continuing it. I think for a 24-hour period all of this is quite normal and good news, all things considered.”

Dr. Rochester went about scheduling their next appointment, via Facetime tomorrow as Tom had requested. He and Charlotte would be packing for their press tour and wouldn’t have time to make the trek to the office. As the good doctor finalized their session for the next day, Tom leaned chastely into Lotte, turning his head to whisper in her ear.

“Should we continue helping you…sleep, darling?” he winked at her. Blushing and looking over to determine if Dr. Rochester was watching their little exchange, Charlotte smiled demurely and looked at the floor.

“Yes, please.”
Tom sat on the bed, stretched out and gazing admiringly at Lotte’s unclothed form as she changed into a flowing, caramel-coloured maxi dress.

“My darling,” Tom smiled as she slid the dress over her head, smoothing it into place, “you always look so wonderful.”

Lotte blushed, walking over to the end table where she’d placed her pearl drop earrings and watch. As she put on her accoutrements, Tom continued.

“Feeling well, sweet?” Charlotte nodded, looking at herself in the mirror – turning this way and that to admire the shape of the dress, then catching what the mirror revealed behind her: a gorgeous, relaxed Tom – her Tom – in their room. Charlotte’s things were strewn here and there – not messily – and she sighed in contentment.

“I feel so at home here, Tom,” she smiled, sitting beside him on the large bed. “And I have you to thank for that,” Charlotte colored visibly, feeling embarrassed at her sudden heartfelt admission.

“I love you, Lotte.”

She hadn’t said it back yet, after everything he’d done for her and everything he’d revealed about himself – and his feelings. But with each day she had Tom as her boyfriend, her partner in more pursuits than just business, it was clearer and clearer that she loved him more than she’d ever thought she could love anyone. Before she could say it back, Tom continued his statement.

“And I’ve only just barely scratched the surface of showing you how deeply I love you, darling.”

Grabbing his stubbly chin with small hands, Charlotte leaned forward to press an open-mouthed kiss to Tom’s lips, savoring the pleased hum that came from his throat. He wrapped his arms around her, giving her a slow, gentle two-squeeze and licking the inside of her mouth with his tongue. She pulled away after a few moments, laughing softly at his flirtations.

“I have to go help your mum, love. You staying?”

Tom ran a hand through his unruly waves and laughed softly. “Well, darling, I know men aren’t traditionally welcome at showers, but it’s my baby sister…and since Sarah couldn’t make it in and we’re technically in our house…”

“Your house,” Charlotte amended absent-mindedly. She was making to head for the kitchen but Tom grabbed her and settled her back against him on the bed.

“Our house, Lotte. Say it with me,” he nuzzled at her neck, and she practically purred.

“Our…house.”

“Good girl. I’m staying here in case you need me. Plus these poor women-folk need to have some sort of handsome man to stare at!”

Charlotte laughed heartily at Tom’s mock-bravado, smacking him playfully on the shoulder. When he got up to follow her out of the bedroom, she turned on him, quirking an eyebrow.

“Should I be worried, Mister Hiddleston?” she asked faux-seriously.

Her tall, handsome boyfriend gathered her against him, tilting her back slightly so she could see the seriousness in his face.
“The only thing you have to worry about, Miss Hamilton, is whether or not I’m going to let you sleep through the night tonight…”

And with a little swat to her bum, Tom let Lotte escape into the kitchen with his mother.
Charlotte hummed pleasantly to herself as she laid out the various contents of her closet. She would be gone for two weeks and needed to make sure she had plenty of clothing so as to look her best on this press tour.

Looking her best wasn’t really just for the cameras anymore.

Normally when she packed for long engagements with Tom, Charlotte only focused on looking comfortable and exuding professionalism.

Now?

She wanted to pull out all the stops for him. The very thought of having Tom by her side, being whisked around the globe for fourteen days, made her dizzy with pleasure and excitement. Just knowing that she was finally his girlfriend…

The contents of her baggage revealed her desire to please: fitted dresses, elegant heels, the softest clothes for hotel suite lounging, elaborately lacy undergarments… Charlotte was learning a lot about herself in the handful of days she’d become close to Tom – closer than they’d ever managed to be in four years of friendship. She’d learned that she did indeed have a very flirtatious side – one that had never had full reign to come out and play before now. She’d learned that it was possible to stun a man into silence just by putting a bit of extra effort into her appearance. And she’d learned, to her great satisfaction, that she could drive Tom Hiddleston crazy with lust from just a few gentle touches.

After James Osprey nearly crushed all that remained of Charlotte Hamilton’s sense of self, Tom Hiddleston was rapidly rebuilding every last bit of it. Inch by inch.

_Inch by naked inch._

Charlotte blushed as she replayed the previous night’s “therapy” session. Could they even call it therapy anymore? Were they both hiding behind their suddenly ravenous appetites for one another
under the guise of self-medication? It didn’t matter. They’d had a splendid afternoon with Tom’s mother and sister, as well as all the guests who came for Emma’s baby shower. To Lotte’s delight, the half Seroxat she took shortly before the party helped immensely in staving off any feelings of anxiousness when the house became full of cheerful, noisy party guests.

She felt pleased for Emma, proud of herself for remaining calm and being sociable, and could sense Tom’s eyes on her the entire time. He was playing with her, she realized. And oh, how she had come to love when they played.

Charlotte tried desperately to ignore him for most of the party, focusing on the guests, holding the small children who’d accompanied their own mothers, and helping Diana back and forth in the kitchen. She knew Tom felt neglected; she also knew he was thinking about his promise when they’d arrived home.

“…whether or not I’m going to let you sleep through the night tonight…”

With only an occasional glance or touch, Charlotte kept Tom at bay for the entirety of the party, and by the time the last guests left and she and Diana had cleaned the kitchen, it was late and dark. Her tall, handsome beast was practically prowling around her by the time they’d seen Diana and Emma off into the night.

After days of seriousness and fright, Charlotte was relieved to feel a new sort of way: seductive. Brazen, almost. It was something she’d certainly never been in her previous relationship, and her somewhat quiet personality dictated, most of the time, that she mind her manners.

But when Tom Hiddleston is looking at one a certain way, well, one wants to deliver.

Charlotte stepped back from the front entryway and turned her back to Tom, immediately dropping her dress where she stood in the hall. As soon as the billowing fabric hit the floor, she took her first steps toward the master bedroom. Every so often, she would shuck another piece of clothing: bra, panties, watch, and earrings. Like leaving a trail in the deep, dark forest so the predator would follow.

He did, wordlessly.

By the time she was completely naked, running fingers through her long, loose hair, she turned to Tom before entering the bathroom, a coy smile on her face. He didn’t hide his head-to-toe appraisal of her body; she didn’t suppress the shiver that ran through her.

“I’m having a bath, love,” she smiled sweetly, egging him on. “Be out in a little bit.”

As she turned and walked into the bathroom, she swore she could hear him growl, cursing under his breath. Paying no mind, she began gathering some bath items and turning on the taps of his delightfully oversized, criminally underused tub.

A sharp little pain on the back of her upper thigh startled her into turning around, confusion etched on her face. Tom was on all fours behind her.

And he’d just bit her, smirk on his face and eyes feral.

Charlotte opened her mouth to scold him, trying desperately to muster up some outrage given how sexy he looked at the moment, but Tom didn’t give her the chance. He sat up quickly, turning Lotte around and bending her over the lip of the bathtub, sinking his teeth into her again. Right on the sweet little swell of her bum, near where her thigh ended.
Purely on instinct, Charlotte grabbed for Tom’s hair and turned, facing him with a scolding stare, as if he were a disobedient puppy. She gripped him by his auburn waves, tilting his head back so he was forced to look in her eyes when she spoke to him.

“Thomas, you bad boy!”

He said nothing, merely allowing her to assert her control over the situation, enjoying the feel of her hand snug in his hair and her eyes blazing at his behavior. The bath was still filling with water, so Charlotte elected to continue their little charade. Still gripping him by the hair with one hand, Charlotte grabbed Tom gently under the chin with her other and pulled him so he moved forward, close enough that she could feel him breathing against her navel. His eyes never left her face; he waited patiently for her next move.

“Why did you bite me, you naughty thing?” Charlotte mock-scolded, quirking an eyebrow.

Tom’s voice was low and seductive in response.

“I don’t like sharing,” he pressed a kiss into the silky skin of her lower belly, smiling to himself when he felt her shudder in pleasure.

Catching Tom off guard – she had almost given up the ghost when he kissed her tummy – Charlotte released her grip on him and stepped into the now-full bath, lowering herself slowly and then turning off the taps. She made no move to invite him in. Leaning her head back and stretching out in the steamy, relaxing water, Charlotte appraised Tom, who still knelt aside the tub, eyes on her.

“You don’t like sharing…what?” she asked in confusion. Charlotte had an idea of what he meant but she wasn’t sure. She hoped she was right.

Tom moved to the head of the tub, where Charlotte reclined, and reached a hand into the warm water to trace the lines of her partially submerged neck and collarbone. Her eyes fluttered closed at the touch.

“I don’t like sharing you, he whispered, “and I haven’t had you all to myself in several hours.”

Yes, I was right, she congratulated herself.

Taking his now-wet hand, Charlotte guided it slowly down to her breast so his palm covered her gently under the water. Her breath hitched when his palm made contact with her nipple.

“So you decided to bite me? Such a poor, deprived boy…” she trailed off.

Tom nodded his head very slowly, a grave and serious look on his face. He continued to stroke her breast under the warm water.

“Should I take pity on you, my darling?” Charlotte teased, breath catching when Tom pinched her soft flesh. Tom leaned in to capture a kiss, growling against Lotte’s mouth as he did so.

“Yes, please.”

For the first time in a long while, Charlotte took charge.

“Off with your clothes, then, Thomas. And get into the bath.”

He wasted no time, divesting himself of his clothes with all of his usual grace. Charlotte was very pleased to see him erect and straining as he climbed gingerly into the water with her. But when he
made a move to sit with her, she stopped him, tsking.

“No, no, you naughty boy. You have to stand.”

Confusion flooded Tom’s face as he stood awkwardly in front of Charlotte’s reclining form. She did nothing other than look him up and down, licking her lips at the sight of his strong yet lithe frame. Waiting just a beat too long, Charlotte reached out, quick as a flash, and gently grabbed Tom by his cock; she stroked him lightly as he moved forward instinctively, breath whooshing from his mouth.

“Ahh, fuck…” his hands found their way into Charlotte’s hair as she moved to her knees. She didn’t give him time to make any other noise before her mouth moved over the crown of him, laving at the sensitive underside and beginning a slow, hot descent down the length of his shaft. When her nose pressed against the soft trail of hair on his belly, Charlotte felt Tom’s loud groan echo through her, all the way to her core.

She moved off of him immediately, looking up into his face with the same scolding look she’d used earlier.

“Bad boys don’t get attention from me, Thomas. If you want me to continue you need to apologize for biting me,” she announced imperiously, smirking at him.

Whatever Charlotte expected Tom to do next – apologize, get out of the bath, force himself on her – none of those things happened. Instead, she watched as Tom sank to his knees, scooping her up and placing her on the edge of the tub, bracing her hands on either side of her so she wouldn’t go over the edge.

“Be a good girl and spread,” he purred, “and maybe I’ll apologize for having need of you all bloody day.”

Bath completely forgotten, Charlotte spent the next hour with her legs dangling over Tom’s shoulders, staring into his stormy eyes as he mouthed roughly between her thighs. When her grip on the tub finally loosened, Tom swiftly situated her back in the water against him, whispering in her ear.

“Charlotte comes every time.”

His best girl forgave him – twice – before they both fell asleep. They both knew she couldn’t have been mad even if she tried.

The chime of her phone brought Charlotte back to the task at hand – there was no time for daydreaming about last night’s exploits when she had to pack for an endless list of commitments! But the growing list of locations Tom kept texting to her gave her a thrill:

*Paris*

*Berlin*

*Rome*

*Dubai*
Looking at the final list of their major stops, Charlotte couldn’t imagine a more perfect press tour – so many of the cities she’d never seen, and many of them were places she’d always wanted to visit. Tom had done press tours on a smaller scale, and one she’d had to miss because she had taken time off for James – what a mistake that had been – so this would be an almost entirely new experience. One that Lotte was thrilled to share with her Tom.

It’s still a WORKING trip, she reminded herself. But why wouldn’t I want to see Paris and Rome and Seoul with the person I love?

As she tapped out a reply to send to Tom, there was a knock at her door, and she assumed he was there to collect her. Tom had been out finalizing some things with Luke and fetching his dry cleaning while she packed and straightened out things at her flat. They’d planned to go back home together and have a leisurely dinner before going to bed early, as their flight to Paris the next morning would be an early one.

The smile on her face died a swift death when she opened her door. James Osprey, trying to look friendly, stood in front of Charlotte.

“Hello, love,” he spoke cheerfully, reaching out to envelop her in an unwelcome hug.

She backed up so that he grabbed at air, stumbling imperceptibly. It was amazing how quickly Charlotte’s mood went from elation to overwhelming dread.

“James?” she whispered, partially in shock at his appearance and partially in fear of what said appearance meant.

“May I come in?” he asked, trying to crowd Lotte past the threshold of her front door.

The Charlotte of a few weeks ago would have cowered immediately, allowing James in. But that Charlotte was almost completely gone. She stood her ground. The memory of what she’d said to Jacqueline Silver came flooding back, filling her with courage.

“…too busy thinking about all the sex Tom and I are going to be having…”

“Can I help you, James? I’m kind of busy packing at the moment,” she finished, feeling proud of herself for the smooth dismissal that issued from her mouth.

James wasn’t quite sure what to do; he hadn’t expected this reaction.

“I, uh, thought we could talk,” he stuttered briefly before recovering, “maybe have that dinner you mentioned?”
Charlotte observed with no small amount of pride that James seemed very ill at ease. This was not an opportunity to be missed.

“Oh, I don’t think so, James,” Charlotte’s voice was saccharine, disingenuous. “My boyfriend and I are leaving the country tomorrow and we’ll be gone for quite some time.”

She made to step back, once again, and close the door, but her comment had roused James from his complacency. He put his foot in the doorjamb, moving closer.

“Boyfriend? You sure do move fast, you little slut,” he hissed, jamming a finger into Charlotte’s face.

“I’m a little confused here.”

The voice from down the corridor startled both Charlotte and James, but Charlotte felt herself relax immediately as Tom made his way to her door, barely-concealed rage on his face. He looked possessed. But not possessed enough that he didn’t kiss Charlotte full on the mouth before addressing her very rude ex-boyfriend.

“Hello, my lovely,” he touched her cheek tenderly. “Are you almost ready?”

When Charlotte smiled brightly and nodded, he gave her a pat on the bum and told her to finish her packing. She strutted away happily…but not so far away that she couldn’t be privy to what was about to go down between James and Tom.

“You,” James spat. “Of fucking course.”

Tom merely held up an elegant hand to silence the egotistical doctor.

“As I was saying, Jimmy, I’m a little confused, what with you calling my best girl, my lovely Charlotte a slut…weren’t you always saying how frigid and disappointing she was?”

James was fighting to keep the upper hand; he wasn’t above saying anything at this point.

“I figure you’ve already found that out for yourself, you braying toff,” Osprey wheezed, his face getting redder by the moment.

Tom could do nothing but laugh, tongue peeking mirthfully between his perfect teeth. He leaned in close to James and slapped him on the back, as if they were old friends.

“I think you’ll be interested to know that Lotte,” he whispered secretively, “had her legs wrapped around my neck last night in the bath. That was quite successful. And I hate to not be a gentleman here, since you so obviously think you are, but it’s kind of hard for her to be so frigid and disappointing when she spends every night in my bed moaning my name.”

Tom thought for a second that a blood vessel was going to burst in both of James’ eyes. Naturally, he continued.

“She’s remarkably astute at lascivious talk, too, that sweet thing. Dirty, talented mouth that one has.”

James went to punch Tom in the face, but hadn’t counted on Tom’s extensive martial arts training for some of his most recent roles. Osprey managed to punch the doorframe instead; he barely made any sort of dent, but the funny way his index finger was angled indicated he’d probably suffer some significant damage.
The bleated curse from James’ twisted mouth caused Charlotte to return to the hallway to see what the fuss was about. Tom just took her into his arms lovingly, inviting her to watch James nurse his broken finger and to take a parting shot.

“I was just explaining, darling, how remarkably responsive you are to my touch and my body,” Tom winked at her.

She allowed the full range of her blush to paint her skin before continuing Tom’s line of conversation for James’ benefit.

“Oh, I see,” she pecked Tom on the cheek, turning to look at James for what was definitely going to be the last time. “Did you mention that we’re about to go on a press tour and that you’re going to have me any way you want me in eleven different cities around the world?”

James screamed a pained, annoyed sound. It wasn’t even a word, just a garbled mishmash of noise.

“OH WILL YOU TWO FUCK OFF!” he finally screamed in their faces.

Tom led Charlotte back into the entryway of her flat, and they turned once more to see James stalking away. But not before Lotte got in the last word.

“Oh we will, with much pleasure…”

Charlotte laughed heartily as Tom rolled another forkful of spaghetti with which to feed her. She and Tom were reliving their confrontation with James, and she’d never felt so free and vindicated in her entire life. As she daintily accepted the pasta, Tom beamed at her.

“You were wonderful, darling,” he praised. “And you should have heard the things I told him.”

Although she had the grace to blush, she said, “I hope you went into explicit detail for his sake!”

Tom just winked, stealing a kiss from her lips and murmuring, “my good girl.”

As she swallowed her bite, Charlotte became curious. Tom saw her questioning look and put down his wine glass.

“Why do you like feeding me so much, Tom?”

“Because, lovely,” he rolled up another forkful, “I like taking care of you. I take care of what’s mine.”

She shivered pleasantly and whispered out a “thank you” when he offered her the next bite.

When they’d finished their meal and cleared their plates, Tom noted that it was almost half past seven, reminding Charlotte they’d agreed to a quick session with Dr. Rochester via Facetime, just in preparation for the trip.

“I want us in bed at a reasonable hour, Mr. Hiddleston,” Charlotte toyed. “We have an early flight
and I don’t want us to be rushing around in the morning like crazy people when we’re supposed to be heading to Heathrow!”

Grabbing the iPad from the kitchen counter and leading Charlotte into the living room, Tom acquiesced to Lotte’s request, sort of.

“Oh, darling, we can definitely be in bed as soon as this call is over,” he leered. “And I agree, we need plenty of time in the morning so we’re not rushing around.”

He punctuated his thought by pinching Lotte lightly on the bum. She squealed and ran down the hall from him, laughing heartily the whole way.

*What a lovely sound,* he mused. *It’s nice to see her so happy.*

When they were comfortably wrapped up in each other on the large chaise in the living room, they dialed in to Dr. Rochester and were promptly greeted by her smiling face.

“Hello, you two!” she greeted. “Thanks for agreeing to a quick session before you leave. How are we this evening?”

The three of them talked over the usual – any progress made, whether or not Charlotte showed any worsening signs of her condition, how the Seroxat was holding her, and if Tom was still feeling relatively unscathed by what had happened.

“All is very well, doctor,” Charlotte smiled, relaxing against Tom.

“Glad to hear it. Now, I don’t want to take the wind out of your sails so to speak, but just remember – this press tour is a huge undertaking for both of you. I urge you to try and take things as easy as possible, and keep as much of that contact going as you can.”

Tom and Lotte nodded understandingly.

“There’s a very real possibility that one or both of you might have some flashbacks when you’re in a particular setting, so it’s important that we stay in contact, and that you, Charlotte, keep that Seroxat with you at all times. There will be lots of commotion and people around both of you…”

Dr. Rochester was about to continue but Tom suddenly interrupted.

“Sorry to intervene, Dr. Rochester, but I wanted to let you, and Charlotte, know about a little plan I’ve made for our trip.”

Charlotte turned in interest to Tom at the same moment the therapist nodded approvingly.

“Well, it’s going to be a busy time, and as you said, Dr. R, there’s a lot going on. I understand, and I think Lotte does too, that there’s potential for some anxiety for both of us. So,” he smiled romantically at Charlotte, directing the conversation to her, “I’ve arranged for us to do something special in each city we visit. I’ve had some time carved out of our schedule each day so we can be either alone and doing something or with very few people so as to decompress and reconnect.”

Dr. Rochester was writing some notes but nodded approvingly. “Excellent idea, Tom. This type of thing will continually reinforce that bond of trust and safety you and Charlotte are building. Good, good, good.”

“This way,” Tom addressed the doctor and Charlotte, “if either of us gets agitated or something is going wrong, hopefully focusing on the surprise will keep me – and her – calm enough to get
Charlotte felt herself getting slightly teary at the sheer thoughtfulness of Tom’s plan. Here she’d been aimlessly wandering around, packing her bags and thinking about the appointments she and Tom would have to attend to. He’d been thinking on an entirely more personal level, for her. For them. She threw her arms around him, burying her face in his chest, the Facetime session forgotten.

“That’s what I like to see,” Dr. Rochester laughed heartily. “Keep in touch, both of you. Let’s try and meet via phone or Facetime when convenient – you two know I keep my schedule open for you.”

“Thanks to this moneymaker right here,” Charlotte teased, grabbing Tom’s face and smushing it affectionately. He laughed, kissing her on the head.

“Charlotte, give me a text tomorrow afternoon when you’ve landed and you have a few moments, yes?” Dr. Rochester requested. Charlotte agreed, and she and Tom both thanked her again before signing off.

Tossing the iPad to the side, Tom surprised Charlotte by picking her up and carrying her through the main floor of the house, turning off the lights and setting the security system. She clung somewhat sleepily to Tom, but failed to hide her excitement at the little plan he’d divulged during their session. She felt him smile when she asked about it.

“You have…surprises for us?” she nuzzled his earlobe as they made their way into the master bedroom. He gently set her on her feet and wrapped his arms around her, looking deeply into her eyes and speaking in that voice, the one that never failed to make her weak.

“Yes, my darling. And you’re going to love them.”

Walking Charlotte over to their bed, he gently removed her clothes; she obediently stepped out of everything, watching the pleased, hungry look on his face as he undressed her.

“I cannot wait,” Tom whispered, “to get you in my arms, warm and naked, all over the world, lovely.”

Charlotte blushed, kissing his mouth for lack of words. Then, as it had started doing recently, Charlotte’s minx came out to play. Standing on tiptoe, she brushed her flesh against Tom’s clothed front, leaning into his ear to whisper something new.

“Mr. Hiddleston,” she murmured, “I want to feel you inside of me, please.”

She wasn’t sure how quickly it had come to this, but Lotte found herself, minutes later, underneath Tom’s strong, warm body, her legs wrapped around his waist and his hipbones kissing hers.

“Ooh, lovely,” he licked at her mouth, “do you like feeling me rub against you like that?”

Charlotte could barely answer as she sat up, looking between their bodies as Tom’s length slid slowly between her swollen pussy lips, the head of his cock nudging her clit with every pass. She could only moan out his name, dropping her head back to the pillows in response. A gentle bite to her collarbone brought her back.
“My wet little girl.”

She cried out at his words. His pace quickening just slightly, Charlotte grabbed for her breasts, tugging gently at her nipples. A haze of pleasure settled over her, and then she felt the broad head of Tom’s cock slip into her core. Her hands shot to his biceps, flexed in control.

“Big,” she moaned, digging her nails into Tom’s flushed skin. He growled, prideful at her admission.

“Yes, darling,” he thrust shallowly, watching as she bit her lip, her hips unconsciously working to try and take him deeper into her heated depths. “We need to get you nice and sticky sweet, don’t we?”

He pulled out, not actually having been all that far in, and leaned down to hover over her pussy. Reaching up to squeeze a breast, Tom forced her full attention on him.

“Watch me, lovely,” he intoned deeply, spitting directly so that a tiny pool of saliva slid onto her quivering bundle of nerves, “watch as we get you nice and soaked for my cock.”

She cursed, eyes closing at the feeling of his fingertips on her clit, spreading the moisture around so that it ran down to her entrance. When he began to stroke her furiously, the begging started in earnest.

“Please, baby,” Charlotte moaned, grasping at Tom’s shoulders, his hips – anything to try and pull him into her. “I n-need it…”

He only rubbed harder, purring his happiness at her wanton behavior.

“Oh, Charlotte, I love when you call me ‘baby’…”

She finally succeeded in pulling him closer to her, and her thighs widened in accommodation. He’d never felt so at home in his life, settling between her soft legs. Grasping one of her hands, Tom joined their fingers at her drenched apex and talked to her once more in the lowest register he could muster.

“Let’s both touch you, sweet, so I can slide all the way in.”

She nodded almost gratefully, gritting her teeth at the combined pressure of both their fingers, as well as the stretching sensation of Tom filling her with his cock.

“Hoh, God…” he ground out, feeling her cling around every inch of him. “Keep rubbing, there’s a good girl, yes…”

The moment he’d fully seated himself, Tom dropped his forehead to Lotte’s and breathed against her, not moving a muscle except for the rasp of his fingers against her clit. He could feel her internal muscles fluttering, trying to accommodate his size.

Charlotte removed her hand from his, wrapping her arms around his neck to quietly murmur against his cheek.

“J-just…hold still…for a little…” she purred, warring with the dual sensations of pleasure and slight discomfort at the extremely snug fit. Tom kissed her hotly.

“Of course, my love…anything…”

“Tom…?” she whispered, voice shaking slightly, “touch me where I like best…”
He didn’t have to be asked twice. Without moving himself, he swiped his thumb against the lowest part of her, gathering more of her honey, and began massaging the sensitive spots underneath and beside her little nub. She seized up around his cock immediately, and they both laughed short, appreciative sounds.

“Good?” he purred, pressing into her clit with slight force.

“Good…yes,” she responded, hands wandering to his delectable behind to grasp at him and force him to finally move.

The first full drag – pull and push – had Charlotte inhaling deeply and holding her breath. Pleasure was blooming from her everywhere Tom touched her; it was a very new experience for her, and she marveled at the novel sensations.

“Oh god…I didn’t know I could…f-feel like this,” she moaned, low and sensual.

Tom leaned down to take her lower lip between his teeth, as he continued the devilish multitasking below her waist.

“I want to make you feel like this all the time, sweet.”

His thrusts began in earnest, their skin slapping together.

“I’m going to have you begging me, screaming for me, crying for me in every city we visit.”

Charlotte groaned at his demands, picturing this exact scene within the luxurious confines of the world’s finest hotels.

But then she allowed herself to admit something she’d been trying to ignore: the coil wasn’t tightening. She’d never been able to succeed much past this point.

“My good girl, “ Tom continued his strokes, changing to slow, deep thrusts that had her raising her hips to meet his every time. “What do you need?”

It hadn’t been the first time she’d looked away, abashed, during one of their intimate moments. She trusted him, but it was still hard not to feel as though she was letting him down.

“I…” she struggled at the pleasurable pull of his rigid length rubbing against her inner walls, “I’ve never…come…with penetration…”

Tom didn’t miss a beat.

“Would you like me to stop sliding in and out of your sweet little cunt, baby?”

His language momentarily inflamed her.

“Ohh…” she squeezed her eyes shut.

“What can I do to make baby come, hmm?” Tom said, still stroking her clit, still thrusting deeply within her wet heat. He noticed with satisfaction that she was rhythmically clenching around him. But despite his greatest efforts to relax her and bring her pleasure, she still clammed up, and tears welled in her eyes in frustrated embarrassment.

“No, no, no, lovely,” he purred. “You tell me what I need to do to make my baby come. What do you need?”
She hiccupped a little breath, not saying anything. Her hips stopped their work, and she went slack around him, to his dismay.

“Do you need this?” he gave a particularly drawn-out thrust.

She shook her head no.

“What about this?” he rubbed at her swollen nub harder, causing Lotte’s breath to stutter momentarily.

_Not good enough_, he thought.

He gently pulled out and settled between Charlotte’s legs, going the one untried route that had given them so much success previously.

“Does baby need my tongue?” he asked before suckling at her clit. Her hands scrambled into his hair and her hips rose off the bed as he flicked his tongue up against her, right where she wanted it. He stopped, chuckling in dark triumph.

“Baby _loves_ daddy’s mouth, doesn’t she?” he ran the tip of his tongue back and forth along the slick button. Charlotte felt her stomach muscles contract sharply at the kink in Tom’s question. To say that out loud…

Her hips working of their own volition, Charlotte responded in a hoarse purr.

“I…oh fuck…I need daddy’s tongue…”

Tom growled at the obscene context of their dialogue, spreading her thighs as far apart as they could go. She was becoming so wet that every pass of his tongue caused a slick, explicit sound. He hummed against her pussy, licking in an animal, almost violent, fashion. Charlotte could do nothing but watch as Tom’s tongue, soaked in her juices, flicked against her. She couldn’t help the words that fell from her mouth.

“I want…daddy…to _eat me_ every night…oh…shit,” she cried.

Her admission tore a loud groan from Tom, who was fistng his cock at the same pace he licked his sweet girl. She sat up, sensing the movement, and was hit with sensation overload: Tom’s mouth, nose, and chin drenched in her sweetness; Tom’s hand tugging at that veiny, purple cock still slick from her body; his tongue lapping at her in time with her thrusting hips.

When the gobs of white fluid spurted in ropes from Tom’s cock, Charlotte pressed herself harder into his mouth as he moaned out his release, her own following at the sight of his body coming for her.

She remained so turned on after her orgasm, in fact, that she crawled overtop Tom and sucked off the remnants of his fluids that mixed with hers, all over his length.

Catching his breath, Tom gave Charlotte a bemused look as she lay down beside him in a sweaty embrace.

“Frigid my arse,” he whispered, winking at her. “We’re going to have so much fun on this tour.”

I am SO sorry for the major hiatus, folks. I got really busy at work, took a vacation, and was generally not feeling motivated enough to update.

Fortunately, my muse came back today and I have a 9,000+ word chapter for you. I think you'll find it's worth your wait.

I'll be in my bunk.

(SMUT.)

Gimme a yell when you, ahem, finish.

Charlotte hadn’t realized her hands were shaking until she handed her boarding pass to the gate agent.

“Thank you, and have a nice flight,” the woman smiled.

Lotte thanked her, then proceeded slowly down the ramp so Tom could catch up with her. She tottered carefully in her heels, switching her oversize bag to her other shoulder just to give her hands something to do.

“All good, my love?” Tom asked, catching up with her quickly and taking her by the hand. He had his suit bag draped casually over his arm and that leather bag he took every time he traveled.

His usual excitement at the prospect of traveling had dimmed since their arrival at Heathrow; Charlotte had had a difficult time navigating check-in and security.

“Just ready to get on the plane and get away from all these staring people,” she breathed, drawing as much calm as she could from Tom’s hand grasping hers tightly. What she needed was to sit in his lap, to huddle against him and close her eyes. Even in first class, though, that probably wouldn’t be possible.

“Oh, my sweet girl, I hope you know why they’re staring,” Tom whispered.

As they reached the plane door, Charlotte chuckled humorlessly, her face still slightly white and her mind racing.

“Yes, Tom, because you’re here.”
She had never wanted to be seated and anonymous so badly in her life. But traveling with one of the world’s most recognizable men did come with its large share of intrusion. Hurrying toward her blessedly close seat, she sat down with a quiet sigh of relief by the window just as Tom plopped his gangly form next to her. Surprising Charlotte with a quick kiss to her cheek, he corrected her misinformation.

“No, Lotte. They’re not even looking at me, lovely. Everyone I’ve seen has been looking at you, you gorgeous girl. So put together and kind to everyone…how I love you.”

Charlotte blushed, arranging her bag underneath the seat in front of her and buckling her seatbelt. All she wanted to do was sleep in Tom’s arms. She’d taken the Seroxat shortly before they’d arrived at the airport, but it wasn’t working soon enough to ease her from the car all the way to their gate. She’d barely kept it together when a small crowd of people followed Tom (and by extension her) from check-in to security, and she swore she could feel malevolent eyes on her at every turn.

“Tom?” she asked tiredly as the air hostesses prepared the passengers for takeoff.

“Yes, baby?” Tom was turning off his mobile and placing everything underneath the seat.

“I know we’re only an hour out from Paris but I think I want to sleep a little…” she trailed off, looking out the window at the air traffic controller beside the wing.

Tom moved the console that separated them and motioned for Lotte to press herself as comfortably as she could in his arms.

“Seroxat is kicking in, Lotte. You did so well in the airport,” he kissed the top of her head, running his fingers through her hair and situating her against him. “Take a nap, my good girl, and when you wake we’ll be in the City of Love and Light.”

A small yawn popped out of Charlotte’s mouth as she settled against her protector, her friend, her lover.

Lover, she smiled to herself drowsily. And a damn good one…

As if he could read her mind, he spoke in that deep, seductive tone so that only she could hear as she drifted off.

“Two surprises this evening, my darling. Get your rest and we’ll be there soon.”

A gentle stroke of his fingers against her eyelids, cheeks, and down the slope of her nose sent Charlotte into a peaceful sleep.

She’d done well for the remainder of their journey: there was no fuss disembarking from their plane or getting out of de Gaulle Airport. The car ride to the Ritz Place Vendôme presented no problems. The concierge saw to it that their arrival was painless and quick.

Charlotte Hamilton’s biggest problem of the day, she mused humorously, was deciding what to wear for the evening photo-call and press conference she’d be attending with Tom.

Freshly shaved, showered and dressed, Tom found Lotte poring over the contents of her luggage, running her hands over the various garments she was unpacking and hanging up for perusal. Sky-
high heels were stacked neatly against one wall of their suite’s master bedroom. Her lingerie bag delicately spilled its contents onto the duvet of the bed: soft whorls of pink, gray, and black piled together in a decadent mixture of lace and satin.

“Oh, my darling,” he purred at her, standing behind her to wrap his arms around her waist and nuzzle her neck. “It’s as if you’ve taken me to a candy store…"

Charlotte hummed an amused sound, turning slightly in Tom’s arms.

“What do you mean?” she asked, pecking him sweetly on the cheek.

Turning her so she faced him completely, he took in the innocent sweetness of her face before placing a smouldering kiss to her lips, lingering at her mouth for a moment before replying. “I mean that I want you in everything,” he purred against her lips before kissing her again. “I want to watch you move in all of these clothes, I want to peel them all off of you slowly…I want to touch and taste you while you wear each piece of your lingerie…I want to have you whilst you wear nothing but your tallest stilettos…”

Charlotte was blushing so profusely at Tom’s confession that she was struggling to keep her breath, much less his gaze on her. When she smiled nervously and made to look at the plush carpeting beneath her feet, Tom gently grasped her chin and brought her eyes back to his.

“I’m serious, lovely. You’re my addiction,” he whispered, kissing her once more before making a surprising request.

“Lotte, I hope this isn’t too forward of me, but…” he looked at her sheepishly before continuing, “may I dress you this evening? Choose what you’ll be wearing?”

The thought warmed Charlotte in a strange way. She liked this Tom, this in-control man who was practically begging to dress her up as his own personal doll. This Tom made her want to play – something she discovered she wanted to do all the time with him.

Demurely, Lotte grabbed Tom’s dress shirt-clad arms and gave him the most seductive look she could muster.

“Would you like me to be your little toy, Thomas?” she crooned, raising an eyebrow in mock question. “So you can dress me up and play with me?”

He was dumbstruck by her overt flirtation; he was also in awe of her trust in him – that he wouldn’t take advantage of her or use her just for his own satisfaction. They would play together, and she knew that.

Swallowing thickly, Tom nodded and quietly whispered for Charlotte to undress in front of him.

“Take off all your things, my darling,” he murmured, breath hitching when she slowly shimmied out of her clothes, then her underthings, to reveal deliciously creamy bare skin. When she stood lithe and naked before him, nipples hardening at his stare and the timbre of his voice, he praised her for her obedience.

“Such a good girl for me, sweet.”

She took two steps forward to run small hands through his lustrous, long curls, smiling as he moaned in pleasure at the gesture, which for him had come to represent her willingness to do anything for him – with him.
What Lotte didn’t expect was for one of his elegant fingers of his to swipe lightly between her legs. She gasped at the sensation, realizing that she was more turned on than she knew – her labia parted easily and she growled lowly at the delicious wetness bursting forth from her core. Tightening her hands in his hair, Charlotte moved her hips fractionally, chasing after any stimulation she could get against her swollen button. She bit her lip as Tom lightly rubbed circles against her.

“Oh, lovely,” he groaned, pulling her closer to him with a hand on her hip, “you like your Thomas, don’t you?”

“Yes sir,” she purred, looking down at his finger glistening against her.

“Do you want to come, Charlotte?” he continued to stroke her clit teasingly.

Before she could reply, Tom gently pulled his hand away from her arousal and traced some of her wetness onto her bottom lip. Pupils blown wide, he bent down to lave at her mouth, savoring her taste with his tongue.

With a loud smack, Tom broke the kiss and smirked at Charlotte, directing her to stand apart from him so he could admire her naked form. “I think, my lovely girl, that you’ll be needing some of your black thigh high stockings,” he nodded his head toward her lingerie bag on the bed, “your black suspender belt, and, let’s see…”

Lotte fidgeted as Tom rifled through more of the contents of the bag. She was so turned on that she could think of nothing else but him finishing her off. Unfortunately, she knew he was teasing her and that she’d be going about their evening engagements wet and wanting.

“These,” he purred, thrusting a matching lace bra and panty set into her hands. The edges of the material were delicately scalloped and intertwined, the lace sheer enough that Tom would be able to see everything. This turned Lotte on even more – and she was quickly approaching the point of not caring how brazen she seemed.

“I’ll dress when you’ve finished me,” she stared Tom down imperiously.

He wasn’t having it.

“Be my good girl and get dressed,” he purred, winking at her.

She thought he was ignoring her none-too-subtle signals when he knelt down in front of her to help her slide on the stockings he held. As he worked the delicate material over one leg and then the other, he ran his hands along the supple fabric from ankle to thigh. Her indignant behavior vanished when he ran the tip of his tongue along the top of each stocking, staring up at her heaving breasts and then back down at her swollen pussy.

Leaning forward, Tom pressed his tongue against Charlotte’s clit, flicking quickly several times until she cried out and grabbed for his head. He retreated immediately, licking his lips mischievously.

“We’d best cover that, my love, or I won’t make it to the photo-call,” he teased. Providing a chivalrous hand, he helped Lotte step into the panties, straightening moments later to run his hands up her abdomen and alongside her fleshy breasts, where he then helped her fasten her bra.

When she reached for the suspender belt, Tom tutted at her playfully, raising an eyebrow as if to challenge her action.

“You go step into those gorgeous stilettos,” he pointed to an extremely tall pair of steel-spiked black shoes, “and walk back over to me so I can fasten you up.”
His tone implied she needn’t refuse; more heat rushed to her center at his luscious, velvet voice telling her what to wear for him. Stepping daintily into the shoes, Charlotte carefully sauntered back to her Tom, who stared up and down her graceful form the entire journey. When she stood nearly face to face with him, he once again knelt before her and began clipping the suspenders to her thigh high stockings. Charlotte turned so that Tom could easily clip the back two sections to her stockings, and she shrieked playfully when he snapped the material tightly against her thighs to test its snugness. In her haste to move away from him, she stumbled almost imperceptibly, but Tom caught her by the waist – still from his kneeling position on the carpet – and turned her while gazing up at her.

The mixture of respect, lust, and pride in his eyes caused her to run a hand lovingly along the scruff of Tom’s cheek.

“Love you,” she whispered.

An almost pained look bled onto his face at her soft endearment.

“Oh, my lovely Charlotte, I love you too,” he crooned, suddenly peeling the lace of her underwear to the side in a hurried fashion. “I need to taste you again…”

Before she knew it, Lotte was pressing her hips toward him, holding his mouth to her sex once more as he drank deeply from her – long, slow laps of his tongue rubbing her swollen bud rhythmically.

“I…oh…thought we didn’t have…oh god…time for this,” she mewled, thrusting against Tom’s mouth as her hands tangled in his hair again. He broke from her only momentarily, breathing rushed, gifting her with a wild, predatory look in his eyes.

“You’d better come, darling, or we’re going to be very late,” he broke off to suck fiercely at her clit for a moment before continuing. “Mmm…my wet little Lotte…”

Arousal and fear warred within Charlotte – she didn’t want them to be late, and their car would be downstairs in minutes. She knew she couldn’t possibly come so quickly, especially not while worrying about their itinerary. Tugging regretfully on Tom’s curls, she pulled back with an apologetic glance and said, quite softly, “I need to dress, baby.”

She figured he would be upset with her for stopping his ministrations, for acting frigid…again. But he merely stood up to his full height, wrapped his arms around her lace-clad body, and tipped her backward to stare longingly into her gray eyes.

“I love when you call me baby, you little minx,” he purred, dipping his head to kiss her collarbone. “And I’m pleased you didn’t come…”

She was confused. Hadn’t he wanted her to?

He elaborated while moving to rifle through her dress collection, picking a clingy black sweater dress that would envelop her curves and tease just a hint of the lingerie that she wore underneath.

“That means you’ll be wet and wanting all evening, lovely. Because you know when we return here tonight, all bets are off. Up,” he instructed, and she stretched her arms above her head as he sheathed the dress over her frame, appraising her suggestively when she stood fully clothed before him.

“Remember your two surprises, my darling. We’re going to have a long night.”

With a gentle swat to her bottom, Tom left Charlotte to put on her jewelry and gather her things in her evening clutch before they sped off to Le Grand Rex.
*I’m glad I took more Seroxat,* Charlotte breathed in relief.

The photo-call at Le Grand Rex was, well, exactly like their previous experience at the V&A. Red carpet. Fans and photographers everywhere. Total mayhem. But Charlotte was getting smarter.

Instead of allowing the anxiety to claim her, she prepared her mind ahead of time. She took her half dose of medicine early on. She kept up a steady regimen of breathing in the car, and as Tom started down the press line, she forced herself to keep the even in-through-the-nose, out-through-the-mouth rhythm going. It worked fairly well.

She still roved her eyes over the crowd, feeling slight trepidation that at any moment someone could start shooting, but she breathed through it.

She reminded herself, just as Dr. Rochester had, that the shooters responsible were no longer alive. The malevolent force was gone. No one was going to be shooting at her, or at Tom, or at anyone.

*Most likely,* she added in her head.

And if she at any moment found her breath catching, mind threatening a flashback, Charlotte forced herself to wonder about Tom’s two surprises later in the evening. She had no earthly idea what they could be, but running ideas through her head distracted her enough that she could refocus her attention on breathing and walking.

She was several steps behind Tom, watching him playing to the crowd and seducing the cameras. They had discussed whether or not she would walk arm in arm with him – officially as his girlfriend – and concluded that it might make Charlotte more anxious to have so much of that attention on her. Ultimately, she elected to stay a ways behind him as he posed and signed autographs, opting to meet up with him once inside for the press conference and Q&A session.

*A smart choice for my sanity,* she thought level-headedly as they neared the end of the line.

The crowd swelled somewhat toward the entrance to the theatre, where the majority of the fans were pushing against some of the safety barricades. Charlotte had been so pleased with herself for staying calm that it took her several moments to recognize something was wrong with Tom.

As soon as she took in the increasingly unstable crowd, she saw it in his face. He was white as a sheet, and had turned to search for her, eyes frantically darting hither and yon in search of his assistant – and best girl. Over the din of the crowd, Charlotte could faintly hear him calling her name, and the longer he searched for her, the more panicked he visibly became.

She politely shoved her way through the throng of other assistants, directors, stars, reporters, photographers, and event organizers to rush to his side in what she hoped was a calming manner. He took her hand in a death grip, noticeably trembling, and shakily exhaled as her eyes met his own.

At that moment Charlotte Hamilton didn’t give a damn what people thought about her relationship with Tom Hiddleston. She threaded her fingers through his hair in her own loving way and gently shushed him, willing him to breathe in and out a few times with her.

“Come on, baby,” she smiled, whispering encouragingly. “Almost done, yes?”

He nodded at her, still pale and shaking, trying to continue some deep breathing.
Pressing a few quick kisses to his cheek, Charlotte maneuvered Tom so that his back was to the throng and he only had to face the last smattering of paparazzi.

“Let’s take a few photos together, my love,” she pressed, snuggling up to Tom’s side. The arm he’d snaked around her waist was holding her almost uncomfortably firmly, as if he was afraid she would dissipate into thin air.

Looking at Tom’s face, she could see he was fighting to appear pleasant for the photographers’ shots, so she playfully leaned up to his ear and covertly licked the shell of his earlobe before whispering to him. “Thomas, just think about what I’m wearing under this dress,” she crooned. “And you get to take all of it off of me in a matter of hours.”

That did the trick.

It was a small laugh, but Tom laughed just the same, turning possessive eyes on Lotte as he licked his lips.

“The press are going to be able to discern my religion soon, you naughty little girl,” he winked, referencing the tightening in his trousers.

Charlotte made to escape his grasp, gaining a few steps, but Tom caught up to her for a passionate kiss just at the very end of the press line. Tom was so wrapped up in the taste of Lotte’s lips that he ignored the flashbulbs going off, ignored the cacophony of the crowd, and only realized after they’d set foot inside the lobby of Le Grand Rex that he’d actually suffered a mild panic attack.

She’s worked her magic on me, much as mine worked on her, he thought.

“So we’ve already had a little setback,” Charlotte informed Dr. Rochester via FaceTime. She was in a side hallway of the theatre on her phone, chatting with their therapist as scheduled. “If you can believe it, Tom had a mild episode this evening during the photo call,” she explained.

The good doctor nodded her head knowingly, which begged a question from Lotte.

“Did you expect that to happen?” she asked curiously, eyes wide.

“Well, Charlotte, you spoke a few minutes ago about how you planned out the evening for you – you took the Seroxat at an appropriate time, you were able to stay mindful of your breathing during the event itself, you distracted yourself with other thoughts while making your way down the carpet. It’s safe to say that now that you and Tom know you can get a handle on things, his own control might be slipping a bit.”

Charlotte’s puzzled expression cued Dr. Rochester to continue.

“Let’s put it this way: Tom’s spent so much time worried about and focused on you and your aftermath, that he hasn’t yet had to deal with his. I think he saw tonight that you were doing just fine, and that may have allowed him, subconsciously, to let go of some of his bravado – with the very results you just described to me. Now that he knows you’re coping properly, on some level his psyche might now see it as a good time to try and process the V&A attack on his own terms.

“Oh,” Charlotte responded, at a loss for words. She felt supremely guilty for not being more supportive of Tom – during their whole ordeal she’d only thought of herself, and shame colored her
face at this realization.

“I know what you’re thinking now, too,” the doctor continued. “This isn’t your doing, and you’re not selfish or unsupportive. At the time, you experienced the higher level of trauma, and while no one’s personal experience should be greater or less than anyone else’s – we’re not diminishing anything here – you needed to seek Tom’s help and mine before this next, natural progression could occur.”

Charlotte continued listening to the therapist as she peeked into the theatre where the press conference was being held. To her eyes, Tom appeared much calmer while answering questions. His color had returned, and his body language suggested he was breathing much more easily than a half an hour ago.

“He’s taking questions at a press conference right now,” Charlotte responded, moving quietly back to her spot in the hall. “Seems much better.”

“And how did you two rectify the situation in front of that crowd?” Dr. Rochester probed.

“Same as usual,” Charlotte answered. “Physical touch. Closeness. I may have whispered something funny and inappropriate in his ear in front of the cameras.”

Dr. Rochester chuckled warmly, winking at Lotte. “Then you’re doing what has already worked well for you up to now. Only this time, Tom might be in need of the therapy just as much as you.”

“Well, we’re both looking forward to the ‘surprises’ he’s got planned this evening, whatever those are,” Charlotte trailed off.

“I’m pleased you’re both sticking to the plan,” Dr. Rochester affirmed. “You’re doing fine, Charlotte, and Tom is too. This is all perfectly normal. I know you don’t have long, but I wanted to thank you for checking in with me and keeping me apprised of how things are going. Let’s talk again soon, shall we?”

Charlotte agreed and ended the FaceTime session, but not before scheduling another meeting in two days. As she typed a reminder into her phone, a text message notification slid onto her home screen from Tom.

Almost done, lovely. I’m feeling a little skittish again. Meet me down by the stage?

She didn’t need to be told twice. At that moment, knowing her Tom needed her – every bit as much as she’d needed him, it seemed – she would have done anything for him.

Quietly opening the theatre door, Lotte took her time sauntering down a long, side aisle of the auditorium, watching as the press packed up and exited along various routes from Le Grand Rex. She tapped out a quick text in reply, knowing that Tom would get it just as she met him. He was saying his goodbyes to fellow cast members and the production team, and by the time Charlotte reached the prosenium of the stage, he was practically frantic trying to get to her. She reached out both hands for him to take, and smiled at his adorable confusion when his phone buzzed in his pocket. Keeping hold of one of her hands, Tom dug into the pocket of his trousers for his phone, thumbing to the message she’d just sent. As he read the message, a soft, slightly embarrassed look crossed his features. He looked back up at Charlotte with shining eyes.

“You’re proud of me, darling? Whatever for?”

Charlotte smiled warmly as Tom returned his now-free hand to her other waiting one. She gave him a two-squeeze and answered his query.
“For what a wonderful actor you are, for how well you do all this,” she gestured to the theatre around them. “For being strong out there on the carpet, my love.”

He hung his head ever so slightly. She could sense the shame in the set of his shoulders.

“I’m so embarrassed, Lotte. I didn’t imagine I would have a fright like that after all we’ve been through – and to know you’re so strong now and I just felt so…helpless…” he trailed off.

Charlotte tucked her hand elegantly into the crook of his arm and gently led him out of Le Grand Rex.

“We do this together, yes?” she encouraged. Tom nodded at her meekly, leading her toward the nearest exit where their private car awaited.

“We help one another when the need arises, don’t we?” Charlotte continued as Tom opened various doors for her.

“Yes, lovely.”

“I’ve spoken with Dr. Rochester,” Charlotte informed Tom gently as he led her to the waiting Audi parked near the side entrance from which they vacated. “She basically confirmed that this would happen to you sooner or later, once I got my bearings.”

The conversation ceased momentarily as Tom had a word with the driver, then walked around to his side of the car and folded himself comfortably into the leather seat beside Lotte. He was silent for a few moments, ruminating to himself. It wasn’t until Charlotte softly squeezed a hand onto his knee that Tom returned his attentions to her. She looked worriedly into his azure eyes.

“I’m afraid you think me weak and incapable after what happened tonight,” Tom whispered hoarsely, fear in his eyes. “I want you to know me as someone strong who can take care of you and who keeps you safe.”

His admissions broke Lotte’s heart, but she clambered delicately into his lap, turned toward him, and ran soothing fingers through his hair as she shushed him.

“You are neither weak nor incapable, Thomas,” she spoke tactfully. “You are strong, and you do keep me safe. But we went through something terrible together and now we must work together to move past it.”

Her heart, so close to breaking moments ago, swelled when Tom closed his eyes and pressed his handsome face into her little palms, visibly relaxing at her touch. She continued.

“You picked me up, dusted me off, and held my hand, Tom. And I am fully prepared to do the same, right here, right now.”

Kissing her lovingly on the forehead, Tom voiced his question in a low, slow manner.

“So if I need you more than usual, or I need more touch when we’re doing engagements, or if I want you in the night…” his eyes desperately searched Charlotte’s for approval.

Charlotte kissed his mouth languidly, brushing her tongue lightly against his bottom lip before replying.

“Then I will give you whatever you desire, my baby. Your needs are my needs. Your wants are my wants. We do this together.”
He pulled Charlotte to him so quickly that the breath whooshed out from her just as he sealed his mouth over hers, his large hands roving over every available inch of her that he could find. She squirmed delightfully in his lap, hips rocking against the ever-hardening bulge in his trousers. Were it not for the driver clearing his throat a few times rather loudly, Tom and Charlotte probably would have been naked and in the act without realizing they’d arrived at their destination.

Getting his bearings, Tom straightened his tie and gingerly moved Lotte off his lap, clearing his throat and thanking the driver.

“Surprise number one, my darling,” Tom murmured as Charlotte immediately gaped from her window.

The glittering lights of the Iron Lady, La Tour Eiffel, beckoned Lotte out of the car. It was so majestic and beautiful that she nearly had tears in her eyes.

She was on the sidewalk in a flash, staring up at the architectural marvel as Tom came behind her to rub hands up and down her shivering form. She never even noticed the cold.

Placing his suit jacket across her shoulders, Tom led Charlotte toward the nearest leg of the structure, where a representative met both of them just outside the lift that would take them up to the heavens.

“Bonsoir monsieur, mademoiselle,” she greeted in rapid French. “Allons-y!”

Charlotte chuckled as a *Doctor Who* reference flitted through her mind, and Tom smiled warmly, leading her into the lift. When he felt Lotte stiffen slightly at the heights to which they were ascending, he placed an anchoring arm around her waist and held her right hand in his own.

“Okay?” he asked, nipping playfully at her earlobe.

“A little scary,” she smiled shyly.

“Almost there, my sweet.” The two-squeeze Tom gave her fingers allowed Charlotte to relax, resting her head back against his chest until they arrived.

“Bienvenue à *Le Jules Verne*,” the representative chimed, and for Charlotte’s benefit, added, “Welcome to the restaurant *Jules Verne*, Miss. We hope you will enjoy your dinner.”

It was hard to hide her excitement and shock at the gorgeous nighttime views, the height – the beauty of the restaurant they were escorted into.

*I am eating dinner in the Eiffel Tower. Oh my god.*

Tom pulled out a chair for Lotte and then watched with a satisfied look on his face as the maître d’ handed her a menu and draped a linen serviette across her lap. Champagne was poured, and Charlotte watched in fascination – and with no small amount of arousal – as Tom motioned for the gentleman to have a word. He rattled off a few flawlessly French directives in that gorgeous voice of his, and as the maître d’ nodded and left, Tom winked seductively across the table at her.

She had to cross her legs, squeezing her thighs together at the throbbing that had started so quickly.

*God, he’s intoxicating,* she thought.

“Please tell me this is surprise number two, Tom,” Charlotte whispered, somewhat overwhelmed at what was surely going to be an expensive evening. When the first course arrived almost instantaneously, Tom leaned conspiratorially across the table to whisper his answer.
“No, my love. This is still the first,” he grinned, spearing a bite of the citrus-infused fish on his starter plate. “Dinner at the Michelin-starred *Jules Verne* with my love.”

Charlotte would have blanched at his reply, but she too tasted the first of what would be six courses, and her eyes closed at the divine flavors bursting forth on her tongue. Swallowing, she took a sip of champagne and raised a curious eyebrow at her boyfriend.

“So I’ve still got another surprise? This in itself is too much, Tom.”

Smearing his next bite of flaky fish into the creamy citrus sauce on his plate, Tom shook his head adamantly.

“Never too much, darling. I’ve wasted four years without you as my partner and I’m not losing another second. I want to give you the world.”

Tears shining in her eyes, Charlotte reached out for her champagne flute and delicately tapped the rim against Tom’s own glass.

“How I love and appreciate you.”

“Hear, hear, darling.”

After drinking to their intimate toast, Tom hinted at what was to happen later, his sentiment changing from love to unadulterated passion.

“The second surprise is a bit…smaller, my darling. More…intimate. And it’s back at the Ritz. *Just for you and me.*”

Lotte was about to ask further questions when the second course arrived. The plates revealed sumptuous foie gras on beds of steamed vegetables. Tom nodded chivalrously to the maître d’ and watched as he left the table before continuing.

“I’d like to ask a small favor of you, lovely. Before our second surprise.”

Charlotte nodded encouragingly as her fork slid easily into the pâté, willing to do whatever Tom asked.

“Take off your panties and give them to me.”

She wasn’t sure she heard him properly and swallowed her bite before asking him to repeat himself. He gifted her with a dark look, subtly licking the tines of his fork before reiterating his request.

“You heard me, Lotte. Sit there and unclasp your suspenders. Slide your panties down your legs, and give them to me.”

Slicing into some of the legumes, Charlotte bought precious seconds by playing coy.

“And why should I do such a thing, Thomas?” she asked as she bit into the fresh green vegetable.

Scooting his chair just a fraction of an inch closer to Lotte’s own seat, Tom growled seductively.

“Because it excites me. And I know you’re still wet, lovely. I can still smell what my mouth coaxed from you earlier.”

Biting her lip, Charlotte warred with herself.
This is indecent, she thought as a pleasurable shiver ran up her spine.

This is what you want, her innermost thoughts countered.

Tom ate innocently as Charlotte looked around, then, seeing no one in close proximity, quickly unclasped her suspenders and shimmied delicately in her seat to slide her lace underwear down her legs. She was about to reach under the table for them when the second course came to an immediate end. Sautéed scallops in a pumpkin-chestnut drizzle replaced it.

Tom kept his eyes firmly on her face as plates were exchanged. He thanked the waiter without so much as a blink in his direction, never taking his gaze from Charlotte’s flushed countenance.

“Give them to me.”

Still she stalled, reaching down to grasp the material as covertly as possible but holding onto the bundle tightly in her hands.

“Why?”

“Because you will thank me immensely later. I guarantee you’ll be glad you did.”

“And if I don’t?”

Slicing into one of his scallops, Tom gifted Lotte with a slight frown.

“Then you don’t get your second surprise, my darling.”

With relish, he bit into the seafood and groaned pleasurably at the taste. Charlotte wished for her underwear back on at that moment; she felt heavy wetness begin to bloom between her legs at the decadent sound of Tom’s enjoyment.

Buck up. You know you want it.

Putting on a brave face, Charlotte stood from her seat at the table, sauntered gracefully around the table to Tom’s chair, and bent down to bite lightly at his jugular whilst dropping her lace panties into his linen-covered lap. She felt him gasp at her actions and smiled to herself as she returned to her third course.

“Good girl.”

The evening continued on in much the same manner – three more courses, refills of bubbly, endless sexually charged banter traded back and forth across the table. By the time they were finishing their sumptuous chocolate pâtisserie, Charlotte was an aching, needy mess.

Tom couldn’t stop openly roving his eyes over her.

“My darling, you have a bit of chocolate,” he said quietly, moving around the table to her side, “just here.”

And he licked the trace of dessert from the corner of her mouth as she moaned softly against him. Before he resumed his own place across the table, he moved his mouth to Lotte’s ear.
“I’ve been dying to have you all day, sweet. Would you like your other surprise, Lotte?”

Reaching a hand back into his hair, Charlotte pulled ever so slightly and begged her answer.

“Please take me back to the suite, Tom. *Now.*”

Chuckling heartily just as the maître d’ returned with his credit card, Tom mouthed “why” at the desperate sound of Lotte’s demand.

She’d had enough.

Politely but with eyes blazing, Charlotte turned to the waiter and extended a hand in thanks.

“Monsieur, je vous remercie beaucoup pour la marveilleuse soirée. Je m’excuse, mais je suis malade et j’ai un besoin de medecine…”

Tom quirked an impressed eyebrow at the fluency of Charlotte’s French, and at the lie she’d just told the maître d’: she was ill and needed medicine.

The older gentleman kissed Lotte’s hand and pulled out her chair for her, ushering her (with Tom in tow) quickly from the restaurant so that Charlotte could presumably get the medicine she so desperately needed.

Once alone in the lift sending them back down the iron leg of the Eiffel Tower, Tom wrapped his arms around Lotte once more, staring lustfully into her eyes.

“Are you sick, my darling? Do you need medicine? Our therapy?” he crooned.

Grabbing Tom’s hand, Charlotte slipped it easily under the hem of her dress, maneuvering until his fingers touched the wet, satiny flesh of her pussy. The first touch of him against her clit had Charlotte shuddering in pleasure.

“I need your cock, baby” she mewled, “I *need* it.”

“Oh, sweet,” Tom responded lovingly as he removed his hand and they departed the lift for the waiting car on the street below. “I’ve turned you on, haven’t I?”

Charlotte was going to combust if they didn’t get to the Place Vendôme soon. Gritting her teeth at the innocent touch of his guiding hand on the small of her back, Lotte growled out a reply.

“Not so frigid anymore, am I? You make me fucking *ache*, Tom.”

Male pride swelled within Tom as he settled Charlotte into the car and they sped back toward the Ritz. She was trying desperately to climb into his lap, to undo his belt buckle, to do anything to assuage the burning need in her core. He managed to calm her by shushing her with a few sweet kisses and was pleased when she serenly threaded her fingers through his hair, a sure sign of contentment.

“I’m going to stroke you just for a moment, lovely, just to give you a little relief, yes?” Tom purred into Lotte’s mouth as his index and middle fingers slid up her stocking-encased thigh to slick against her wet heat. “Stay quiet, Lotte.”

Her head dropped back against the headrest and her eyes closed in momentary bliss as Tom rubbed lightly against her swollen clit. She had to bite her lip to keep from moaning his name – and she surely didn’t want the driver finding out what was happening. Luckily Tom draped himself over her
just enough that they wouldn’t be caught out.

He whispered sweet nothings as he continued toying with her flesh, appreciating the pulse in her neck and the black abyss of her pupils.

“Will you be my good girl when we return, Lotte?” he tapped playfully against her slick button.

“Yesss,” she huffed out at the unexpected sensation, hands returning to clench in his hair.

“Will you walk silently up to our suite for me, lovely? And wait for my instruction?”

His fingers hovered away from her flesh until she nodded frantically, giving a pleading look in exchange for more pleasure. Her nod was the go ahead: Tom gently thrust two fingers into her weeping center, immediately working them in and out in a devastatingly slow pace.

“Oh, daddy,” Charlotte whispered, the taboo endearment falling easily from her mouth as Tom’s digits filled her.

“There’s my good girl,” Tom growled quietly at her response, thrusting slightly more forcefully so his thumb bumped against her clit repeatedly.

Just as their sensual rhythm was establishing itself, the car stopped at the entrance to the Ritz. With a flourish, Tom gently disentangled himself from Lotte, thanked the driver, and raced around to open the door for Charlotte, who was smoothing down her dress as though nothing had happened.

The slight shake of her legs told Tom otherwise, and he smirked to himself as she reached out to take his hand, steadying herself before walking in to the Place Vendôme, head held high and traces of arousal invisible to all but the one man who knew her best: her Tom.

She did as she was told: she didn’t make a sound through the lobby, during the ride up in the lift, or while waiting for Tom to unlock the suite door. When he motioned for her to enter ahead of him, she did so with the silent grace of a sleek cat, striding elegantly through the main part of the living area into their shared bedroom.

“Leave the shoes on, leave everything on, Lotte,” Tom murmured after her. He loosened his tie, stepped out of his shoes, and watched her retreating form hungrily as he silenced and discarded his phone, checked the lock on the door, and moved to follow her.

“Stand by the window, darling, and I’ll get you out of that dress,” he purred as he entered the master bedroom.

She turned slightly when he extinguished the overhead light, but soon realized the room was awash in a golden and bluish light from the world outside their windows. Coming up behind her, Tom nuzzled Lotte’s neck momentarily and felt her intake of breath at the pleasurable sensation.

“Do you need to talk, lovely, or can you stay quiet for me?”

He began to peel the heavy fabric of the dress up and off her body, removing it with poise on a nearby chaise.

In an awed whisper, Charlotte found her voice.

“I’m so aroused right now that I’m shaking,” she murmured in amazement.

“Am I doing my job, lovely?” Tom asked, stepping back to admire his little Lotte clad in nothing but
stockings, suspenders, and bra. He dropped her panties from his pocket onto the dress that lay lifeless near them.

She could barely respond, she was breathing so hard.

“Lotte, answer me, sweet,” Tom commanded, deftly unhooking her bra and discarding it with her other accoutrements.

“Y-Yes…” she breathed, mesmerized by the view from the window and the feeling of Tom’s hands running over her exposed flesh: tracing her collarbones, brushing against her nipples, scratching gently down the contours of her stomach.

“Be my good girl and put your palms against the window glass, darling,” he instructed as he divested her of the suspender belt. “We need to get you ready for your other surprise, my love.”

She inhaled suddenly through her nose at the cold feeling of the panes of glass against her palms, and then looked down to see Tom situating himself on his knees before her, breathing excruciatingly close to her sex.

“Shoes and stockings stay on, sweet. And I want you to press those beautiful breasts against the glass, too. Look outside for me, Charlotte.”

She looked out at the seductive night – the lights twinkling from far away, the lazy hum of evening traffic in the streets below. The chill on her breasts was swiftly countered as Tom’s mouth found her swollen sex once more – thus his kneeling position. After one painfully good lick, he felt the need to issue another command.

Charlotte was willing to assent to anything.

“Spread your legs.”

She did so, teetering on dangerously slim stiletto points.

“Can you be a good girl and come, darling? I’m going to lick you so you get some relief, my precious girl.”

Her answering moans were all the encouragement Tom needed. He pressed his mouth to her as a man starved, and worked his slick tongue against all of the pleasure points he’d learned were imperative for her. When he grasped at the pert flesh of her little bottom, he knew she was fighting the impulse to let go.

Another command, this time hoarsely purred.

“**Thrust, baby.**”

“**Nnggh...**” Charlotte cried. She could get there if she could just... “T-Tom...oh...**god yes...**can I p-please move my...my h-hands?” she begged.

Face pressed against her most intimate spots, Tom moaned a sound that implied agreement. Charlotte’s hands flew of their own volition into Tom’s hair, providing the leverage she needed to move against his sinful mouth.

The coil tightened rather quickly after that, to Charlotte’s surprise. Before she had any time to think, or backtrack, her back was bowing as warm, sweet contractions shook her entire body.
“Mmmm,” Tom moaned his appreciation at her body’s response, continuing to draw out Charlotte’s orgasm with slow, gentle licks against her throbbing clit. His grip on her bottom never loosened, and he continued to lavish attention on her swollen button until she sobbed, pulling away from him.

Stepping unsteadily out of her shoes, Charlotte kept a small distance from Tom as she ran a hand along her flushed face and through her hair.

“That was…fast,” she whispered to Tom, who was still kneeling on the floor and eyeing her with a mixture of hunger and immense pride.

“You like that, don’t you?” he murmured huskily. “I can make you come every time, can’t I, sweet?”

He stood up and stalked over to Charlotte, who was backing away somewhat warily – but in the wrong direction – toward the edge of the bed.

Stripping out of his trousers, tie, shirt, and undershirt – and characteristically without boxers – Tom grasped his straining erection and passed his fist over the length once, twice, three times very slowly as he licked traces of Lotte’s sweetness from his mouth.

“Thank you for my surprises, Tom,” Charlotte smiled genuinely, although somewhat nervously at Tom’s still-predatory behavior. He was now gently pushing her backward onto the bed as he pressed himself atop her sated form.

“Oh, darling,” he chuckled darkly, “you haven’t been given your other surprise yet.”

She turned to watch as Tom, lithe and naked, moved once more and situated himself against the headboard of the bed, legs splayed and erection bobbing against his abdomen.

“My good girl, you’re going to come and sit on my cock, aren’t you?” Tom ordered in luscious syllables as he began teasing the head of his penis again, making an “ooh” face as he gave in to his own pleasure momentarily.

Her mouth watered and her inner muscles contracted at the deliciously obscene sight before her. Splashed in moonlight and the glow of the city, Tom was possibly more handsome than she’d ever seen him.

She crawled obediently up the bed, her only thought his rigid cock stretching her aching pussy.

“Don’t even think about using your mouth, lovely. The only thing I want to feel is that swollen, wet little cunt sinking down onto me,” he purred.

Charlotte blushed slightly, not so much at Tom’s words, but at the physics of the position they were about to assume. She never liked being on top – it made her feel vulnerable and had done nothing for her in her previous relationship.

Stop thinking about that, she scolded herself silently.

Tom could read everything on her face plain as day and broke his air of dominance to reach out reassuring hands to his little Lotte.

“Will you try with me, my darling?” he asked softly, smiling a broad, warm smile that relaxed Charlotte and somehow gave her a little boost of confidence.

She nodded shyly, sidling up to Tom’s lap and arranging her thighs on either side of his hips.
“I’m going to sit up so you can wrap your arms around my neck, yes?” he coaxed.

He moved carefully, not wanting to force anything upon Charlotte, and she linked her hands behind him as he gently teased the head of his cock against her slick opening.

“Ease down, love;” he murmured, keeping steady eye contact so as to gauge her discomfort or alarm. One hand reassuringly placed against her cheek, Tom used his other to guide himself into her wet heat.

She felt neither discomfort nor alarm as she slid slowly – but easily – down the length of his shaft until she was completely seated against him.

“Ohh…” Charlotte moaned involuntarily, taking in the sensation of tight fullness, but also the feel of Tom’s sharp hipbones against the backs of her thighs.

She flexed her fingers instinctively against the nape of his neck and panted a pleasured breath as Tom grit his teeth against the welcoming sensation of her pussy grasping around him.

“Baby was ready for me, wasn’t she?” Tom groaned, moving his hands to Lotte’s little hips to grasp possessively. Moving slightly upward and then sinking back down experimentally, Charlotte moaned again and nodded.

“So, so ready, Tom,” she breathed, moving hands to his hair to pull herself closer against his propped-up chest.

“Ahh……yes…” she ground out as her straining areolas made contact with the heat of Tom’s chest.

As she continued shallow movements, Tom could only lay slack-jawed at the overwhelming pleasure washing over him. His beautiful girl astride him, taking his cock into her sweet little pink pussy. Looking down at their joined bodies, Tom couldn’t help but gently rub against that little spot that brought Charlotte so much pleasure. His eyes twinkled mirthfully when he felt her seize up around him.

“Can you go harder, lovely? Can you be my good girl and ride me?”

A sharply groaned curse and Charlotte was bucking up and down against Tom, hips rolling and pussy coating his cock with her honey.

“Fuck…” Tom moaned, moving one hand into Lotte’s hair as his other fingers continued spreading sweetness around her clitt.

“Oh my fucking god,” Charlotte cried, noticing the penetration was deeper, that she could rub her little nub against Tom’s fingers and pubic bone and –

He stilled her with hands on hips.

“Are you ready for surprise number two, my beautiful Charlotte?” Tom was shaking from the discipline it took not to continue thrusting into her welcoming wetness. She tried to respond but was on stimulation overload, still feeling Tom sheathed inside her, her clit pulsing against his heated flesh.

“Say yes, baby. Please say yes;” he begged her, veins working in his neck as he strained against her.

She nodded her head frantically, running hands through his hair once more as an attempt to soothe both of their raging libidos.
Of course it only inflamed them further.

Grasping at her body tightly, Tom rocked Charlotte against him as he reached toward the nightstand beside the bed and grabbed quickly for a small metallic object she hadn’t previously noticed.

He matter-of-factly pressed a small button on the object and Charlotte’s ears pricked as a barely discernable hum filled the air.

Heavy moisture gathered at the place she was joined with Tom.

*He’s going to use that on me.*

Kissing her face and mouth heatedly, Tom spoke in a calm smattering of words that belied his blinding need for Charlotte.

“We’re going to work together, lovely, so that you can come with me inside you,” he moaned as she involuntarily began to clench around him, moving, seeking some sort of friction. “Remember what I always tell you?” Tom queried as he coaxed Charlotte to sit back and resume her up-and-down thrusting motion.

Lotte nodded, eyelids hooded and mouth partially open as she watched those gorgeously long fingers hover the tiny bullet vibrator ever closer to her apex.

He wouldn’t touch her until she said it.

The sexy grin on his face at her eagerness made her want to eat him whole.

“I come…every time…” she whispered throatily, and as soon as the words left her lips, Tom pressed the little buzzing object flush against her soaked button.

Charlotte’s hands flew to Tom’s shoulders, digging nails into his skin as she bore down onto his cock at the overwhelming pleasure coursing through her.

“FUCK…” was all she could manage.

As if things weren’t unraveling quickly enough, Tom Hiddleston and that devastating voice of his had to raise the bar to unholy, sinfully evil levels.

“Yes, baby. Tell me how good that feels on your clit,” he purred, beginning to rub the object in tiny circles against her. “Fuck me, baby…yes…fuck me. We’re going to make you come, aren’t we? Are you going to be a good girl?”

“Oh god…harder…” Charlotte commanded, moving Tom’s hand more forcefully against her as she shook, bouncing on his shaft.

“Such a good girl, yesss…” Tom groaned loudly. “I can feel my baby’s little cunt getting tighter…Jesus…and tighter…”

Charlotte’s eyes slammed closed just as the coil tightened severely – she was so very close that everything within her was throbbing and aching and felt so goddamn *good*. Tom’s growl brought her back, seconds from the brink.

“Look at me.”

She did, yelping a little as Tom lifted his hips from the bed to piston against her. He continued working her swollen bud, staring ravenously into her eyes. The veins in his neck were corded as he
strained against her, his breaths puffing against her breasts as he leaned further forward to get as close to her as possible.

“Tom...oh...yes, there...”

Flashing Charlotte a wicked grin, Tom lunged forward to bite her lip, toying her clit and continuing to meet her thrust for thrust. Moving his face mere inches from hers, he purred a final directive.

“Come.”

She did so immediately, moaning his name amid a litany of curses and breathy sighs as he continued to press the vibrator against her, fucking her contracting pussy.

“Baby, yes...good girl,” he groaned, easing the little bullet away from Lotte, as she stilled around him, inner walls still fluttering slightly.

As she caught her breath, Tom surprised Charlotte by flipping her onto her back, plunging his still rock-hard erection back into her soaked core. Her arms and legs locked around him immediately; she moaned in renewed pleasure at his show of dominance.

“You’re going to come again for me, lovely,” he whispered seductively against her mouth as the gentle buzz of the vibrator began anew. “Aren’t you?”

Her “yes” ended breathily as he sought out and found her clit again, nestling the object snugly against her.

As his long, deep thrusts began, Tom asked another question. “Can I come inside you, sweet? I want it...”

A second, moaned cry of “yes” echoed through the bedroom.

“Are you my good girl?” he teased, snapping his hips against her as the bullet’s vibrations escalated.

Hands fisting in Tom’s hair, Charlotte could no longer formulate a reply. It would distract from the immense pleasure pulsing against her.

When she could only muster a broken, pleasured groan, Tom laughed evilly, thrusting faster and harder.

“Welcome to Paris, my love.”
The feeling was so addictive that Charlotte wanted to experience it again when she awoke early the next morning. Gently brushing kisses against Tom’s neck, she smiled languidly as her very warm, very naked boyfriend gave a small stretch and groaned pleurably at the feel of her pressed against him.

“Lovely, what time is it?” he murmured, gathering her closer than she already was and repositioning them under the sheets so he spooned against her.

“It’s…five am…” Charlotte whispered sheepishly. She’d wanted them both to get as much rest as possible after their rather active night, but the second she’d awoken she yearned for Tom. Enough to forgo the two extra hours of sleep they still had before them.

Nuzzling her ear affectionately and pressing himself fully against Lotte’s soft body, Tom playfully chastised her.

“Awake so early, Lotte?” he murmured, slyly slipping a hand around her front to dip lightly between her thighs. He was rewarded with a breathy affirmation.

“Y-yes…sorry…”

“Don’t be sorry, baby,” he nipped at her earlobe. “You feel very ready for me again.”

At his insinuation Charlotte’s legs loosened further and Tom pulled her back against him even more harshly, so as to tease her from behind with his considerable length. She whispered something he didn’t catch, so caught up was he in the warmth seeping from between her legs against his now-straining member.

“Be a good girl and repeat yourself, Charlotte, so that I can hear you, and know what you want,” he purred, licking a slow line from her shoulder up to the sensitive spot just below her ear. She was already struggling against him, trying in vain to sheath him inside her; he wouldn’t give her the satisfaction until she spoke louder – he wanted to hear her ask him for what she wanted. To Tom, the sweetest sound was his best girl asking him to show her the utmost of love and affection.

Breathing heavily, still squirming in his arms, Charlotte groaned impatiently and attempted to voice her request.
“Make…love…” she voiced tremulously.

His heart seized painfully at her sweet, sincere need. There was nothing he wanted more than to make up for all the lost time between them – closest friends for years, but missing the final puzzle piece until they both realized how much they truly needed one another. He wanted to show her how much he needed her, how much he loved and cherished her, as often as possible.

Gently coaxing her legs further apart, Tom situated himself tightly behind Lotte’s reposing form and dipped the head of his cock easily into her heated depths.

Had he been able to see her face in that moment, he would have taken in her utter relief and happiness at being so treasured by him – and his body.

“Love, can you touch yourself for me while I sink into you?” Tom asked softly. “We don’t want you sore, do we?” he kissed her temple fervently.

Charlotte did as he asked, rewarding him with a low moan as she found her clit and began teasing the wet bud, easing Tom’s passage into her tight core. When he seated himself fully, she huffed out a pleased breath.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” Charlotte babbled. Those words were reminiscent, to Tom, of the same “thank you” she extended to him the night her headache was so bad he had to retrieve a hot cloth for her. He lost himself in that memory, and his mind began playing tricks on him.

Stiffening, Tom turned Lotte slightly in his arms, eyes wide, with a note of alarm in his voice. “Am I hurting you, darling? Are you all right? You must tell me if something is wrong,” he began checking her over, looking for imaginary wounds, signs of discomfort…his heart beat out of his chest, seemingly at random.

Charlotte could sense the change in his tone immediately, snapping out of her pleasurable haze and placing a warm palm against his cheekbone. She gingerly pulled away from Tom so as not to hurt him, and then turned fully to gather him in her arms.

“Baby, look at me,” she spoke softly but assertively. Tom did as she asked, realizing he was having another moment similar to what happened at Le Grand Rex. He forced himself to look into Lotte’s eyes and began breathing deeply with her when she encouraged him to do so. She placed his hands around her body and waited until his respirations evened out and he’d come back to himself.

“What happened, Tom? Were you thinking about something, baby?” concern colored her voice and furrowed her brow.

Tom took a deep breath, blowing it out slowly, and nodded, not breaking precious eye contact with his best girl. Before saying anything, he craned his neck toward Lotte so he could press a shaky kiss to her lips. He stayed against her mouth for a few moments, seeking reassurance.

“Something you said triggered a memory of your headaches…and I guess I just started thinking about…everything,” he explained weakly. His eyes closed, as if in defeat, and he pressed his forehead to Charlotte’s while squeezing her tightly – almost to her discomfort. “I almost lost you, my love, and we could have been parted…and now that I know what it’s like to love you and to be loved by you…” he’d started crying a bit by this time, “…I can’t bear it. I just want to keep you in my arms and stay inside of you forever so nothing can harm us.”

Charlotte was not only dumbfounded by Tom’s reaction to whatever it was she’d just said, but she was also deeply moved by the reverence and love for her of which he’d just spoken. Perversely, she
even felt a thrill at the notion that he wanted to be inside of her forever. She didn’t really know what to say to him. But she knew he needed soothing; as Dr. Rochester said, now it would be his turn to iron some things out. Just as she was working through what had happened, so too would he.

Pressing her flushed body against Tom, she began to lightly stroke his brows, the tip of his nose, and his cheeks with the back of one of her dainty hands. Seeing him deflate a little – perhaps in relief that the memories were abating, or possibly just at her touch and nearness – Charlotte suggested they quiet their minds and attempt the last two hours of sleep.

“But, darling, you said you wanted –”

A short, sweet kiss to Tom’s lips stopped him from voicing his thought.

“Thomas, I love you.”

He replied with an “I love you” that was so grateful and sincere that she felt pride in knowing she’d chosen a wonderful person to be with.

“Let’s sleep, baby. We have a train ride ahead of us later, don’t we?”

Eyes closed, Tom nodded and pulled Lotte closer, dropping quickly into a deep slumber.


He was looking at Lotte expectantly, knowing this clue was disarmingly simple.

“Tie,” she responded, clacking away on her mobile as they sped toward Berlin. “Give me something worse than that, Thomas,” she stuck out her tongue.

Tom perused the crossword clues carefully. Charlotte looked up to take in his appearance: slightly disheveled hair, glasses perched on his nose, and that devilishly adorable eyebrow of his quirked in search of the perfect question.

“Aha…here. How about five letters: ‘exploding stars’?”

Feeling proud, Charlotte immediately rattled off, “Novas!”

Tom’s wicked grin tipped her off that she was wrong.

“That can’t possibly be wrong, she thought exasperatedly.

“Novae, darling, in the correct plural,” he teased, plugging the letters in and winking at her.

Charlotte refused to concede that she’d answered incorrectly. “That is still correct, you! Give me another! A hard one,” she specified, tossing her mobile into her bag and looking imperiously out at the European scenery flashing past the windows.

“My darling, if you truly love me, you’ll get this one,” Tom teased with a straight face.

She knew without a doubt it was a Shakespeare question. If there was one thing Tom loved – and knew – more than he did her, it was the bard himself.
She nodded; a large part of Charlotte wanted to make Tom proud. Every time they did their crosswords she swore he threw in a random literature reference. And while she’d studied some literature at university, she wasn’t nearly as versed as he was.

There aren’t many people who are as versed as he is, she thought ironically.

“Setting for Hamlet: eight letters,” he looked at her expectantly, almost challenging her to get it wrong.

Lotte felt a small frisson of excitement go through her – she knew this! Hamlet had always been her favorite of the tragedies. But she wanted to keep Tom hanging…lull him into a false sense of satisfaction at having bested her. Putting on a confused face, Charlotte pretended to ruminate about the possible answers, when in actuality she was counting and re-counting the letters E-L-S-I-N-O-R-E in her head just to make sure they fit with the clue.

“Time’s ticking, my sweet,” Tom gloated, pushing his glasses up on his nose and kissing her cheek in assumed triumph. If he wasn’t so handsome, she would have brushed him away.

“I just don’t…know…” Charlotte teased, continuing to see satisfaction painted all over Tom’s visage. “But it’s probably Elsinore,” she smirked.

Tom’s face fell, knowing his moment to gloat had passed.

“Shall I spell that for you, Thomas?” she badgered, reaching beside her to tickle her fingertips against the smooth side of his neck. He reddened and jerked away, laughing quietly. This was a weak spot for him – something she’d only recently discovered. And she loved to tease him.

Escaping her ticklish clutches and completing the puzzle, Tom capped the pen and gave the crossword book to Lotte to stow safely in her carry-on.

“How many of those do you think we’ve done since we met?” Tom asked, wrapping his arm around Charlotte’s shoulders as the train continued its speedy journey to Berlin.

“Probably hundreds,” she smiled, leaning into him. “Once I figured out they were a good way to stop you fidgeting when we traveled, or as you waited for interviews, or when you were just generally being annoying…” she squeaked as Tom leaned over to stick his tongue in her ear.

Shuddering at the weird sensation, Charlotte playfully smacked him on the arm.

“You are gross,” she said matter-of-factly.

Tom gently clasped her chin in one of his large hands and leaned in closely to murmur against her mouth.

“But you love me, don’t you, my best girl?”

Smiling in replete happiness, Charlotte nodded profusely.

“Do you love me enough to marry me, sweet?”

Her heart skipped. Her eyes widened. It was such an earnest, simple question. He said it with the nonchalant sound of someone asking about the weather. But she knew him well enough to see it written all over his handsome face – he was completely serious. Dumbfounded, she could hardly find
“Tom...?” she searched for the right response. It was all very sudden, and they’d been through so much...

“Oh, my love,” Tom smiled. “I’m not proposing this second. But I would like to know, that when I do, you’ll say yes.” He kissed her hand and moved some of his things aside as they were served lunch in their private area of the train car.

_He said ‘when’..._

Fighting through the tiny bit of anxiety as to Tom’s sudden question, Charlotte realized that there was only one reply she could give – ever.

“I love you more than enough to marry you. But keep your tongue out of my ear!”

The two decided to have a working lunch on the train, just to prepare for Tom’s schedule that evening after their arrival in the heart of Germany. There was a pre-taped interview for **BBC World**, and they needed to discuss certain strategies in regard to the request the network had emailed to Charlotte a few hours ago.

“I know it’s obvious that some people might want to hear about our ordeal,” Tom said quietly, looking to see if any other train passengers were nearby, “but is it really necessary to cover that in a movie-promotion interview?”

“I’ve let the producers of the show know that while we’re not averse to handling whatever they want to present you with, we’re not guaranteeing that you’ll answer absolutely everything,” Charlotte explained diplomatically.

“I appreciate that darling,” Tom ran his thumb absentmindedly along the knuckles of Charlotte’s left hand. “What do you think I should do?”

Even though it was technically still her job, Charlotte took great pleasure in being Tom’s personal assistant – helping him navigate the ins and outs of the industry. She had always felt special, knowing that he valued her opinions and asked her advice about certain aspects of his work. That was even before they’d become an item. The first time she realized he didn’t ask Jacqueline the kinds of things he asked her, she actually dared hope that there was something more between them – but it was so many years ago, and at the time, she’d settled for being his “best girl.” She would have taken anything she could get.

But now she got to have it all.

Had it come at a price? Yes. Had it been scary, the scenario that brought them together? Undoubtedly. But Charlotte Hamilton was learning that it was all worth it. Her Tom had become _her_ Tom.

“I think people would benefit from hearing not necessarily about the shooting, or what happened, but maybe about what you – and even I – experienced on the other side of it...what we’re still experiencing,” Charlotte mused thoughtfully. “You could encourage people who have suffered traumas to seek help, just like you did with me.”
Tom saw the positives in the situation – as he always did most things. But the way Lotte voiced it made it sound so important, so helpful. And he was in a position that allowed him a voice to reach a lot of people. Perhaps he could help make a difference?

“My good girl,” he squeezed her hand affectionately. “You’re so astute. Proud of you.”


Looking at their schedule on her phone, she did some quick calculations.

“So our ETA is around 4:30 – we’ll have a few hours before we head to the studio to do the taping. Anything in particular you want to do?” Charlotte pressed. She wanted to make sure Tom had some time to relax and mentally prepare himself for the next red carpet, which would happen tomorrow.

*We don’t want a repeat of what happened at Le Grand Rex,* she rationalized.

“Is it a new day, my love?” Tom asked cheekily.

She wasn’t sure what he was getting at.

“Uhm, yes?”

Tom leaned closely into Charlotte’s personal space, wiggling his eyebrows in a ridiculous manner that never failed to make her laugh. She was hoping he wouldn’t start in with the “Loki’d!” business, though – he’d finally gotten over that a few months ago and she couldn’t have been happier about it.

“Then I guess you’ll have to get your next surprise this afternoon when we arrive in Berlin, *meine liebe*…”

Charlotte broke into a huge grin, excitement bubbling within her at the prospect of the next surprise. She’d been so distracted getting them both out the door and onto the train this morning that she’d forgotten about surprises.

“Can you give me a hint?” she begged, practically crawling into Tom’s lap with giddiness. He kissed her fiercely a few times, pulling her against him for the briefest of moments before giving her the smallest bit to go on.

“Mac and Helene,” Tom whispered cryptically.

Lotte sat back a bit, confusion written plainly on her face. “My parents? Are they coming?” she asked seriously.

Tom favored Charlotte with a smile, but let her know her parents weren’t meeting them for a visit – at least not anytime soon.

“I can’t imagine what…” Lotte trailed off. “Give me another hint, Tom. Please?”

Pulling his iPad from his bag, Tom shook his head good-naturedly, trying his hardest to refuse his best girl something she really wanted. Queueing up the latest episodes of *Game of Thrones,* Tom encouraged Lotte to snuggle closer so they could while away their last handful of hours onboard the train.

Seeing her gorgeous little pout at not figuring out the surprise, Tom chuckled to himself. *What a lucky man I am.*
“You’ll know soon enough, my darling girl. I’ve made arrangements for us to have the surprise as soon as we arrive.”

As the episode started, Lotte reached out to hold Tom’s hand in her own, mind reeling in anticipation of where they were going.

“Would you be angry with me if I asked you to close your eyes, sweet girl?” Tom asked as the hired car whisked them away from the station. They were within the bustling city, and Charlotte was freshly abuzz with interest as to where their next surprise would take them.

Turning to give Tom a quizzical look in the back of the car, Charlotte thought a moment before agreeing to anything.

“I’ll close them if you give me one more hint,” she bartered cleverly with a wink.

Scooting her closer to his body, Tom acquiesced, leaning toward her ear to whisper the second clue as to their eventual whereabouts.

“San Diego.”

Charlotte’s eyes snapped closed, and Tom savored the way her long lashes brushed elegantly near the rosy skin of her cheeks.

“Thank you, darling. Although I can see from the smile on your face that you’re putting two and two together, aren’t you?”

She knew exactly where they were going – well, not exactly, as she’d never been there previously, but she was pretty sure Tom was taking her to the Berlin Zoo.

The clues “Mac and Helene” and “San Diego”, when combined, were a total giveaway. Charlotte found herself getting somewhat teary when she realized the care with which Tom had chosen this new surprise.

She’d told him, a few years ago, how her parents met. Mac had been visiting friends in California and decided on an impromptu trip to the San Diego Zoo, where Charlotte’s mother just so happened to be doing some visiting of her own – with Charlotte’s Aunt Grace. As oddly romantic stories go, her parents had literally run into one another – both running away from a mischievous gorilla that had decided to start throwing his own waste at the zoo patrons. Dodging and crashing into one another, it had been love at first sight for Mac and Helene.

They felt even more confident in the fates’ grand design when they both discovered they were UK born and bred. By the end of that day, as Helene often loved to recount to Charlotte through the years, Mac had taken her mother out to dinner and gifted her with a small plush giraffe from the zoo. Attached to its toy collar was his phone number and address in Leeds.

They were married within five months.

“How did you remember such a thing?” Charlotte squirmed in her seat, pleased and touched at Tom’s long-reaching memory. She was squinting and doing a poor job of hiding it – anxious to arrive at their destination.
“Because I saw the love in your eyes so clearly when you first told me that story,” Tom recollected, remembering the early days of Lotte’s assistantship and the sweet pleasure of getting to know her life.

On another occasion she’d divulged to Tom that the same giraffe gifted to her mother all those decades ago was passed down to her five-year-old self. The giraffe followed her to university and also when she made the move to London at the start of her position with Tom.

“I didn’t get the chance to sneak over and pack Topper for you, my love,” said Tom, referencing the stuffed animal that she kept in her flat. “But, I’ve arranged a special little treat that I think will make up for his absence. Open your eyes, Lotte.”

They’d arrived at the main entrance to the zoo. It was busy, but not overly so, and there were two designated guides waiting for them as they stepped out of the car. Grabbing Tom’s hand giddily, Charlotte waved to the pleasant-looking zookeepers, who held out their hands in welcome.

“Wilkommen, Mr. Hiddleston and Miss Hamilton,” said the first, named Jonas. He introduced himself as one of the lead zookeepers on the property. He then introduced his colleague Kiersta, who was holding a special little something that Charlotte knew was for her.

“Mr. Hiddleston said you have quite the affinity for giraffes, yes?” the young woman smiled, handing Charlotte the little stuffed animal. Charlotte thanked her, taking the tiny toy in hand and cradling it lovingly.

Giraffes never ceased, for her, to serve as a symbol of her parents’ love – and the fact they were gentle creatures didn’t hurt either. Lotte liked to think of herself in a similar fashion: loving and gentle.

“They’re going to give us a guided tour of the area, darling,” said Tom, smiling broadly at seeing Charlotte so thrilled with his surprise. “And then we have a stop to make.”

He took her hand as they were ushered through the main entryway and gave her a two-squeeze. Tom was just as excited as Lotte; he only hoped the last part of the surprise would come through.

A little under two hours later, they’d viewed the entirety of the complex, had asked some interesting questions regarding animal care and environment, and Charlotte was starting to wonder when, exactly, they’d get to see the giraffes. They’d viewed practically every other animal but her favorite; surely they wouldn’t give her a stuffed toy and talk about Topper without letting her see some of the gentle giants?

“Mr. Hiddleston,” remarked Jonas, “I think our time is near, so I’m just going to usher you and Miss Hamilton back through this exit here,” he pointed to a side-path along the main loop of the walkway. “We’ve already made your arrangements and are happy to accommodate.”

Tom said nothing but ushered Charlotte along behind the zookeepers, placing a tender hand on the small of her back as they made their way through a small security checkpoint and through to an indoor complex.

They were met with a couple of additional staff members: a veterinarian and what appeared to be a food specialist (Charlotte guessed because he was gathering a small bucket of what appeared to be carrots).
“Would you like to go feed the giraffes, sweet?” Tom whispered as Charlotte took in the controlled commotion of the room.

Embarrassingly for her, Charlotte started to cry just a bit. She was so overwhelmed with gratitude that the staff allowed her and Tom to do this. She was floored by the thoughtfulness of Tom’s gesture – he knew what this meant to her. She was excited. Being near the animals reminded her of Topper, which consequently reminded her of Mac and Helene. It was all so lovely and well thought-out.

“Oh, Lotte, I didn’t mean to make you cry,” Tom cooed as he saw her wipe away a few stray tears. “Is this okay?”

He seemed worried, second-guessing his plan.

“I’m wonderful, Tom,” she sniffed, gifting him with a genuine smile. “This is just such a kind, sweet gesture, I’m a little overwhelmed.”

The staff members made themselves busy momentarily so Tom and Charlotte could have their emotional moment.

“We’ve been through so much, my darling, and I love you and am so proud of you and I thank you for being with me. I want to surprise you and make you smile…I’ll keep saying it. I want to give you everything,” Tom murmured, kissing her cheeks.

Reaching up on tiptoes to grasp Tom in a hard hug, Charlotte thanked him profusely and whispered quietly in his ear so only he could hear.

“You are the most wonderful man, Thomas. I’ll do anything for you.”

Kissing her lips chastely, Tom grabbed her hands gently and led her back out to the grounds, following the gentleman with the carrots.

“Let’s go feed some giraffes, Charlotte. I think they’ll even let you pet them.”

She could barely hold in her squeal of delight.

Amazingly, no one bothered Lotte as she sat in the audience for the BBC World taping. She was scrolling through the zoo pictures on her iPhone, marveling at just how close they’d been to the four giraffes there. There were pictures of her sticking out carrots for the giraffes to eat – their long, black tongues hanging out to curl around the bright orange veggies.

There were pictures of Tom, practically half as tall as the animals, reaching out to stroke their soft spotted fur.

One of Charlotte’s favorite photos was of her and Tom, on either side of a “bowing” giraffe, them doing the same: Charlotte curtseying and Tom bowing back. The mirth in their eyes glowed through the screen.

In all, they’d spent another hour just with the giraffes, and Charlotte gleaned all sorts of new, interesting information about her favorite animal: that they require very little sleep, and no two fur-spot patterns are the same. She was even able to Facetime her mum briefly to show her what she was
“You tell that Thomas that he’s a man after my own heart,” Helene laughed. Tom had just waved to her as he fed more carrots to one of the baby giraffes.

_Now if we can just get through this television interview_, Charlotte mused as she turned off her phone and settled into her seat when the audience began clapping for the show intro.

When she’d been cleared by security to go backstage and gather Tom afterward, Charlotte was a little surprised by how tired he seemed, changing his clothes in the dressing room they’d assigned him.

“Oh, baby, I’m so sorry we stayed at the zoo so long.” Charlotte apologized, gathering some of his other things to speed up the exiting process. “We should have headed to the hotel for you to rest a bit before the interview.”

Tom shook his head and smiled, stepping into more comfortable jeans and adding a sweater over his dress shirt.

“Lotte, the zoo was perfect, darling. I wouldn’t have left a minute sooner. Seeing your face,” he paused to check his trousers for phone and wallet, “made my day. Your excitement thrills me.”

He signaled he was ready to leave, and Charlotte noticed he was still pale, still sleepy. It worried her, but she said nothing as they exited the building and made their way to the car.

Once situated in the vehicle, Charlotte ran a hand through Tom’s unruly hair and suggested some things for the evening. She didn’t want to talk about the interview unless he brought it up.

Sitting in the audience, it had been hard for her to watch him answer questions about what happened at the V&A. He’d done it – and done it well – and yet it had taken a mental toll.

“Let’s order room service, my love, and then I’m going to give you a rubdown so you can relax and sleep, yes?” Charlotte suggested.

Closing his eyes wearily and resting his head against the seat, Tom smiled wanly.

“My darling girl, that sounds wonderful. I’m afraid talking about those things in front of everyone has done me in,” he whispered. “I haven’t really had to relive a lot of it from my perspective.”

The car zoomed sleekly through the German streets, which were lit with a warm, yellow glow. They were headed to the Waldorf Astoria, which was only a short ride from the television studio.

“You did wonderfully, baby,” Lotte replied. She had taken to massaging the back of Tom’s neck and could feel the stiff tendons at his nape. After experiencing what she had, she could more easily see some of Tom’s own fight-or-flight responses now that she knew what to look for.

“Would you like some of my Seroxat?”

He shook his head, reaching out to grasp Charlotte’s tiny hand. He pressed it against his lips.

“No, love. All I need is your touch. Just get me up to the room and I know I’ll calm down.”
She nodded in the darkness of the interior, turning to use her free hand so as to keep rubbing Tom’s neck. He moaned softly at the blessed pressure, his head bowing to allow her greater access.

“Love you, my little Topper.”

“Love you too, Tom.”

Charlotte’s timing was indeed quite good: she’d managed to change clothes, order room service, and lay out comfortable sleep clothes for Tom while he showered the evening’s stress away.

He always worked hard during press tours, but she was quickly realizing that the added pressure of confronting what had happened to them – in front of the whole world, no less – was causing him extra problems. That’s why she ordered a light supper of grilled chicken and chef salad.

Anything too rich and his stomach will begin acting up.

While generally a happy, light-hearted individual, Tom had the little-known habit of internalizing stress to the point he had a hard time eating and digesting without discomfort. She was the same, and she knew any additional distress needed to be avoided – especially right now.

Pouring some bottled Voss into two stemware glasses, Charlotte was preparing to set the table in the living area of the suite when Tom padded out, drying his wavy hair and setting sleepy, smiling eyes on her outfit of tiny boxers and a soft black shirt.

“Why is it,” he whispered sweetly, coming over to where she stood doling out salad onto the china, “that you look so lovely every time I lay eyes on you?”

She could do nothing but blush. Lotte was still getting used to the lavish praise he constantly bestowed on her.

Draping his towel over one of the unused chairs at the table, Tom reached down to drain his glass of water in one go. His stomach promptly growled at the liquid intrusion.

“I’m hungrier than I thought,” he mused, sitting down.

As Charlotte moved to sit across from him, a frown crossed his face. She assumed he didn’t like what she’d ordered and was about to ask him if he wanted something else when he spoke first.

“Can you come sit in my lap and eat, Lotte?”

He was blushing like mad. It was as if a small child had just asked for something he wasn’t sure he was supposed to have.

She said nothing, merely smiled, and picked up her plate, cutlery, and glass before walking carefully around the edge of the table to deposit her wares next to his. Situating herself gingerly in his lap, Charlotte leaned back and turned herself sideways just a bit so she could kiss Tom’s temple and run a hand through his hair.

“You were too far away over there,” he pouted adorably. “I got scared tonight talking about the
shooting and I just needed you, Lotte. I always need to feel that you’re with me and we’re okay. I could have lost you.” He pressed his forehead into hers and she could see he was warring with his mind again.

Transferring her knife and fork to his plate, she cut a generous piece of the chicken and fed it to him.

“You need to eat, baby,” she urged. “Let’s get some full bellies and then we can go read in bed. How does that sound, hmm?”

He chewed slowly, acknowledging that she had a good plan. She fed him a few more bites until she was sure he’d continue eating, and then resumed attacking her own salad.

Tom was mid-bite when he suddenly looked confused.

“I don’t think I remembered to pack any books, Lotte,” he said dejectedly.

They were both bookworms and she’d never known him to forget reading material when they took a trip. Chewing thoughtfully, Lotte smiled, swallowed, and took a sip of water.

“I may have a little surprise of my own, then,” she teased as Tom finished his salad. “Luke forwarded me some reading material before we left…”

Tom thought for a second, his eyes brightening. Reading material from Luke could only mean one thing…

“Script?” he asked.

Charlotte nodded, happy to see that Tom was distracted from his earlier thoughts.

“I’ll tell you who it’s from as soon as you clean your plate, my love.”

The prospect filled Tom with a bit of vigor, and he kissed her cheek energetically before tucking into the last of his chicken.

Several minutes later, Tom had finished his plate and was looking at Lotte expectantly. She just smirked, pretending not to know what he was after. Her own plate sat empty on the table, too.

“Go into the bedroom and get yourself ready for bed, Thomas,” she instructed cheekily. "I’ll bring it in to you.”

Before he moved, he wrapped strong arms around her waist and held her tightly to him without a chance for escape.

“You promised to tell me who it’s from!” he growled, nipping gently at her ear.

“Christopher Nolan.”

She barely stood up before he was tearing out of the living area toward the bedroom, whooping with elation. When she retrieved the script from her bag moments later, she walked into the bedroom to find Tom tucked in and propped against the headboard, eyeing her expectantly.

“I thought you were tired,” Lotte teased, tossing the script gently onto the bed.

Tom held it reverently in his hands, skimming the document greedily, flipping through the myriad pages.
“I’m assuming I’m going to need to hold off on that massage, then?”

She knew he would try to read the entire thing through the night; it was already almost midnight.

He looked up from the freshly printed pages, regarded Lotte thoughtfully, and then placed the script, plus his glasses, on the nightstand beside him.

_This isn’t like him_, she thought. _Work is his life._

As if he’d read her mind, Tom peeled back the covers on Charlotte’s side of the bed and beckoned her to join him.

“You’re my life now, my darling girl. This,” he beckoned to the discarded script, “can wait until tomorrow.”

She hesitated for a moment but still asked, “Are you sure, Tom? I don’t mind.”

Charlotte moved around the room, plugging her mobile in and letting her hair down before moving to the bathroom to complete her evening ablutions. When she came out of the bathroom, ready for bed, she found him standing near the door in front of her.

He held out a hand to her, grasping her fingers tightly in his own. He led her silently to their shared bed. Lights were extinguished and both settled comfortably against one another without saying much at all.

After a few quietly breathed “I love yous”, Tom and Charlotte kissed one another to sleep, as they’d learned to do so many nights ago. Only this time, it was Charlotte who eased Tom into a peaceful slumber.
Berlin: Part II

Chapter Summary

Tom and Charlotte's stay in Berlin continues, with considerable apprehension.

Chapter Notes

Hi lovelies…here's some more feels and fluff with a dash of smut thrown in. I feel like I'm starting to put poor Tom through the wringer. Good thing he's got Charlotte and Dr. R.

Talk to me!

“You both look well rested,” Dr. Rochester smiled favourably.

It may have been inappropriate, or even lazy, of Tom and Charlotte to Facetime with their therapist from their king bed in the Waldorf, but they’d wanted a lie-in and could only garner an appointment from the good doctor late in the morning.

Blushing slightly at Dr. Rochester’s observation, Charlotte smiled and nodded her head.

“We needed a long sleep. Yesterday was a whirlwind of travel and last evening presented us with a little bit of difficulty,” she looked at Tom from her place curled against him, both of them propped up on pillows.

“Tell me more about that, please, Tom,” said the therapist.

Tom didn’t hesitate at all. If he was embarrassed at his recent psychological changes, he was willing to push through the chagrin to seek the help he needed.

“I was finally asked about the shooting and the aftermath,” he began.

“Oh? By whom?” asked Dr. Rochester.

“The host of Berlin’s BBC World program,” he smiled a bit sadly. “In front of a live studio audience.”

Concern immediately flooded Rochester’s face, but Charlotte picked up the conversation, curling more tightly against Tom as she did so.

“We were given prior notice, as well as the option for Tom not to answer anything he felt uncomfortable with,” she explained. “We talked about it, and he elected to broach the subject delicately – with the idea that talking about our shared mental experiences after the ordeal would possibly help others suffering from forms of PTSD to seek help, just as we did.”

Nodding, Dr. Rochester asked Tom another question.
“And while you were speaking about these things, my goodness…on live television…did you find yourself having any flashbacks or moments of intense anxiety?”

With his free arm around her, Tom gathered Charlotte even closer as he responded. She reached up and ran a hand soothingly through his slightly mussed curls.

“I didn’t have any flashbacks, no,” he breathed. “But my body sort of went haywire internally as I explained what we’d gone through. I felt myself starting to sweat a little, and my stomach of course was rolling with nausea, and I figured people could see my heart thumping out of my chest.”

Nodding once more, Dr. Rochester affirmed what Charlotte already knew.

“So, a standard panic attack which you were able to keep at bay in front of a few hundred people on camera, then? That’s still pretty impressive,” she smiled, trying to lighten the moment a little.

“My acting training sort of helped me through that one,” Tom reasoned calmly. “I’m sometimes able to compartmentalize and just focus on getting through something, or I just put on a mask.”

Charlotte had never known Tom to hide himself in this way, as he so often spoke about acting as the art of truth telling. It surprised her; he was not someone good at lying or deceiving. She broke out of her temporary reverie as the session continued.

“Was the experience better, worse, or the same as your evening at Le Grand Rex?” probed Dr. Rochester.

Thinking for a moment, Tom bit his lip in an effort to answer the question as accurately as possible.

“It was better because I wasn’t surrounded by the chaos of a crowd – and we were inside a secure environment. But it was worse because I was asked specifically to relive some of the minutes from that evening.” His voice faltered for a moment before he continued. “And then I immediately think of Charlotte. It’s like I drown in worry about all the what-ifs, all the could-have-happened scenarios. I’m thinking about it more and more,” he whispered, looking away from the iPad screen to stare fearfully into Charlotte’s sleepy gray eyes.

She craned her neck up to place a firm kiss against his temple as he wiped a stray tear from his cheek, his breathing suddenly elevated.

“And you both have an event this evening, yes?” asked Dr. Rochester.

Charlotte nodded, smiling, to try and stay calm and positive for Tom.

“Yes. There’s another red carpet and premiere tonight, followed by a dinner.”

Dr. Rochester could very easily see all the color draining from Tom’s face at the prospect of the evening’s activities.

“Tom, tell me about how you and Charlotte are going to handle this evening, okay? I assume you two have some plans in place to make things go as smoothly as possible?”

He smiled wanly, but then looked at Charlotte, who nodded encouragingly for him to explain. Her right hand was still stroking lovingly through his hair. Tom paused for a moment and concentrated on the feeling of her little fingers rubbing his scalp, allowing himself to focus on nothing but her presence. Taking a deep breath, he answered the question.

“My darling girl has agreed to walk the carpet hand in hand with me tonight, and we’re going to
draw strength from one another,” he began. “I’m also going to skip signing autographs and posing for pictures with fans in the crowd, because that seems to be a trigger for me right now.”

Dr. Rochester visibly scribbled a few notes on her pad. She looked at Tom and Charlotte expectantly, so he continued.

“The premiere will be the easy part because I get to sit in the audience with Lotte and I’m not required to do much, but I’m concerned that people inside might ask me about the BBC World interview, as it’s to be shown later this evening before the premiere. I don’t really want to be asked anything else about what was said there.”

“Then don’t answer them,” the therapist said matter-of-factly. “You’ve given your statement and offered an adequate response when asked previously. You don’t owe anyone anything else.”

Tom ruminated about this idea for a moment, nodding, but Charlotte could tell he was displeased with the concept. She piped in.

“I agree with you, Doctor, and I know that Tom does too,” she paused to give his hand a two-squeeze, “but I think maybe he feels that ignoring peoples’ questions, in addition to not doing any photos or signings tonight, is rude of him.”

It was no secret to Charlotte that Tom didn’t want to disappoint people, and he was having a hard time creating these new boundaries – even if they were in service of his well being.

“Tom,” Dr. Rochester said authoritatively.

He looked up as his eyes widened slightly, hearing the tact in her tone.

“The only person I want you to think of right now – until we make some progress – is you. And Charlotte, of course, but specifically you. If you upset people tonight by not being your normal gregarious, outgoing self, then so be it. The goal is to get through the evening, maintain your sanity, and repress your body’s urge to go into fight-or-flight mode. Anything else good that comes of it will just be a bonus.”

He didn’t really know what to say. She hadn’t left him much room to argue.

“I would also suggest that if you can, avoid the dinner and any after-parties for the time being,” Dr. Rochester suggested. The frowns on her patients’ faces hinted that this probably wasn’t feasible.

“Trust me when I say that we’ve tried to wiggle out of those things, Dr. Rochester, but there are some people we need to see tonight and we don’t want to offend certain key players in the business. We’ll try and make quick work of it,” Charlotte offered.

“Do you feel that you need to go on medication, Tom?” the older woman questioned.

Tom shook his head adamantly, head bowing ever so slightly.

Dr. Rochester took this moment to look solely at Charlotte, who was giving her a somewhat covert “not yet” look.

“I’m not…averse to it,” he said quietly, “but I don’t know that I’ve reached that level of crisis yet. I just…aside from the social aspect of things frightening me now, my main concern is still Charlotte. I’m more and more painfully aware of when we’re apart – even if it’s just in the next room. I told her last night that I don’t want to be away from her because I’m so desperately in love with her. And when I think that we almost didn’t get together – or that she could have been killed…or that I could
have been killed…” he trailed off.

Dr. Rochester said nothing but shook her head understandingly as she continued to write copious notes.

“Would you say that the majority of your anxiety has transferred from thinking about the actual shooting to worrying about losing Charlotte?”

Lotte had never seen Tom nod so quickly, so earnestly. Tears were shining in his eyes again.

“I think these fears are valid, Tom, I definitely do,” the doctor agreed. “And relatively speaking, the trauma you’ve both suffered is still immensely new. Although Lotte appears to be functioning much better with the Seroxat, doesn’t she?”

Tom smiled slightly and touched Charlotte’s face, fixing her with his proud gaze.

“She’s remarkable. Is doing so well and has adjusted very quickly – press tours are hard to begin with but she’s grit her teeth and is being my absolute angel, my godsend.”

“Well, as I said to her the other night when you two were in Paris, things have worked out for a reason, it seems: she’s making some wonderful strides and is now able to help you in your hour of need. I don’t want this to sound morbid, but it’s a beautiful thing to see the both of you struggling through together. That will make the healing process work faster, and I guarantee you’ll both come out of the experience much stronger – individually and as a couple.”

Charlotte placed a small, sweet kiss on Tom’s lips at the praise they’d been given. The sweetness of the gesture touched Dr. Rochester’s heart.

“That’s what I like to see,” she smiled. “You’re certainly approaching this as a shared effort. And Tom, if you think you can avoid medication and can work your way through this solely with Charlotte’s help, I’m all for it. But you don’t want to get yourself in over your head to the point where all of a sudden you can’t function. Because as I can see from your itinerary, this is a long press tour, and you’re far from home and any comfort zone you’ve established.”

Pressing Charlotte to him and putting her head against his chest, he shook his head in dissent. “This woman is my home, my comfort zone,” Tom whispered sincerely. “Which is why I absolutely cannot lose her.”

It took the good doctor another half an hour via Facetime to calm Tom back down, once he began thinking about what Charlotte’s loss would do to his mind, his heart, and his soul.

He’d asked Lotte to shower with him after they’d signed off with Dr. Rochester, and after they’d eaten a leisurely brunch. At first, Charlotte had to force Tom to eat, saying he needed his energy for what his body would be going through later in the evening. It would be hours before they could eat a proper meal again – what with the stylists, makeup artists, and hairdressers coming to the suite for the lengthy preparation process.

And who even knows if he’ll be in any state to eat by the time we make it to the dinner, she mused to herself.

“Of course, baby. Let me just finish this email to my parents,” Charlotte smiled from the foot of the
bed. She was attaching some pictures of their zoo adventures so that Mac and Helene could see what a rare treat it had been to interact with the giraffes up close.

Tossing her mobile to the bed when her email sent, Charlotte held out both hands to Tom’s reclining form and gently pulled him up toward her standing position. He immediately latched onto her, arms going around her waist and pulling her flush against him.

“Please don’t ever leave me, my love,” he whispered as he stared into her eyes. He looked to be on the verge of another meltdown. Charlotte pressed a series of small kisses to Tom’s mouth, working her way across his left cheek to his ear.

“I’m not going anywhere, Tom. We’re going to be fine, you know that?” she reassured softly in his ear.

“I think I might need you to keep telling me that for awhile, sweet, especially tonight,” he murmured, somewhat embarrassed.

Pulling away slightly so as to lead him into the huge marble bathroom, Charlotte reassured him as best she could.

“I will say it as much as you need to hear it, baby. I’m going to be right with you all night, and if things get bad, we leave. Simple as that.”

He nodded, still looking slightly worried, but then determinedly set his jaw when Lotte turned on the shower and began fiddling with the temperature. As she worked to find the perfect warmth, Tom purposefully shucked off his pajama pants and shirt and nuzzled her from behind, slipping fingertips into the waistband of her little boxers to slide them down her legs, panties in tow.

“May I undress you?” he asked reverently.

Feeling that the water was pleasantly warm and steaming up the bathroom, Charlotte turned around and placed a chaste kiss on Tom’s lips, nodding sweetly at his question. She marveled at the change wrought in him from just two days ago – he had been insatiable and fueled by passion during their last few hours in Paris. Now, she could still sense the passion, but he was keeping it at bay. A desperate love seemed to replace it.

Lotte leisurely raised her arms so he could slip her shirt over her head, and as soon as she was completely unclothed he pressed his own naked flesh against hers, gathering her in his arms and walking her backwards to the edge of the shower. Dipping her in his arms ever so slightly, Tom kissed her forehead with hooded eyes, then proceeded to usher her into the streams of hot water that awaited them.

“May I undress you?” he asked reverently.

He looked so fucking gorgeous, she thought, as he stood under the showerhead and wet his thick hair, tilting his head back so the spray hit his face and dripped down his chest. It made Lotte want to cry, that someone this handsome – this beautiful – was at the same time such a wonderful, caring person who had taken immaculate care of her in more ways than one.

Reaching a hand out to place over his pectoral muscle, feeling his heartbeat, Charlotte stepped closer so that droplets of water began to fleck her hair, face, and body. Tom peered down from his considerable height and his eyes went fuzzy momentarily, watching two little beads of water that had collected on her full lower lip. When he could resist no longer, he grabbed her suddenly, hauling her under the spray with him and kissing her heartily.

They broke apart precious seconds later, both panting, caressing one another’s faces until Charlotte
realized something.

“Do you know, baby, that nearly every time we bathe together, you take care of me?” she asked, specifically referencing the night Tom had washed blood from her body and the few times he’d pleasured her in the steamy heat of the shower.

He nodded, almost shyly.

Charlotte was beginning to see this different side of him – he was less sure of himself, worried.

“Why so shy, my love?” she asked. As she spoke, she gathered some of his shampoo in her hands and began to lather, standing on tiptoes as she ran soapy hands through his now-dark locks. His eyes closed on contact; she swore he was making a purring growl sound in his throat.

“Oh, darling…that feels divine,” he moaned. His own hands pulled her closer against him as she worked, feeling her warm flesh cleave to his. “I…I know this is silly but…I can’t help feeling that I’m going to scare you off with this new problem I’m having. That my needing all this attention from you and reassurance will drive you away…” he trailed off.

She gently tilted his head backward so the suds began to rinse from his hair. Not knowing whether to start with humor or seriousness, Lotte tried for levity.

“I’ve been your PA for almost five years, Tom. You’ve always needed attention and reassurance,” she smiled, rubbing a thumb lovingly against his face as her other hand slicked the last of the shampoo out of his hair.

The levity didn’t work.

“Yes but darling, it’s different now. And I know you know it is,” he spoke earnestly, eyes looking sad as he pulled her back into the cradle of his chest. “Now that we’re…together, and I have your love and I’ve known your touch and your taste and we’ve been completely vulnerable together…I want even more of your attention. And reassurances from you used to be ‘of course that tie looks fine with that suit’…now I’m asking you to reassure me that you won’t leave and that you’ll be with me in case I have a massive upheaval when we’re out in public. It’s, well, I’m embarrassed.”

Lotte covertly began soaping Tom’s neck, back, and shoulders, willing away this frantic episode with massaging touches to his muscles.

“There’s no need to be, my sweet man,” she purred, working soapy hands down the lengths of his arms in front of her. “You’ve seen me vomit, pass out, cry, and you’ve gone head to head with my self-esteem issues. You’ve kissed my bruises. And let’s be honest – I’m only doing moderately well because I’m on medication. I will tell you every five minutes if I have to that we are in this together.”

He tried to continue but stopped short as Lotte soaped down his chest and abdomen, rubbing wide, soapy circles into his skin. His eyes fluttered closed at the sensation of her massaging hands.

“Feel good, baby?” Charlotte asked quietly. She was biting her lip to keep from moaning at the erotic sight of him: head thrown back in pleasure, body covered in a slick mixture of water rivulets and soap bubbles.

She wanted to wipe the fear from his face and mind any way she could.

“Mm hmm,” was all he could get out before she dropped smoothly to her knees, working her hands along his backside, down his hips and around those thick, strong runner’s thighs.
He was very pleased with her, she could see.

“Do you want to relax, Tom?” she continued her ministrations, soaping his legs before surprising him with an open-mouthed kiss to the tip of his now-leaking cock. He gasped quietly, a sound that contained a breathy “yes” at the end of it.

Maneuvering backwards on her knees just a bit, Charlotte murmured her next instructions.

“Back against the wall, baby. Put your hands in my hair,” she commanded lowly, and when he lovingly threaded those long fingers into her wavy tresses, pressing himself against the wet marble, she sighed in happiness before wasting no time tracing slippery fingers along his rigid length.

If his expression was anything to go on, Charlotte assumed that Tom was currently not too worried about things that daunted him. His mouth was hanging open, lips tantalizingly parted, and his eyes were closed beneath furrowed brows as he thrust rhythmically into her tiny hands. Just as he was establishing a pace that had moans pouring forth from his sinful mouth, Charlotte took her hands away and rinsed him off, earning her a surprised, somewhat abashed look as he removed his hands from her.

She grabbed his wrists and encouraged him to resume his place, staring up at him with doe eyes before asking, “would you like to come in my mouth?”

He didn’t even get the chance to answer before she’d taken his cock into her warm mouth, laving at the veiny underside near his crown. What she couldn’t fit into her mouth she stroked lovingly – firmly, with a tiny, enclosed fist.

“God…yes, Lotte,” he breathed pleasurably. “Yes, my darling…”

She did nothing but keep a desirable pace, allowing him to control the speed and depth with which he thrust. She said nothing about his fingers tightening in her hair, or about his lean hips snapping closely to her face. Her comfort didn’t matter, she thought; this was about what Tom needed.

When she began to moan around him, feeling wet heat pool between her thighs, he opened his eyes to see her staring up at him, cock slipping in and out of her delectable mouth.

Just five seconds of Tom staring into her beautiful gray depths had him shuddering violently as hot spurts of his seed hit the back of her throat. Seeing her swallow his offering only prolonged his pleasure.

Barely recovered, he hauled Lotte into his arms, kissing her wildly and moaning a heartfelt string of “I love you” and “such an amazingly good girl” and “so good to me” before she sheepishly reminded him that she needed to shower, too.

He refused to let her do it herself, not after what she’d just done for him.

“Here we go, baby. Almost there. Keep hold of my hands, right, and we’re going to do some of that breathing we like, okay?”

They were a few blocks out from the CineStar Potsdamer Platz, and Charlotte knew the few moments before they got out of the car were integral to Tom’s success in getting through the red carpet.
He nodded, paling more and more each second, as she instructed him to breathe in through his nose and back out through his mouth, doing it with him every step of the way.

She broke off right as the car came into view of the venue, seeing hundreds of people awaiting their arrival. Taking Tom’s face in her hands as the car slowed, she crowded him: moving to touch knees with him as they sat in the back and bringing her face as close to his as possible. She whispered very hypnotically against his mouth, moving one of her hands to stroke through his hair.

“I’m right with you all night, my love,” she reminded, staring into his sapphire eyes. “We just have a short walk down the carpet, don’t we?”

He nodded, closing his eyes as panic flashed in them.

“No, no, no, baby,” Charlotte reassured, pecking him on the lips forcefully. “Keep breathing just like you were…. yes…we can wait a few moments if we need to,” she nodded at the driver, who was awaiting their instructions as the car came to a stop. The windows of the car were tinted; there was no danger of anyone being able to see in.

“I feel a little sick,” Tom spoke uncharacteristically softly, eyes still closed.

Charlotte wasted no time. She deftly unknotted his tie and unfastened the first two buttons of his dress shirt, moving him close to one of the air vents situated in the back of the BMW. Rummaging expertly through her bag, she pulled out a plastic baggie with a wet cloth soaked in ice. The first touch to Tom’s cheeks and the back of his neck had him babbling his relief and surprise in the same measure.

“Oh my sweet, thank you…how did you –”

Lotte kissed his cheek, moving the ice-cold flannel along his heated skin again as she answered.

“Mum got motion sickness and panic attacks a lot when I was young. She always carried something like this in her bag if she knew she was going to be in a tough situation. I remembered it last-minute before we left the hotel.”

He smiled genuinely, the nausea slowly abating with the combination of cool vehicle air and frigid cloth swiping along his skin.

"Take your time, baby. They'll all wait for us," she soothed.

After collecting himself for a few moments, Tom nodded to Lotte that he was feeling slightly better.

“We’re going to take a deep breath, and then we’re going to book it down that godforsaken carpet, okay sweetheart?” Charlotte instructed. She began to fix his clothing as he resumed some more deep breaths for her. “And if you don’t mind me asking like a spoiled, rotten child,” she giggled, “can you maybe give me a hint…you teased another little surprise earlier when we were getting ready.”

Of course she was curious to know more about the next surprise Tom had planned; but for right now, she wanted to distract him long enough to get him out of the car and into the building away from the mob scene just outside the car doors.

Leaning forward as Tom took his final deep breaths, Charlotte said a quick “Danke schoen,” thanking the driver, and signaling that they were preparing to exit. He nodded pleasantly and waved them off.
She resumed her attentions toward Tom, who had suddenly put on his best acting veneer and was doing his best to exude calm professionalism. If she hadn’t known any better, Lotte would’ve sworn there was nothing wrong.

Tom opened his car door, signaling for her to wait so he could get hers, and she smiled in agreement.

*Even in the throes of panic and stress he’s still my sweet gentleman.*

Her door opened almost immediately, and a graceful arm beckoned her out of the car and into a world saturated by flashes, yelling, and the smell of idling cars and chilly nighttime air. Clasping her hand tightly in the crook of Tom’s elbow, Charlotte gracefully slid a leg out of the passenger side of the car – this was her official debut as Tom’s girlfriend, after all – to show the generous amount of calf and lower thigh the slit in her gown afforded.

Exiting the vehicle and stretching to her stunning height, Charlotte felt Tom stiffen slightly at the roar of the crowd and the blinding light from hundreds of cameras going off in their direction.

Leaning in to kiss his cheek affectionately, she masked the whisper in his ear so the crowd couldn’t steal their private moment.

“Look at me as we walk, love. Tell me about my surprise!” she laughed sweetly, and her happiness at his nearness was infectious – he could do nothing but smile brightly in response, whispering a soft “thank you” against her temple before they turned to face the masses.

Grasping her hand tightly, Tom kept his eyes on Lotte, but was every so often able to look to either side of their path and give a charming smile to the fans and members of the press who’d congregated.

Tom realized it didn’t matter if he needed to keep constant eye contact with Charlotte; everyone would just assume they were madly in love and couldn’t bear to look away from one another.

*And that’s the truth,* he thought pleasantly to himself.

“Your next surprise might be a little late for us tonight,” he murmured as they took careful steps toward the venue. “It’s just a little delivery that I hope we might be able to enjoy together before we leave for *bellissima Roma,*” he quipped in seductively soft Italian.

Charlotte’s heart skipped a beat at his sensual grin, and she felt herself relax as Tom’s strides became less harried. He merely walked along with her, focusing all his energy on his beautiful girl.

“I’m so sorry I haven’t yet told you how stunning you look, lovely,” he murmured. “I used to have to bite my tongue when we went places, you and I.”

She blushed quite prettily at that remark, casting her eyes down to the forest green swaths of fabric pooling at her feet.

“Give me those captivatingly gray eyes, Lotte,” he spoke again, turning just once to smile at more well-wishers in the crowded street to their right.

Charlotte looked ahead a bit, gauging they were over halfway through the carpet and getting nearer to the building. She breathed a small sigh in relief, moving her line of sight once more so that Tom was her entire focus. He explained his earlier comment.

“I had to bite my tongue because I was always afraid I’d make a complete arse of myself, telling my best girl how I wanted to kiss her and beg her for the chance to let me love her.”
“Oh, baby,” Lotte smiled, touched at his confession. Turning slightly inward and slowing their approach, she stopped to kiss him – in front of everyone – and run her hands through his hair. A great cheer went up all around them, and the photographers were shouting for the glamorous couple to keep kissing. Charlotte broke the kiss first, smiling shyly and grasping both of Tom’s hands in her own for a two-squeeze.

“Now you can kiss me and love me whenever you like,” she winked, leaning into him conspiratorially.

“I’m going to kiss you and love you when you get your next surprise in a few hours,” Tom purred.

Giving her another quick peck on the cheek, they resumed their sojourn toward the CineStar. Charlotte felt a mixture of relief in her gut and a thrill of excitement in her heart at what would await her back at the Waldorf Astoria. Tom was doing so well, and she wanted the night to go smoothly for him so that they could really enjoy one another.

_His distress is my distress_, she thought seriously.

Tom opened his mouth to continue teasing Lotte about the next little “gift” when suddenly there were several loud, male shouts.

_“Nein! NEIN! HALT!”_

They both turned simultaneously toward the noise to see a handful of security guards trying unsuccessfully to hold back a small group of Tom’s fans who were swiftly breaching the barrier. As Charlotte tried to pull Tom away in the split-second she had to react, four of them were on him: pulling his clothes, shoving cameras, photos, and posters in his face. Their screams and cries of elation were deafening, terrifying in their adulation.

Tom, white as snow, went down without even the smallest fight.
Berlin: Part III

Chapter Summary

Tom and Charlotte's time in Berlin, thankfully, comes to a close.

Chapter Notes

Here we are, my lovelies. A lot of feels in this chapter (and as usual, a bit of smut). I saw Crimson Peak earlier today so I'm in full Tom Hiddleston obsession mode. Whew.

Thanks for reading; thanks for the kudos. Most of all - thanks for talking to me! Love you.

She spoke softly and politely, but there was no mistaking Charlotte’s irate tone, especially not when directed at the head of security for CineStar’s public events.

“This is an absolute travesty,” she hissed quietly, “An oversight such as this should never have happened – and we were reassured completely that all precautions had been taken.”

“Yes ma’am,” he apologized, attempting to right the situation. Charlotte interrupted him before he could continue.

“I even went so far as to have words, personally, with the venue staff and your own firm. And now we have to make our excuses and disappoint a lot of people, because my client is in no right state to work after what’s gone down, here!”

The man’s eyes widened as Charlotte’s voice reached a crescendo amid the din of the still-chaotic crowd outside Potsdamer Platz. Sweeping the long material of her gown into her left hand, Lotte held out her right palm for the gentleman to shake. He stared at her, nonplussed, but took her hand and shook it. Just as he was about to launch into another litany of apologies and rectifications, she stood toe to toe with him and spat her last words of the evening.

“You’ll be hearing from our legal team. Guten abend.”

All he could do was murmur a faint reply in English as he watched her fling open the door of the waiting car.

“Good evening, ma’am.”

“Drink this, baby. You need to drink it all down with the pill, okay?” Tom nodded exhaustedly from his perch in the backseat of the BMW, taking the dose of Seroxat Charlotte proffered, along with the small bottle of water she’d sent someone to get only minutes ago.
Watching him throw back the capsule and begin to take long pulls of the liquid, Charlotte reached over and gently placed her palm on his knee, using her other hand to lightly run fingers through his scalp. He was still white as a sheet, nearly matching the dress shirt she’d unbuttoned – again – once they’d gotten him to the car. His hair was mussed, and the stitching on one shoulder of his suit jacket was torn in three places.

In all the confusion, a fan had even managed to slice a lengthy, superficial cut along his right cheekbone.

Lotte’s heart broke for him.

This isn’t what’s supposed to happen, she mused sadly.

Sadness once more gave way to immense anger as Charlotte let the earlier pandemonium replay in her head while Tom leaned his head back and took several deep breaths. The fans had practically gotten him onto the ground, and it took Charlotte and the severely unprepared security guards nearly five minutes to get all of the overzealous people away from Tom so they could whisk him back to the car.

Charlotte hadn’t been sure whether he was going to vomit or stop breathing altogether, and for a moment her own panic threatened to rear its ugly head.

Stop it! You have to be strong for him right now, she scolded herself internally. He needs you.

While he neither vomited nor stopped breathing, he shook like a leaf, crying and raging as she settled him quickly into the back of the waiting car. He flashed back and forth between feeling indignant at the fans’ lack of manners and panicking as he struggled to separate what had happened moments ago with what had originally happened at the V&A.

Charlotte’s quick thinking had her fumbling in her evening bag – the same one that carried the blessedly cool cloth from earlier – for her pill bottle. She knew without even thinking that half a dose would do little to no good in Tom’s significantly larger body. She was so tiny that a half always did the trick; with him, it would take a bit more.

Pressing lips to his clammy face, Charlotte begged him to remain calm for just a moment more, so she could send someone for a bottle of water. Tom did nothing but squeeze his eyes closed, his labored breathing continuing. She’d taken precious seconds that couldn’t be wasted to exit the car, wait for the water, and snag the security guard who was headed furtively toward her. Her fury was barely concealed by the demure set of her shoulders and the beauty of her clothing and understated jewels.

Later, Charlotte wouldn’t even remember the exchange with the apologetic gentleman; everything was a blur from the moment she left Tom in the car to the time she returned to him to administer the Seroxat. As soon as he swallowed the remaining water, she had to level with him. Gathering his trembling face in her hands, Lotte forced his eyes up to hers as the driver slowly pulled away from the CineStar to return them to their hotel.

“Tom, baby, we’re going to leave,” she whispered slowly.

His response shocked her: he lurched forward against her and began babbling, eyes darting everywhere but her face.

“I can’t…I absolutely can’t Lotte you know this we have the premiere and then the dinner isn’t negotiable there are people I need to speak with and maybe later –”
The only way to cut him off was to kiss him; she did so very forcefully, threading one hand in his hair and another against the back of his neck to try and restrain him. Tom only fought her for a few seconds before she felt him melt against her mouth.

“Mmm,” he murmured sadly, hands curling around her shoulders so he could continue to kiss her back. Still he trembled. Still he sniffled as a few more tears escaped his eyes.

Part of Lotte wanted to continue speaking to him, to rationalize her decision, but she knew he would only continue to fight her, to try and convince her that he needed to return to Potsdamer Platz. It didn’t matter; their car was already leaving. So on she went, kissing and gently nipping at his now-swollen lips. Every once in awhile she swiped her tongue out gently to trace the seam of his mouth. He only clutched at her tighter.

Halfway through the back entrance to the Waldorf Astoria, and up the lift to their suite, the medicine began to take effect. Tom’s eyelids became noticeably heavy, and he seemed to come back to himself after being either frantic or barely breathing. He hugged Charlotte tightly as they sped upward toward their floor.

“I should have stayed,” he murmured quietly, almost too softly for Lotte to hear.

“You can blame that on me, then,” she spoke unapologetically, “I had to make a decision and I chose to get you out of there.”

The fact that Tom had her tightly in his arms, and that she was subtly rocking him back and forth, belied the slight ice in her tone. She’d be damned if he beat himself up about this. How dare those fans, how dare the security staff allow this to happen!

“Thank you for the pill, darling,” he breathed gruffly. His voice was rough, hoarse from all the deep gasping breaths he’d taken earlier. She could almost hear more tears threatening just from the sounds he was making.

“You feeling it, my love?”

She felt him nod against her head and continued her soothing rocking motion.

“I want to look at your suit jacket when we get into the suite, baby. I can probably sew that shoulder part up before we pack it,” said Charlotte.

The lift doors opened as a faint “ding” echoed through the quiet space. Charlotte pulled away from Tom but kept hold of his hand to lead him down the hallway. She didn’t miss how he looked anxiously down both sides of the hallway corridor before following after her. It seemed as if he now expected to be ambushed everywhere.

Changing the tone of her voice to a sweet lull, Charlotte walked backward a bit so Tom could focus on her as they headed back to the room.

“My sweet man,” she purred, smiling at him with immense love. “Let’s get you out of those clothes and into the tub. What would you like for dinner, Tom? I know you mightn’t feel like eating right now but let’s at least try…” she trailed off as she slipped her key card into the slot of the suite door.

Hearing the soft beep of the card reader and feeling the almost imperceptible click of the lock disengaging, Charlotte pushed forward into the suite, careful not to catch her heels on the lengthy material of her gown, when she was unceremoniously pushed forward and steered against the cream wallpaper of the entryway.
Slamming and locking the door with a free hand, Tom hovered over her, eyes pained and frenzied, and pulled her down onto the lush carpeted flooring so she laid spread out amid billowing fabric before him.

“T-Tom,” she stammered, unsure of what had just happened, “what are you d–”

He gave her no time to finish, sinking to his knees and groaning painfully as he shoved the yards of fabric up Charlotte’s legs, exposing her satiny flesh to him.

She tried once more to ask him what was going on.

“Baby, are you okay?”

Worried as she was, peering at him from her propped up position on her elbows, Lotte had no extra time to question Tom as he unceremoniously pulled the material of her panties to the side and closed his mouth over her, sliding his tongue over her flesh as if he wanted to devour her.

“Oh god, Tom…what are you…” she trailed off, head hitting the floor. Her hands flew to his hair, warring with whether to pull him away from her or hold him closer against her rapidly dampening flesh.

Pressing fingertips into her hips, Tom lapped ferociously at Charlotte’s clt, moaning and sighing intimately as he fed upon her.

“Need you…” he whispered hoarsely as he closed his lips around the little jewel of flesh that was hardening and protruding against his tongue.

Charlotte’s baser instincts won out, and she felt her hands clutching tightly in Tom’s long auburn hair, hips bucking against his mouth as he laved at her pussy savagely, his eyes burning into her with a fearful need she’d never seen before.

To her left, a full-length mirror against the wall of the foyer revealed the eroticism of their shared position on the floor, and Lotte found herself transfixed at the sight: her bare legs spread obscenely wide, dress up around her tummy, while Tom’s face disappeared between her thighs. He murmured his satisfaction in low moans every time he felt her stomach muscles tightening in preparation for the release she sought.

“Tom,” Charlotte whined, “baby…please…” She wasn’t sure what she was asking for. In fact, she wasn’t sure if she wanted him to make her come or stop and explain to her what was going on.

He must have sensed the confusion in her tone, because he stopped suddenly. Taking his heated mouth from her, he feverishly pressed his forehead against her abdomen and loosed a shaky breath that had her clenching against him, the warm breath teasing her now-swollen core. She tried again.

“Baby…?”

His first response was a quiet answer.

“Yes, my love…?” he sort of trailed off.

His second response was to seat two fingers inside of her. She gasped pleasurably, about to force out another question as to just what he thought he was doing, but he spoke lowly against her stomach as his long digits moved slowly, slickly, in and out of her soaked cunt.

“I need you, darling,” he moaned, tears clogging his voice. “I need to feel you against me and I need
to love you and I need us to be together…”

Charlotte felt a damp droplet splash onto her bellybutton. She reached down and tugged gently on Tom’s hair so that he looked up at her. Her heart broke when she saw the pain and fear in those gorgeous blue eyes. Whatever arousal he’d stoked within her ebbed; her only concern in that moment was to get them up off the floor and to dry his tears.

As he pressed his mouth to her throbbing clit once more, fingers still working gently within her, Charlotte gasped out a breathy “stop” and brushed the hair away from his forehead. Not being one to ignore a lady’s request, Tom disengaged himself from her body and sat back on his heels, looking dejected and afraid.

Recovering a sense of the demure, Charlotte sat up and lowered the skirting of her gown, maneuvering so she was on her knees directly in front of Tom. He wouldn’t even look at her; he just kept his gaze fixed on the floor. It hurt even more when Charlotte reached out and touched his face and he visibly flinched at her touch before leaning into it gratefully.

What is going on? Charlotte thought in a panic.

“My baby,” she whispered, tilting his chin up so he had no choice but to look at her. “Where did all of this come from?”

“You…you stopped me,” he whispered at her.

Charlotte’s brow crinkled in confusion. “What?”

“Do you not want me anymore?” Tom’s voice wavered, as a fresh wave of tears filled his eyes. “Are you ashamed of me?”

She was on him in a millisecond, arms wrapping around him and pulling him gently against her as if he were a small child. She dropped kisses against his face, in his hair, on the sides of his neck. Tom clutched at her with a fierce grip.

“Why would I ever be ashamed of you, Tom?” Lotte asked in disbelief. “You’re the man of my life.”

He sniffed and cleared his throat.

“Because of how I reacted back there,” he motioned vaguely, referring to what happened at the CineStar.

Charlotte scoffed heartily. “Are you ashamed of me for throwing up in your Alexander McQueen ready-to-wear after we both got shot at?”

Paling at the memory, he shook his head vehemently against her.

“And for having nightmares and headaches for a week?”

He shook his head again, squeezing her tightly.

“And for needing to see a therapist and going on anti-anxiety medication?”

That seemed to rouse him. He brought himself up to his full sitting height and glared at Charlotte a bit. “Stop that,” he murmured.

She nudged him in the side, smiling a little. “You stop that, too. I know you’re freaked out, my sweet
man. Tonight was shit; we can admit that. And yes, you need more help, it appears, but we’re working on it together, aren’t we?”

Tom didn’t say anything. He just returned his gaze to the floor, the same embarrassed and pained look returning to his face as they held onto one another.

“Am I less of a man to you because of this?” he asked quietly. She’d never seen him so unsure of himself until that moment.

_Goddamn all of this, _she thought angrily, _for making him feel this way.

“I’m sorry, did you say something?” Lotte mock-scolded him. “Because it sounded like you’d lost your mind there for a second.”

“You heard me,” Tom suddenly growled, lurching forward against her so they were once again tangled up on the floor.

“No, Thomas,” Charlotte looked him dead in the eye from her position beneath him. “You are not. But may I ask what got into you a few minutes ago?”

He sighed, wiping a hand across his face before settling his head against the crook of her neck and wrapping an arm around her waist.

“I just…” he thought for a moment, trying to find the right words he needed. “I needed to feel safe…and you’re my safe. When we’re alone together…and we don’t need to speak with anything but our bodies and my mouth all over you…that’s my comfort and my ‘safe.’”

It dawned on Lotte that the situation was almost identical to her own – the anxiety abated for her, only a week or so ago, when Tom began expressing physical love and affection. And now that Tom was experiencing anxiety more and more regularly, she understood why he needed what he was asking for.

“Are you angry with me?” he queried, craning his neck to look worriedly into her eyes once more.

Charlotte’s face softened.

“Oh, my love, no. I understand what you need. It’s our therapy, isn’t it?”

Tom burrowed his face against her neck, nodding, inhaling her scent.

“I do think we need to call Dr. Rochester, don’t we?”

He hesitated, pressing warm lips to her neck. “Can we…just wait a bit, please?”

Charlotte moved so as to wrap her arms around him, turning her head to breathe against his mouth.

“Would you like to have a shower, and then have some dinner sent up, baby?” she punctuated the question with a firm kiss to Tom’s lips.

“Yes, please,” he breathed. “Are you…going to be in the shower…with me?”

Her heart melted. He looked so hopeful, so fearful.

“I’m right with you at all times, my Thomas.”
He’d eased considerably in the solitude of their hotel suite, away from screaming crowds and intrusive telephoto lenses. Charlotte made it a silent rule to not be more than a few steps away from him, to always having some sort of physical contact as they unwound from the dreadful effects of the Potsdamer Platz incident.

She carefully divested Tom of his suit jacket and stripped him of his tie as he called down for dinner service for two. Each touch of her hand against him – whether it was to undress him, to run hands through his hair, or to stroke his face lovingly – calmed and strengthened him. He hung up with the restaurant concierge just as Lotte turned her back against him in their bedroom, asking him to undo her zipper.

As the dark green garment pooled at her feet, Tom wordlessly helped her unclasp her bra and step out of her panties. Turning her around to him, he placed a large hand against her breast, just over her heart, staring into her face with gratitude.

“Thank you,” he murmured, “my beautiful, understanding girl.”

She placed her palm over his own, squeezing his hand and smiling shyly at his sincerity. Tom’s eyes dropped to the placement of his hand, and Lotte felt herself blushing as he registered her completely naked form, still aroused from his earlier attentions.

“My god but you are divine, my little Lotte.”

Charlotte brought his palm to her lips, pressing a soft kiss to his hand. She then gently laid his fingers against the straining nipple of her right breast, sighing at his warm touch.

“Let’s get you undressed, baby.”

Tom was out of the remains of his suit and following her into the bathroom seconds later, keeping a firm grip on Charlotte’s waist as she led him along. He held onto her as she flipped on the lights, as she situated their towels, as she turned on the taps and started the shower. He cradled her tiny form against his own while the temperature sorted itself, humming in relief at the feel of her pressed against him. When the water was deemed warm enough, they helped one another into the spacious cubicle, letting the steam and heat sap away the last of their worry and anxiety about the evening’s events.

Lotte slicked back Tom’s hair as she talked soothingly to him.

“There you are, my love. Let yourself relax; let the pill do its job.”

Tom closed his eyes and leaned into the stream of hot water, pulling Charlotte close to him so she too could rinse off and begin showering.

Being pressed so closely against a very wet and naked Tom was causing Lotte’s earlier arousal to flare up again. She felt guilty – here she was trying to calm him down and get them situated for dinner and, she hoped, a restful night, but all her body could concentrate on was him. He was so very male: imposing, beautifully proportioned, devastatingly handsome.

She must have been staring; he caught her in her reverie and groaned a noise of satisfaction.

“Do you want me, Lotte?”

Charlotte could only bite her lip, blushing, as she glanced at him like a deer caught in the crosshairs.
She nodded once, and if he hadn’t been looking for her affirmation, he would have missed it.

He shouldn’t have been so surprised at her next response – she was showing him more and more every day that she could take charge, could be vocal about what she wanted, what she needed. What they needed.

“Take pleasure in me, my love.”

He was sheathed within her, pressing her against the steamed tile, before she could say anything else to inflame him more. Wrapping her legs around him and instructing her to hold on tightly, Tom began to thrust deeply, eagerly, as Lotte melded around him.

“My sweet girl,” he moaned against her mouth, the water beating against him. “I’m afraid I’m not going to last very long.”

Lotte grinned, licking his lips and then gently biting his bottom one, capturing it between her teeth. She reached down with a free hand to rub at her swollen clit, knowing she wouldn’t have the time to come – not at that moment, anyway – but wanting to revel in the dual pleasure they could create together.

“Then we’ll just have to do this again later, won’t we?” she rasped, tugging at his wet curls with her other hand and staring lovingly into his eyes. His hips pistoned harder at her seductive tone. The breath stuttered from his mouth.

“That’s it, baby,” Charlotte crooned. “You’ll feel so much better when you come, won’t you? Hmm?”

He looked down at her tiny fingers stroking her dripping sex and a choked groan issued from his mouth.

“Y-Yes…”

Tom felt Charlotte flex her inner muscles around him, felt the knuckles of her little fingers rubbing against his abdomen. He latched his mouth onto her neck to keep from escaping his own body; he needed an anchor.

“Can you put your mouth on me again later?” Charlotte asked sweetly. “Can we play? God you feel so good.”

Turning her head so her mouth found the shell of Tom’s ear, Lotte pressed a kiss against the sensitive skin. Moaning her continued pleasure at the feel of his cock stroking in and out of her, she found herself shaking slightly as the sensations engulfed her. Her pace against her clit quickened.

“Ohhh…love you…s-so much…” she cried out.

That was all he needed to hear. With a roar, Tom spilled himself inside of her, crushing her body against his as he pulsed in her womb. He prolonged their pleasure by grinding his pelvis into hers, feeling her continue to stroke her clit.

Tom ignored Lotte’s cry of disappointment when he pulled out from her, getting to his knees as safely as possible – given how shaky they were. Her cry morphed into rapturous shock when he once more began laving at her, sucking at her pussy lips and lapping at her painfully aroused little button.
Lifting her carefully so as to situate her legs over his shoulders, Tom kept a firm grip, urging her to do the same against him so she wouldn’t fall.

It was a mistake for Charlotte to look down.

She was met with Tom’s burning gaze, his hands holding her thighs safely against him. That sight alone was enough to have her clenching deep in her belly. But then Tom broke away momentarily – only to dip his tongue down into her entrance and gather a bit of their combined juices, bringing them up to slather around her clit with his mouth.

“Mmm…” Tom murmured lowly against her, moving her hips back and forth so she was riding his mouth and could see him soaking her bud with his cum, mixed with her own honey.

“Fuck, Tom… so hot…” she cried, orgasm closing in at his filthy show for her. She lost it when he began sucking at her in earnest: deep, wet noises issuing from his mouth, his face wet and shining from the mess they’d made together.

Tom’s groan at Charlotte’s release nearly matched her own; it sounded as if he was as relieved as she when the sharp, sweet contractions hit her. She held his mouth against her, riding out her completion while he continued to lick and suck at her sex. He managed to catch her when she slumped forward against him, both breathing heavily and her legs shaking violently.

Cradling her in his arms, he rinsed them both under the still-heated spray of the shower’s jets, rewarding her finish with a lazy, openmouthed kiss.

“Ohh,” Charlotte purred in his mouth. She rubbed her body against the length of his, feeling similar to a cat in heat.

“Do you taste us, sweet? Do you like how we taste together?” Tom growled softly.

She might have asked him to stay in the warm water with her forever, but room service was banging on their door.

“I’ve got you on speaker, Doctor R,” Charlotte said, bringing her mobile into the living area of the suite where Tom had assembled their dinner.

“Hi Tom,” the therapist spoke pleasantly.

“Hello, there,” Tom greeted dejectedly. Sadness flourished on his face at the prospect of what this conversation could entail. Hadn’t he told Lotte to hold off on calling the therapist for a bit?

“I’ll be brief, as I know you’re not really in a talking mood at the moment,” Dr. Rochester continued, getting to the heart of the conversation.

“Much appreciated,” Tom replied. He motioned for Charlotte to sit at the ornate banquet table where he’d set up their meal, replete with linen and good china.

She smiled gratefully and placed her mobile in the center of the table.

“I think it’s obvious that we need to start you on some medicine at this point, don’t you agree?” the therapist asked quietly. Charlotte thought Tom would fight both of them on this issue – but any
reluctance he’d had previously was now gone. She suspected, now that he’d had a dose of the medication, he realized it could be helpful.

“I do. And probably a larger dose than Lotte’s taking, I’m afraid. She’s half my size,” he chuckled humorlessly.

“I can have that sent to you airmail by tomorrow morning at the Waldorf, then. Take another of Charlotte’s in the meantime, one for the morning,” Dr. Rochester suggested.

Tom looked mildly aggravated at the doctor’s response. He began to cut into his filet in an irritated manner before looking at Charlotte, eyes widening to suggest she end the conversation.

Charlotte was slightly confused at Tom’s sudden change in attitude. And then she caught it just as he responded.

“I’m afraid we’re to be in Rome tomorrow,” he continued the conversation tersely. “I can get you a forwarding addr–”

Charlotte cut in. “I haven’t told him yet, Doctor R.”

Looking pointedly at Tom, who was working his way methodically through the steak, Charlotte explained herself. “We’re going to stay in Berlin just a little longer, baby. Just until tomorrow afternoon.”

“Whatsoever for, darling? You know we have an engagement in the Piazza della Repubblica that I must attend,” he spoke confusedly.

Placing her knife and fork gently on her dinner plate, Charlotte gazed imploringly at Tom. She felt tears filling her eyes at the shortness in his tone; he’d never spoken to her in this way before.

Disappointment…

“I’ve canceled that, Tom. You need a little bit of time to rest and recover yourself before we complete the rest of your press obligations in Italy. And we need to get you the medicine so that things can calm down a little –”

She wasn’t able to finish because he slammed a palm onto the table, shaking the china and glassware spread before them.

“UNACCEPTABLE!”

Without another word to Dr. Rochester, and without so much as an angry glance at Lotte, he stalked from the room to slam the bedroom doors behind him. Stunned for only a moment, Charlotte came back to herself with a small sob as Dr. Rochester spoke again.

“I hate to say this, Charlotte, but this is par for the course, it seems. He’s confused and embarrassed and we both know he doesn’t want to let anyone down.”

Lotte still said nothing, sniffting quietly at Tom’s rash actions.

He’d never shown her any anger.

He’d never yelled before.

She was afraid. Afraid he hated her. Afraid he’d want to end things because she made a choice he disagreed with.
“You made the right decision,” Dr. Rochester continued. “Get him sorted out and leave for Rome tomorrow evening. I promise he will thank you. I know you want to eat your dinner, now. Keep me posted.”

Charlotte ended the call, wiping her nose with an index finger before blotting at her eyes with the good linen napkin from downstairs. She trembled as she sipped her water, cubes of ice clinking pleasantly against the glass.

*How off-putting you actually are…*

James Osprey’s voice reappeared conveniently in her head as she tried to eat her soup and sandwich. Her stomach turned at the memories, at the fact that her best friend finally realized how awful she was. Just as James had told her. And now Tom knew.

She stepped away from the dining table to walk over to the windows in the living area, carrying the linen napkin with her to continually dab away her copious tears. Placing a hand on the cold glass in front of her, Lotte attempted some deep breaths, willing her heart to harden and praying her tiny, hiccupping sobs would abate.

He found her, five minutes later, counting cars that whizzed by in the street below and trembling only every so often, her wet face giving everything away.

“Sweet…?”

Charlotte turned, startled, to see Tom standing a few feet from her, looking contrite and extremely embarrassed. Another tiny, hiccupped sob slipped past her throat as more tears slid down her cheeks.

He moved forward, wanting nothing more than to hold her in his arms. To his shame, she stepped back, eyes dropping to the floor in defeat.

“I’m s-so sorry I can-canceled without as-asking you.”

He tried in vain to close the distance between them, but for every step forward Tom took, Charlotte took two small steps backward, not daring to look at him. A fresh wave of tears had begun pouring down her face.

“Please…d…don’t…be…mad…” she breathed, frightened. Still, she refused to look in his eyes.

As quietly as he could, Tom crept to the enlarged sectional furniture and sat down, hands out in entreaty. His voice was no more than a low, non-threatening whisper.

“My darling,” he intoned, “I could never be mad at my best girl.”

She remained rooted at her spot across the room from him, but her eyes slowly lifted to find his own. He took this as a step in the right direction and continued.

“I’m afraid my anger at myself got the best of me a few moments ago,” he murmured, willing her silently to keep looking into his eyes as he spoke. “It had absolutely nothing to do with you, my love. *Nothing.*”

An adorable little hiccough fell from Lotte’s lips. He wanted to run to her and gather her against him – but he needed to tread carefully.

“You’re…n-not mad?” she questioned, disbelievingly.
“Won’t you come sit in my lap, lovely? You’re awfully far away,” he whispered. Without realizing it, Tom, too, had started to cry.

Still Charlotte didn’t move.

“I haven’t dis-disappointed you?”

Eyes wide, the full weight of what he’d done sunk in.

Thomas, you fucking arse! Now she thinks you’re like that twat Osprey!

Shaking his head vehemently, holding his hands out for her, he cried.

“That’s an impossibility, my love,” he sniffed. “Please come here.”

Walking tentatively to him, Charlotte found her anxiety ramping up again, out of nowhere.

If this is the man you’re supposed to trust, who relieves your anxiety, what happens if you make him angry? Where do you go? Charlotte thought worriedly.

Tom grabbed her – not enough to startle but just enough to ensure she couldn’t get away – and settled her comfortably in his lap. Or what he thought was comfortably, as she was stiff as a board in his arms. She was barely looking at him, shivering uncontrollably.

“Kiss…?” he murmured softly against the shell of her left ear. “Please…?”

Turning to face him, Charlotte wiped her nose daintily and leaned slightly into his face, eyes worried and frightened. He placed the lightest of kisses against her lips: once, twice, three times. Taking her delicate face in his hands, he spoke earnestly to her.

“I am so sorry I frightened you. I am so sorry I made you think I was mad at you. I should never have walked away like that, my love. It hurts to think that you’re scared of me, or that you think you made me mad.”

She nodded her head just a bit, still wary and unconvinced.

He kissed her again: once, twice, three times. He moved his mouth to her forehead, dropping a kiss there. He kissed her eyelids, her cheeks. He brushed the hair from her face, lovingly.

“You were right, my little Lotte. You are right, that I need to take a little time before we go on to Rome. You always know what’s best, sweet.”

Her hands tentatively found their way into his loose curls of reddish-brown hair. She scooted a bit closer in his lap, a stray tear finding its way down her cheek.

“I lashed out in anger at the situation, at letting people down. I’m very frustrated…” he trailed off, trying to explain himself but understanding there was really no good explanation at all.

“I know,” came the soft reply in his lap. Her hands were running soothingly through his hair, just as they’d always done. The action soothed both of them, just as it had many times before. And then, another soft set of words. “You scared me. You’ve never done that before,” Lotte continued.

And then she kissed his mouth: once, twice, three times. Tom was almost inconsolable at this point – how could he have done such a thing to his best girl? He’d scared her and made her think the worst of herself. Gathering her as closely to him as possible, he began to rock Charlotte back and forth slowly, pressing his face into her elegant, smooth neck.
“And I won’t be doing it again, my love. I am so very, very sorry. I can’t imagine hurting my best girl, but I’ve gone and done it.”

She didn’t respond, and he thought she was working herself into a worried, silent state again, when she shifted slightly in his arms and pointed a small finger toward the coffee table.

“What’s that?”

He’d forgotten the surprise.

It had been delivered hours ago as they were making their way to Potsdamer Platz.

“A little surprise for my sweet girl,” he kissed her neck, inhaling her scent – the scent that made him feel secure and happy. His lips clung lovingly to her flesh, and he felt her sigh against him.

“Can I have it?” Charlotte whispered, curious. It was gift-wrapped, the package larger than a hatbox.

“If you give me another kiss you can open it,” Tom murmured playfully.

She surprised him in that moment – she seemed to do that more and more – by not only kissing him, but also stopping to look into his eyes.

“I love you, Thomas.” She raked her hands through his hair again, staring in his eyes and confirming her forgiveness of his rash behaviour.

“I love you too, my Charlotte. I am so profoundly sorry.”

A less perceptive person wouldn’t have noticed it, but Tom did. As Charlotte carefully tore into the gilt wrapping of the surprise box, she feigned interest in the task to mask her still-hurt feelings, when she asked him a searching question.

“So I didn’t disappoint you?” she tried to ask nonchalantly, but he could see in her posture and the pulse in her neck that her body was still flush with worry and doubt.

He settled her back against his chest, the box in her little robe-clad lap, and murmured lovingly into her ear.

“No way, no how.”

The surprise, to Charlotte’s delight, was a box of assorted designer German chocolates – of all flavors and brands. Since he’d known her, Tom was no stranger to Lotte’s sweet tooth. And he loved seeing – and hearing – her indulge.

Still twined together in the living area, finally relaxing back into comfortable companionship after their harrowing evening, Charlotte and Tom fed one another back and forth, rifling through the large box of schokolade to try bits and bites of truffles, bittersweet squares, and marzipan-filled delicacies.

When Lotte swiped her thumb along Tom’s bottom lip to remove a trace of the dark chocolate coconut truffle, his tongue darted out to lick at the fleshy pad of her finger.

His eyes sought hers in silent permission.
But although Charlotte felt better after Tom’s multiple assurances, and his loving kisses, and the tenderness with which he fed her their desserts…she was still quite out of sorts. In her head, she still heard him yelling, slamming his hand on the table before leaving the room – leaving her. And despite everything he’d said to her, the true despair in his eyes after all was said and done, she’d still convinced herself she was an enormous disappointment to him.

Therefore, the permission Tom sought wasn’t granted.

“I think I’m going to go to sleep, love,” she said softly, averting her eyes from his unsure glance. She could have cried, the feeling was still so fresh inside of her – being unsure of herself, feeling like a failure, being off-putting.

Tom could do naught but let her up from his arms, watching sadly as she gently placed the chocolate treats on the coffee table where they’d sat, unopened, earlier. His eyes followed her as she began to clear the remains of their dinner, and he shot from his seat to help her.

“Let me, darling. You go relax and get ready for bed.”

She nodded, coming over to where he stood to peck him lightly on the cheek, and then retreated with her phone to the bedroom where he could hear her confirming with a travel agent their change in arrangements for tomorrow.

You great tit, he chastised himself. Of course she doesn’t want to make love, not after the way you’ve treated her this evening.

He took his time cleaning up the table before setting the room service tray carefully to the side in the foyer and cleaning up the remains of their shattered evening.

When he entered their bedroom, he was surprised - and thankful - to find Lotte propped up and reading, instead of asleep in the dark. She looked up meekly from her novel when he shut the double doors leading from the living room and gifted him with a small smile.

“I wanted to wait for you.”

He could have cried in relief.

“Give me just a moment, darling, and I’ll join you,” he begged, hurrying to the bathroom to brush his teeth and use the loo. He then moved to the dresser to change into some different sleepwear but couldn’t find his favorite blue shirt, threadbare though it was.

“Darling, have you seen my…” he trailed off, turning to look at Lotte.

She was wearing it. It clung ever so lovingly to her, just the way it had the night she’d first worn it – and nothing else but her panties – back at Hampstead. He discovered, as she stretched a bit under the covers, blushing, that she once again wore nothing but the shirt and tiny satin and lace panties.

“I’m sorry, Tom,” she began to raise the hem up to take it off. “I should have asked…”

He stripped off his clothing except for his boxers – which were traitorously tight since seeing her in nothing but his shirt again – and tutted at her sweetly as he climbed into their shared bed.

“You know you needn’t ask, my darling.”

He gathered her into his arms, taking her book gently from her and placing it on his nightstand.
“And please stop apologizing, Lotte. You do know you’re still my best, perfect girl, don’t you?” he asked pleadingly.

She laid her head on his chest and nodded a little, focusing on the steady throb of his heartbeat and the warmth of his body seeping into her little frame. After a few moments of silence, Charlotte recalled their earlier turmoil.

“Is the Seroxat still doing okay for you, baby? Can I get you anything?”

He only snuggled her closer in answer.

“We’ll get you your meds tomorrow and then we’ll be off to Rome. I know you’ll feel much better,” she mused, relaxing against him. Sleep would find her soon.

“Lotte,” Tom spoke lowly.

She raised her head to look at him. A slight trace of fear still colored her gaze, but she should have known not to fret. She would have to learn not to: not with her Tom.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you, my lovely. Let’s sleep.”

With a soft click of the light switch, blessed darkness cocooned Lotte and Tom in one another’s arms.

“Baby, what time is it?” Charlotte whispered, squinting sleepy eyes at her mobile.

A distracted Tom whispered to her from his side of the bed, the screen from his laptop casting a shadowy glow across his face. “Four…”

Sitting up in a mildly confused manner, Lotte scooted closer to Tom’s side to see what was so important given the hour. As far as she could tell he’d been tired and hadn’t stirred much in the night. But how long had he been awake?

“Woke up about an hour ago,” he spoke hoarsely.

She knew immediately something was eating at him, just from his tone.

One look at the webpage he’d pulled up gave her all the answers she needed.

**Hiddleston Abandons Fans**

_In an uncharacteristic move last evening, A-lister and handsome leading man Tom Hiddleston appeared to snub his fans for the premiere, dinner, and after party of his latest film Dark Conquest._

_While at the CineStar Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, Germany, the wildly popular actor only made a brief appearance on the red carpet before leaving due to what has only been reported as “a small emergency.”_
Recent speculation on fan sites has cited everything from Hiddleston’s desire to be taken more seriously as an actor to his resentment of his “mostly benign” fan base, “The Hiddlestoners.”

Hiddleston’s reps could not be reached for comment.

“Oh, my love,” Charlotte murmured, turning to run a hand through his disheveled hair and touching his face lovingly with her fingers. “We both know none of this is true.”

He grit his teeth before shutting the shell of his laptop, closing his eyes in resignation.

“Did you just find this, or…?”

“Luke sent it to me,” Tom replied, rubbing his eyes. “He wanted me to know just in case I got ambushed later in an interview. I feel as though I keep letting everyone down.”

“Not me,” Charlotte whispered sweetly. She settled herself against him and gently took the glasses off his face, reaching across him to place them back on the night table at his side. Lotte then urged him to stretch back out in the bed and rest.

“Yes, you, and everyone else” he murmured sadly, kissing her head.

“But you bribed me with chocolate after,” she giggled a little, teasing him.

This earned her a genuine smile, and another kiss dropped atop her head.

After ruminating for a few moments, her personal assistant thinking cap on, Charlotte had a wonderful little idea.

“Tom, what would you say to us making a little movie on my iPhone tomorrow?”

“You naughty girl,” he purred, laughing.

“No, no. Not like that!” she blushed, laughing along with him. “What if we tweeted a video thanking the fans for their understanding and explaining what’s going on? And then maybe directing them to a charity or cause of some sort that directly benefits people who experience PTSD-related traumas?”

He hauled a surprised Lotte overtop him to settle fully against his form, wrapping strong arms around her and kissing her thoroughly before answering her.

“That, my darling girl, is why we hired you.”

He kissed her cheeks.

“And why I love you.”

He traced kisses down both sides of her neck.

“And why you’re still going to have to marry me someday, even if it’s against your will.”

Charlotte gave him a two-squeeze, arranging herself more comfortably against him so they could go back to sleep.

“Let’s do it, lovely lady.”
He was out as soon as his head hit the pillow.
Rome: Part I

Chapter Summary

As Tom and Charlotte leave Germany behind, mixed emotions once again come into play. Perhaps some time in Rome will help.

Chapter Notes

Some more fluff/a little angst for you all. Just when I try and keep Tom and Lotte happy, emotions get in the way! Thank you all for your continued comments, suggestions, and encouragement. I appreciate it ALL.

A sharp pain in her abdomen woke Charlotte just a few hours after she and Tom had settled back to sleep. She curled into a fetal position, trying to assuage the tender ache, but to no avail. Lotte knew when she went to the bathroom what would await her.

*Right on time,* she thought, as she gingerly stepped out of the bed so as not to wake the handsome man asleep next to her.

Now she had a handful of days to look forward to: stomach pain, tenderness, being ravenously hungry…and being unfortunately turned on at all hours of the day and night. It was bad enough that since being with Tom, she’d felt that way more and more.

*And now there’s nothing you can do about it,* she sighed.

Walking silently to the bathroom, Charlotte detoured a bit to grab her blister pack of pills, a new pair of underwear, and the unopened box of tampons she’d stowed in one of her bags. She gently closed the bathroom door, filled a glass tumbler with water from the tap, and faithfully took her birth control pill.

Looking in the mirror at her reflection as she threw back the medicine and water, Charlotte could see some remaining tension from last night’s conversation at the dinner table. Although Tom consoled her and apologized, and they’d had a comfortable night together – more so after she coaxed Tom back to sleep – Charlotte still felt wary of him. The outburst was so out of character that she kept replaying it over and over in her head; each time it still frightened her, remembering the loud timbre of his voice, the violence of his hand slapping the cherry wood of the table…the dead expression on his face after the anger leeched away. She tried to forget about the incident yet again as she sat to use the loo.

Sure enough, her period had begun. The little dark trickle in her underwear – and now also in the toilet bowl, should have frightened her. After all, the last time she’d seen blood was when she was covered in it, racing through the crowd of the Victoria and Albert. But now, to her pleasure and surprise, she didn’t associate the sight with the memory. Whether it was the Seroxat or her own sheer will she did not know. But Lotte was proud of herself – panties down around her ankles – for a shining moment.
Her happiness was short lived as her stomach muscles gave another painful clench. Charlotte wanted nothing more than to sleep all day and forget about being on a promotional tour for *Dark Conquest*. She loved the film, and she definitely loved her Tom, but she’d never been “on the road” during her time of the month, so to speak. And if she was, it had never been for the duration.

Cleaning herself up, Charlotte flushed, washed, and decided to crawl back into bed for at least a little while to steal some of Tom’s warmth. While she was hanging up her other pair of sink-scrubbed panties to dry for a bit, she heard Tom’s rough, sleepy voice float through the bedroom toward her.

“Darling? Everything okay?”

Walking back into the bedroom, Charlotte smiled at him sleepily – he’d put on his glasses to look for her, alarm written all over his face.

*My sweet boy,* she thought.

“I’m fine, baby,” Charlotte replied, crawling back into the master bed with a half-naked, still-warm Tom. She pressed herself against him, trying to find a scrunched-up position that would ease the pressure in her abdomen once more.

“You’re a little pale, my beauty,” Tom whispered as he gathered Lotte to him, kissing her hair and running strong hands up and down her back. “Are you ill?”

Closing her eyes and nuzzling her face into the crook of his neck, she shook her head no. “Just my period.”

She’d almost been embarrassed to say anything – and her answer came out as a whisper. She and Tom had been through and done a lot of personal things, but this was new territory for her. She knew he had a close relationship with his sisters, and he was primarily raised by his mother…but she still felt uncomfortable talking about it.

“Oh, my love,” Tom purred lovingly. “That means all your sweet little parts are working, doesn’t it?” He lovingly ran a hand through her tangled tresses, now kissing her forehead and temples with soft smooches.

All she did in response was gift him with a blush-filled smile.

“Do you hurt, my little Lotte?” he asked, genuine concern coloring his question.

*I can’t believe we are even talking about this,* Charlotte mused embarrassedly.

“My stomach is cramping up…” she trailed off, not wanting to even look in Tom’s general direction. “Just tender and tired is all.”

Without a word, Tom modified their positions so he spooned her against him, allowing her to maintain a still somewhat scrunched up pose. Carefully lifting the hem of her little sleep shirt, Tom began massaging a smooth, warm palm against the muscles of Lotte’s belly. The slow, wide circles delivered just the right amount of pressure to ease a little of the ache.

“There, sweet. Does that help?” he kissed her ear tenderly.

She murmured out a soft, thankful “a little” as Tom continued his ministrations.

After a few minutes, Charlotte placed her little hand atop Tom’s own to stop him, turning to thank him with a kiss. He hummed against her mouth in happiness. “Anything for you, my darling. I hate
that you’re not feeling well,” he frowned as he gathered her to him once more.

“A woman’s lot in life, I’m afraid,” Charlotte responded, closing her eyes and willing herself to relax.

Nodding absently, Tom thought for a moment as Charlotte cuddled back against him. Suddenly, he continued her thought. “Yes, but…a lot that could bring us the tiny baby we talked about practicing for,” he intoned against the shell of her ear.

Charlotte stiffened, just a bit, but then flooded with pleasure. For what, she wasn’t sure: the thought of practicing with him? Or the thought of making a tiny child that looked like the perfect mix between the two of them? Both seemed extremely attractive ideas in her mind.

“That reminds me, love…I had good news while you were in the loo,” Tom said, pulling away from her to retrieve his mobile from the night table. “Em’s had her baby!”


Tom laughed heartily at Charlotte’s rabid interest – in the last trimester of Emma’s pregnancy, Lotte was almost as ready for Em to have the baby as Emma herself had been!

“I just got word from mum about an hour ago, apparently,” he checked the time stamp on the message. “Em and baby girl are doing well…seven pounds and a few ounces…they named her Lily Charlotte.”

Lotte’s eyes filled with tears. Emma hadn’t mentioned anything about names to her…she racked her brain trying to remember all their conversations about what the little girl might be called. By the time Tom showed Charlotte the pictures on his phone that Diana had sent, she was crying – most embarrassingly – profusely.

“Oh, my Lotte,” Tom frowned, taking his phone from Charlotte and gathering her back against him where she’d been only moments before. “Why the tears, my love?”

Charlotte sniffed a little, leaning into Tom’s touch when he ran a gentle thumb against her cheekbones to wipe away the tears that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. “Just…emotional,” she whispered as a few more ran down her cheeks. She was touched at Emma’s gesture; she was in love with the little baby at first sight; Tom’s talk of a baby had also affected her. “Hormones.”

Charlotte stiffened again suddenly as another particularly vicious cramp settled in her abdomen, and Tom abandoned his phone completely when he saw – and felt – her distress. Gently moving Lotte into a prostrate position, Tom worked his way down her front to lift up her shirt once more. Placing his warm lips against her belly, Tom began to speak in an authoritative – if not humorous – tone.

“Listen up, you,” he growled. “You’re hurting my best girl. And I don’t like that. She’s too sweet and kind to be treated this way!”

He blew a raspberry right on top of her bellybutton, and Charlotte giggled, the sensation tickling her skin.

“You go on and do what you must,” Tom continued, seeming to address her reproductive system as a whole, “but just you wait…we’re going to put you to good use someday. That’s a promise.”

And with a soft, reverent kiss to the tender skin just below her navel, Tom stared into Lotte’s shining eyes and smiled, a look full of warmth and love. She didn’t know what to say; a deep rose flush
covered her face and neck as she pulled Tom upward, eagerly pressing her mouth against his own.

“Would you like some breakfast, sweet? Let’s have something sent up so you can rest. How’s that?” Tom asked.

Helping situate Charlotte into a more comfortable position against several pillows, Tom kissed her mouth once more before wandering into the living area to peruse the room service offerings and call down for breakfast.

As she heard Tom’s near-perfect German, ordering God only knew what, Charlotte grabbed her own iPhone and did a little research; her idea earlier in the morning was still with her. What sort of charities would benefit the most from a little video that Tom’s fans would see? She made quick work of her searches and came up with a mental list to show to Tom during breakfast.

“Darling, I’ve got a package,” Tom announced as he strolled back in the bedroom. "It was just sent up from the front desk – I think I know what it is.”

The large envelope had all the markings of an airmail package, and Charlotte stiffened slightly as Tom sat at the edge of the bed to open it. She didn’t know why she felt suddenly on edge, but once again, she was remembering the events of the previous night.

Tom yelling.

Tom leaving the room.

Charlotte feeling stupid, fearful.

Her stomach churned a little as the events of the evening played in her mind again. She didn’t realize she had completely zoned out until Tom scooted backward onto the bed a bit more and placed a gentle hand on her leg, covered by the duvet.

“Medicine, darling. Should I take this with food? What do you suggest?” he asked, not a little hesitantly.

Snapping out of her haze, Charlotte pulled the covers up around her more closely and nodded her head slightly, looking at Tom for only a moment. Her gaze traveled to the window beside their huge bed, the curtains drawn back to reveal a dreary, rainy day in Berlin. As much as she tried to fight it, her eyes filled with traitorous tears again.

Tom asking her opinion – something she swore he used to love doing – now made her worry. What if she made a wrong choice? What if there was a repeat of last night and he decided she was useless? A disappointment? She swallowed slowly.

“If you want to take it, I would eat, yes.”

Charlotte tried to quickly look away, covertly swiping at one of the tears escaping down her face. When she heard Tom’s harsh exhale of breath, her face snapped to his, thinking he was about to get mad again. About what, she had no idea.

“Baby?” he asked softly.

He wasn’t mad. He looked extremely worried.

“I’m sorry…I’m sorry,” Lotte began crying. She hid her face in her hands, wanting nothing more than for Tom to leave her alone in the room so she could have her cry and worry all by herself. He
just made things worse, being so close...seeing her freaking out at the drop of a hat.

Crawling quickly to her side and climbing under the covers, Tom wasted no time wiping Charlotte’s face – again – and stroking the hair from her eyes so he could look into them.

But she wouldn’t look at him. A rush of words, mostly more apologetic ones, tumbled from Lotte’s mouth as Tom once again gathered her to him and began to rock her a little, trying unsuccessfully to shush her and calm her down.

“I’m s-sorry I’m crying so mu-much...” she started, struggling to catch her breath. “Lots of hormones...l-like I s-said, and the baby st-stuff...and I k-keep thinking ab-about last night...”

“When I yelled?” Tom whispered.

She looked at him and was astounded at just how ashamed he looked. It made her feel worse; she cried harder.

“I d-don’t want to t-tell you what to...to do or sug-suggest things because y-you m-might get mad at me or I m-might do some-something...wrong.”

“Jesus, Lotte,” he breathed, realizing just how badly he’d frightened her last evening, how much of her trust he’d unknowingly broken.

She pulled away when a loud knock on their suite door reverberated throughout the living area. Tom thought at first she was going to answer the door and do all the breakfast prep – he wanted to do it for her, not the other way around – but she got up, walked into the bathroom and then he could hear water running. She was sniffing and still crying.

He couldn’t really wait on the room service, so he reluctantly moved toward the suite door, let the gentleman in, and tipped him for his service, offering a polite “Danke” as the employee left. Not bothering with assembling breakfast once the gentleman was gone, Tom hurried back into the master bedroom to find Charlotte leaning against the vanity in the bathroom, a cloth pressed against her face. She was trying to dry her tears and ease the swelling of her eyelids. Every few seconds she would take a deep, unsteady breath, shaking slightly. One hand was unconsciously rubbing at the painful ache in her belly.

Walking quietly toward Lotte, Tom’s heart broke. It squeezed in his chest. It hurt. He knew he’d done this to her – and despite his apologies and loving words and reassurances last night, he’d truly mucked everything up and had made his sweet, shy girl return to her shell. It was eerily reminiscent of their first few days together after the shooting: Charlotte skittish and apologetic, nervous and fragile.

Very softly, Tom murmured to her that their breakfast was ready, and would she like some coffee? Which fruit did she want on her waffles?

A tiny, defeated voice answered him. She turned away from him and wrung out the flannel, draping it on the lip of the sink.

“Yes, please, love. And peaches, if there are any.”

She still calls you ‘love’ despite you being a legendary arse, Tom thought, ashamed of himself once again.

“Of course, sweet. You come out when you’re ready and I’ll have your plate for you.”
He hoped she’d stop him, or reach out to him, or even come to him…but she nodded and continued to stand with her back to Tom, braced over the sink.

Tom waited patiently, making sure Lotte’s breakfast was laid out perfectly for her upon her arrival at the table. He focused on his own, next: preparing his own coffee, dashing salt and pepper on his eggs, buttering his toast. He tried to busy himself by reading some of the medication information on the Seroxat package, but he knew his little Lotte would make sure he did what he was supposed to with the pills.

*Just like she always does. She knows what’s best for you.*

How could he have let his anger get the best of him last evening? It didn’t matter that it wasn’t directed at Lotte – or even Dr. Rochester – the fact was, his sweet best girl received the brunt of his ire, and he’d scared her immensely. So bad, apparently, that she was thinking about it several hours on. And all she’d had in mind was his best interest. Taking care of him as he’d tried to do for her when their strange journey together started.

Had Lotte raged at him when he insisted she stay at Hampstead? No, not really. Did she slam her hand on the furniture and scream in his general direction when he tried to convince her not to go back to her flat in Soho? No.

As Tom heard Lotte heading into the living area, he was finally hit with the realization that his own trauma was becoming too much for him alone – and possibly Charlotte – to handle. If he was hesitant about taking medicine and doing fewer engagements before, now he could see, very clearly, that he needed to do both of those things. For his health and hers.

“How have I gone from feeling as though I know him better than I know myself, to worrying that I don’t know him that well at all?”

He didn’t ask. He simply gave her no choice. And she acquiesced.

Perching herself lightly in Tom’s lap, Charlotte leaned back against him slightly, but still tentatively. She was embarrassed at her crying, she was still thinking about the previous night’s events, she was worried Tom was going to tell her to stop being such a hysterical girl.

“Charlotte, darling, please come sit in my lap.”

Tom leaned forward to wrap loose arms around Lotte’s waist, murmuring encouragements as she scooted her plate and cutlery forward to begin eating her waffles. In a small voice, she thanked Tom for the peaches and coffee. When he didn’t say anything, Charlotte began to feel anxiety again, but then she felt something wet brush against the back of her neck, where Tom had lovingly moved her hair aside.

Turning, swallowing her bite of waffle, Charlotte saw that he was crying. She swiftly put her fork down and wrapped her arms around Tom, fear coloring her voice as she asked him what was wrong.

“I can’t bear that I’ve hurt you so, my little love,” he whispered brokenly. “I don’t want to be the reason you cry. I hate that you seem…afraid of me now.” A sob escaped Tom’s mouth at the last part of the declaration. He continued anyway. “I’m so sorry, once again, for my actions. And I desperately hope you know,” here he placed a hand on her heart, “deep down, that I would never take my anger out on you. I was so frustrated at the thought of letting down the fans, and not being
professional…” he trailed off.

Charlotte waited a few moments before responding, although she was immensely torn up, seeing Tom just as upset as she was. She vacillated between accepting his words without adding anything to the conversation, and wanting to be clear with him – wanting to prove she did what was right. It wasn’t dissimilar to the times she’d tried to make James see reason, see her side of things.

She hoped the outcome would be different if she tried with Tom.

Taking a breath, she made her attempt – very quietly, but in about as firm a tone as she’d ever taken.

“I had two choices in the back of that BMW when you were spaced out and hyperventilating,” she began. “I could put you through even more engagements and risk a bigger issue down the road, or I could get you to safety, put a call in to the doctor, and arrange some time for you to regroup so you would be fresh for Rome. Tell me I was wrong,” she sniffed sadly.

Not a little astounded, and definitely impressed, Tom could only stare openmouthed at his surprisingly strong Lotte. She took this as his disagreement and immediately stared at the floor, unsure. He solved that problem quickly with a fierce kiss, leaving her gasping for air when he broke from her mouth.

“Not wrong,” Tom murmured, staring into her shining gray eyes.

“Then you’re going to need to remind me of that for awhile, okay Tom?” Charlotte asked, a pained look in her eyes and a slight frown on her face. “I’m probably going to worry about that for awhile, and my hormones won’t be helpful this week.”

He nodded so hard she thought his neck would crack. When he gathered her back against him and asked her permission to let him feed her, she found herself relaxing a bit more. The sweet man even continued massaging her cramping, uncomfortable abdomen during the meal.

Tom would be damned if he let anything else bad happen to Lotte – even at his own hands.

“Play it again…I want to see it,” Charlotte smiled, looking at Tom’s Twitter feed that he currently had up on his phone.

They were replaying the little video they’d shot after breakfast, and it was already getting tons of views and likes on Facebook and Twitter.

There was nothing to do in the terminal of Berlin Schönefeld while they waited for their Alitalia flight, and Charlotte hadn’t yet started the new book in her carry-on bag. She was too busy looking for signs of discomfort from Tom, from their check-out at the Waldorf, to their arrival at the airport.

He seemed fine through customs, check-in, and on their long walk to the terminal that would send them onward to Rome.

Apparently the Seroxat after their late breakfast had worked; she’d urged him politely to take it with enough time to spare – it needed to be working by the time they hit the airport, and she didn’t want him to have another meltdown, not two in a row.

They’d showered and dressed – separately, at her insistence, because she felt “yucky” – and then decided they had enough time to quickly record and post the little video message they’d talked about
in the wee hours of the morning.

Tom pressed the “play” triangle on the video link once more, and their smiling faces immediately went into motion.

“I’m Tom Hiddleston.”

“And I’m Charlotte Hamilton.”

“As you all know, Lotte and I had a bit of a scare a week or so ago during our time at the V&A. We just want you all to know that we’re both doing well, but that sometimes things are still difficult for us – especially when we’re out in public with a lot of people and a lot of commotion,” Tom explained, flashing a smile.

“Tom and I are both seeing a licensed therapist who specializes in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, something with which we’ve both been diagnosed. We talk regularly with our therapist, and we’ve both recently begun taking low doses of anti-anxiety medication,” Charlotte piggy-backed off of Tom’s intro.

“That’s so we can see as many fans and visit as many cities on the Dark Conquest tour as possible!” Tom winked, and Charlotte laughed a little at his hammy behaviour.

“Tom and I want to urge all of you to spread the word – if you, your friends, family members, neighbours…anyone you know might be suffering from trauma-related issues, it’s okay to get help.”

Here they’d flashed the numbers of several hotlines in the UK and North America.

“We’re also giving away some free tickets to the London premiere of *Dark Conquest* in a few weeks…but we’re asking that for your name to be entered in the drawing, you donate anything you can to one of the wonderful PTSD-related charities we’re sponsoring. More information is on my Facebook fan page.”

Tom then read off the list of charity names that appeared on the screen, and gave instructions for donation.

“I just want to thank my wonderful fans and colleagues for their understanding right now,” he finished, “and since I haven’t done so, in case you all haven’t heard, this is my best girl Charlotte. My lovely Lotte.”

The kiss Tom snuck onto Lotte’s lips made her blush; it was evident in the video. With a soft “Thanks, everyone,” Charlotte finished out the video clip, smiling at Tom.

“Sie sind ein glücklicher Mann,” someone spoke behind Tom’s seat.

Tom turned to see an older gentleman looking between him and Charlotte, and nodded, agreeing. “Ja. Danke.”

The gentleman made his way to the gate beside Tom and Lotte’s assigned area, and Charlotte turned
“What did he say to you?” she wondered aloud, taking Tom’s hand in her own.

“He said I was a lucky man.”

Charlotte blushed prettily, eyes dropping to her little pointy-toed flats.

“And I am.”

“Thank you,” Lotte whispered shyly, gaze returning to Tom right before he hugged her against him in a two-squeeze. Just then, Tom broke contact as he remembered something.

“I may have been in that little bookshop over there,” he pointed, “while you were in the loo a few minutes ago.”

Adorable hope flitted across Charlotte’s face. Despite having a brand new, never-been-read book in her bag, the prospect of another book never failed to excite her.

“I will need a kiss, my lovely, before you can receive your gift,” Tom teased. “And no, this is not your surprise for today. That happens later this evening in Roma.” Tom tapped his cheek playfully, and Lotte obediently kissed him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Since you’re such a good girl and you’re so lovely to me, here…”

Lotte could barely hide her squeal of excitement as a hardcover – English – copy of *All The Light We Cannot See* came from Tom’s bag. He knew she’d been dying to read it for months and she had never managed to find time, much less her own copy.

“Does this mean you’re going to ignore me the entire flight?” Tom pouted playfully.

Lotte, overjoyed at her new reading material and relieved that Tom seemed to be handling the public space better today, decided to tease him.

“It’s only a two hour trip to Rome, baby,” she winked. “I’m sure you can occupy yourself for that amount of time.”

She was already eagerly turning to the first page of Doerr’s novel. Tom’s graceful hand slid across Lotte’s shoulders and pulled her closer, very gently, to his side.

“Will you hold my hand please?” he asked lowly, in that pleasing octave she loved to hear. Looking up from the hardback, she leaned in to kiss the tip of Tom’s nose and smiled, taking his proffered hand in her tiny one.

“How are you feeling, baby?” Tom continued.

Her smiled turned to a slight frown, but Lotte shrugged. “Okay. Still some pain, and I’m just generally uncomfortable.”

Leaning closer to her so no one else could hear him, Tom spoke once again in his deep register.

“Would you like me to run you a bath when we get to La Cavalieri, sweet?” he referenced the hotel in which they would stay, noting the small shiver that went through Charlotte at his tone.

She marked her page with a finger and closed the novel momentarily to look at Tom in a shy, meek manner. Very softly, she replied.
“Will you get in with me?”

His grin was a mixture of relieved, pleased innocence combined with a seductive leer. Charlotte thought she’d have to remind him she was on her period, especially at his next words.

“I was going to beg you if you didn’t let me.”
Rome: Part II

Chapter Summary

We've finally reached Rome, and things improve significantly for our two main characters. For the moment.

Chapter Notes

I'm late! I'm sorry! I know the updates are infrequent, my loves…I'll try to do better! Please be advised that this chapter has heavy *squick* factor. There's period sex here, folks…not for the overly squeamish.

If it's not your sort of thing, skip it…it's not really *my* sort of thing but when my muse forces me, I do things in the name of all that is Tom Hiddleston.

Please don't yell at me at the end of this one...

Completely enamoured with All The Light We Cannot See, Charlotte didn’t hear Tom come into the bathroom until he whistled lowly at the sight of her stretched out luxuriously in the bath.

“My beautiful love,” he growled, placing his mobile on the vanity and walking fluidly over to kneel at the side of the tub.

Lotte dog-eared her page and smiled up at Tom, blushing at his roving eyes moving all along her warm, wet flesh. Handing him her novel wordlessly, Lotte tilted her head back in a gesture that meant won’t you join me, please?

He didn’t even have to ask what his sweet girl wanted; Tom immediately stepped out of his trousers, peeled his shirt over his head, and tossed all remaining clothing in a haphazard pile on the cool marble flooring. Charlotte obediently sat up in the tub, moving slightly forward so she could accommodate Tom’s tall form behind her.

A tiny twinge in her abdomen had Lotte absentmindedly rubbing a hand against her lower belly as Tom situated himself carefully into the steaming hot water. While the warmth of the soak was easing her cramping muscles a great deal, she still felt somewhat uncomfortable. The first few days were always like this for her, and she wished more than anything that she could be in her bed in Soho with a hot water bottle, sleeping through the worst of it.

“Lean back, darling,” Tom purred gently as his strong hands reached out for Charlotte, sliding her back against his long, lean form. He settled her efficiently between his legs, cradling her with his muscled thighs and wrapping one arm loosely around her waist under the water. His other hand made soothing passes along her neck and shoulders, urging her to rest her head against his chest. The relaxed sigh that escaped from Lotte’s lips made him smile.

My gorgeous little love, he thought proudly as Charlotte’s hands sought both of his own – one under
the water and the other now splayed across her collarbone.

With eyes closed, Lotte allowed the steaming water and Tom’s nearness to leach out the stress and discomfort from her body. For several minutes neither one said anything or moved, simply listening to one another’s breathing and relaxing in the spacious tub. After a few moments, Charlotte turned her head just so and kissed the smooth, warm skin of Tom’s chest.

“Seroxat doing okay for you, baby?” she asked, concern coloring her tone. She gave Tom’s hand a two-squeeze under the water.

“Mmm hmm,” Tom replied in a low, sleepy voice.

Charlotte laughed, a tiny, gentle sound. “I’m sure the combination of this bath and your medicine is making you woozy, yes?”

His next “mmm hmm” buzzed against her skin as he responded while trailing some light kisses against the nape of her neck. Charlotte gave a soft moan at the pleasurable pressure of Tom’s mouth against her pulse point, one hand reflexively moving behind her to tangle in his hair.

“How do you feel, my good girl?” Tom whispered hoarsely between little licks and nips at Lotte’s shoulders and neck.

It took her a few breaths to answer him. When she did reply, her words came out sluggishly, so drunk was Charlotte on oxytocin from Tom’s attentions.

“Still…ah…hurting some…” Charlotte breathed in reply, becoming keenly aware of Tom’s roving mouth against her skin and his hardening flesh beneath the swell of her bottom.

With one hand anchored around her waist underwater, Tom’s other arm swept across Lotte’s breasts, moving possessively up to her throat to tilt her head just so, so he could whisper in her ear.

“You know, my little Lotte, that orgasms can actually help with your menstrual pains?”

Charlotte could do nothing but close her eyes and groan, embarrassed at what Tom insinuated.

There’s no way we’re doing that...

When he could tell she wasn’t taking his bait, Tom began to bite softly at the flesh of Lotte’s earlobe, dropping his voice to its lowest octave.

“Did you also know,” he brought his hand closer to Charlotte’s face so she could hear the tiny whirring mechanism he’d just procured from his trouser pocket, “that our little friend here is waterproof?”

At the sound of the little bullet vibrating next to her, Lotte opened her eyes and blushed a dark shade of crimson. To add to her embarrassment, a deep twinge in her belly caused her to grimace and cry out, ever so slightly. She would have tried to hide her pain better, had she known what Tom wanted to do to…alleviate her pain here in the bath.
“T-Tom…no…” she whispered, barely able to look at him. “I can’t do…that…”

He would have felt discomfort at her anguish and embarrassment over the situation if he didn’t find her so thoroughly adorable. So unbelievably sexy, naked and wet in his arms. And he knew she was uncomfortable – in pain – and he wanted to relieve her. Of course he had his own selfish motives, wanting to watch his gorgeous girl come apart in his arms.

“Why not, my love? It’s just you and me here,” he murmured against the damp tendrils of hair curling at the base of her neck. “Close your eyes and relax, Charlotte.”

The way he said Charlotte had her clenching her thighs together almost painfully. She was sure he didn’t mean it in such a commanding way, but Tom’s use of her full name brooked no disobedience. Her eyelids slid shut, traitorously, and she felt herself melting into his warm strength. Lulling herself into a sense of calm, Lotte began to drift off, when suddenly, a frisson of pleasure darted through her.

“Oh…”

Tom gave Charlotte no time to think as he placed the smooth, buzzing vibe gently against the tip of her right nipple, watching the rosy peak harden and elongate slightly at his attention. He smiled to himself as she stretched out in his arms, involuntarily seeking more of the sensation as he held the vibrator away from her breast for a few seconds before moving it to her left.

“There’s my girl.”

She couldn’t stifle the cry that spilled from her mouth when the buzzing sensation settled at the tip of her left nipple.

Grasping her more tightly to his own naked body, Tom felt a lengthy shudder ripple through Lotte as he listened to her soft mewls.

“Tell me, sweet. Tell me why, exactly, you can’t…do…this…”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth he tore the bullet from her, feeling her body go slack in his arms at the loss of precious stimulation. She took a few moments to breathe deeply, trying to remember why she was fighting him. Ashamedly, she pressed her face into Tom’s pectorals, turning slightly in the tub so that she was back in a fetal position between Tom’s long legs.

“I’ll…bleed…” she whispered, mortification painting her tone of voice.

“Oh, my darling,” Tom laughed – just for a moment – before responding in a lovingly dominant tone. “We’re in the bath.”

As he voiced reason, he returned the vibrator to Charlotte’s skin, running a light trail from between her breasts down to the soft skin of her navel, under the water. She cried out again, very softly. Before she knew what she was doing, Lotte returned to her original position, prone against Tom’s chest and situated on her back, hands resting on his muscular thighs. Her little fingers dug slightly into his skin at every trace of the bullet against her flesh. Tom’s long arms afforded him quite the reach; he teased the backs of Charlotte’s knees, the little creases of flesh where her hips met her thighs. He knew she was close when he felt little continual tremors running through her body, wedged tightly against his own in the oversize bathtub.

“I can’t…”

Still she tried to convince him she didn’t want what he was offering. He could hear the hesitation in her voice, yes, but all the signals her body gave him told a completely different story. The flush of
her skin could no longer be down to the temperature of the water. Her straining, berry-colored nipples weren’t an indication of cold. So Tom gave her no choice. Pressing a firm arm across her midsection, he moved Charlotte up his body just a bit, so that she was entirely in his lap.

“Hands on the tub, my beauty.”

“But –”

She struggled momentarily at his instructions until he very softly sank his teeth into her jugular, not letting up until her tiny palms found their place at the edges of the bathtub.

“Good girl.”

Charlotte released a shuddering breath at his endearment for her.

“Now, my love, listen very carefully. Put those lovely legs on the outside of mine, please.”

He waited just a few moments as she obediently, if not grudgingly, lifted her legs out of the water to slide them back in overtop his. Tom immediately pinned her thighs open, pressing her knees against the side of the tub with his own.

“Still being my good girl. Yes.”

Tom wasted no more time. He knew she was agitated and could see the elevated rate of her pulse throbbing beneath the delicate, creamy skin of her throat. Dipping his hand under the water with finesse, he immediately sought out Lotte’s tiny curls and pressed the bullet snugly against the underside of her clit.

Her back bowed; the breath was stolen from her lungs. All Charlotte could do was brace herself against Tom. In her responsive new position – arched and tense – she pressed herself unabashedly against his groin. He moaned his own pleasure: at her body on display, at the soft, supple feel of her bottom against his now-aching cock.

“Oh god YES.”

She was breathing harshly, her knuckles white as she gripped the edge of the tub with both hands. Tom began to rotate the vibrator in the smallest of circles, never once leaving the agonizingly pleasurable nerves of her swollen little bud. Lotte’s hips responded in kind; she began a fluid rocking motion against his attentions as Tom’s mouth made its way back to her ear.

“Still think this isn’t a good idea, sweet?” he growled seductively, pressing the bullet into her flesh just a bit harder. Charlotte’s only response was to grind harder against Tom’s hand, her bottom brushing up and down his straining length as she moved. Her brow furrowed and she bit her lip, shaking in concentration.

“It’s…oh…”

“Just think, lovely,” Tom continued as he rubbed the buzzing toy increasingly faster against Lotte’s throbbing button, “when you come, you’ll feel so much better. Get all of that tension out of your abdomen…”

He broke off to mouth roughly at her neck once more, purring happily at the way Charlotte’s hips were now bucking more insistently under the water. Her head dropped back against Tom’s shoulder at the dual pleasures he gifted to her.
“Look how *spread* you are, Lotte…”

She cried out his name softly, stuttering on the *T*.

“Are you close, my love? Tell me when your little pussy wants to come.”

One of Charlotte’s hands flew from the lip of the tub to tangle in Tom’s hair as she turned her head, panting, to seek out his mouth. He’d no sooner pressed his lips to hers when she began slicking her tongue against the seam of his mouth, wanting to taste him more deeply.

“‘m…going t-to come…” Lotte moaned into his mouth, inhaling sharply.

Sucking on her bottom lip briefly, Tom pressed the vibrator even more firmly against Charlotte’s clit, feeling her legs trembling against his own as her end hurtled ever closer.

“Yes, baby. I know,” he purred. “And then,” here Tom moaned briefly as he almost slid into Charlotte’s core, “*we’re going to fuck.*”

By the time he’d said the last word, sounding so proper yet so filthy with his gorgeous accent, Charlotte was bearing down with all her might against the bullet as moan after deep moan fell from her mouth. When the incoherent moans turned into a low, throaty “yes” that seemed to continue on and on, Tom knew his little Lotte found her satisfaction. He kept working her, refusing to remove the little contraption from her pussy until she could take no more. In doing so, her orgasm ran deeply, causing her entire body to shudder helplessly against his own. Tom counted slowly in his head, getting to twenty-four before Charlotte weakly brushed his hand away from her center, falling slack into his arms from the little bit of effort she’d just expended after a particularly strong orgasm. She curled weakly into his arms, turning so she was on her side against him, and Tom quickly dropped the bullet to the floor so he could envelop his best girl within the safety of his embrace. With one hand, he made small waves in the bathwater so that warm ripples splashed over Lotte’s chest and uncovered shoulders. Despite her flushed state, he didn’t want her to be cold.

“Oh my *god,*” she whispered quietly, trying to return her breathing to normal.

“Better?” Tom chuckled, hugging Charlotte to him possessively. He couldn’t help it; this sweet woman, who weeks ago declared herself *frigid,* of all things, could now practically come at his command. The feeling was heady.

When she didn’t say anything, Tom tilted her face up toward his own, only to see mortification in her eyes.

“Darling, are you all right?” he queried, concerned. He hauled Charlotte up further into his embrace, turning her so she was seated in his lap, her arms wrapped around his shoulders and her legs around his waist. A quiet voice answered his question as she shyly fought to keep eye contact with Tom.

“You’re not…disgusted with me?”

Taking her face delicately in his hands, Tom pressed soothing kisses against Charlotte’s brow.

“Why on earth would I be disgusted, lovely?” he asked, genuinely concerned that she could ever think he thought of her in any unpleasant way.

Peering down into the water, Charlotte didn’t need to say anything. Tom followed suit and could see a faint little bloom of pink in the water.

“Stand up,” he ordered softly.
Holding Lotte’s hands, he helped her into a kneeling position, followed by a standing one. Tom remained seated in the tub, splayed underneath Charlotte. Unsure of herself, she peered down where Tom sat sprawled in the water, his hands still holding both of hers. When he broke contact with his right hand to reach between her legs, Charlotte’s eyes widened and she made to move away from him.

“No.”

That one word was all it took for Charlotte to freeze in place. Tom raised an eyebrow up at her, recognizing her hesitance but demonstrating he meant business.

Her disgust, her shame began to melt away when Tom placed two of those devilishly long fingers against the swollen seam of her pussy, tickling slightly until some of her wetness began to seep onto the pads of his index and middle fingers. She couldn’t help it; she looked down and saw him stroking her labia and clit, a glistening mixture of light pink fluid coating his skin.

*I wish this didn’t feel so good,* she warred with herself.

“This will *never* disgust me, lovely,” he murmured, gazing into Lotte’s eyes as he continued to rub against her over-sensitized flesh. A tiny drop of bright red blood ran leisurely into Tom’s palm, and he moaned at the sight of it, his other hand grasping onto his erection under the water. Charlotte leaned forward a bit, falling under the spell of Tom’s gentle touch against her. She watched his hand stroking her; then her eyes darted to his fist tugging slowly, pleasurably, along the length of his shaft.

“It means your body is working properly, lovely,” he breathed, beginning to rub her clit insistently in time with his own strokes. “It means you can be ripe with my child.”

At this last declaration, Tom slid two fingers into Charlotte’s quivering core and began to stroke slowly against her aroused walls. Her pupils were completely blown, staring down at Tom in surprised pleasure as he massaged her with his dexterous fingers. He leaned his head against the back of the tub to stare at her with a lazy, seductive gaze, fisting his cock slowly all the while.

“I’ve also read that you’re much wetter…much *easier* to arouse during your cycle,” he growled, watching his fingers slide in and out of Lotte’s core.

She couldn’t take much more, she decided. All thoughts of embarrassment and disgust had been quickly tossed aside, and Tom seemed extremely interested in exploring her, period or no. Gently taking his hand and removing his fingers from her slick cleft, Charlotte carefully knelt down, straddled Tom, and plunged her hand into the water to wrap around his aching cock, placing it at her entrance. He leered at her, success written on his face.

“Lovely knows what I want, doesn’t she?” he leaned forward to capture her lips in a rough kiss, smothering her mouth with his own as she guided his throbbing erection into her overheated cunt.

As she felt him slide all the way in, seating herself nimbly atop his lap, Charlotte’s head dropped back and she loosed a rough, pleasured sound before speaking thickly, mind trying to work amid blossoming pleasure.

“Oh my god you feel…even *deeper*…like this…”

She ran fingers through the damp curls at Tom’s temples, greedily taking in the look of unashamed lust written all over his face. He laughed a dark, delighted sound in the back of his throat as Lotte began to thrust herself slowly up and down his cock.

“My beautiful girl…worried about getting a little dirty,” he smiled, reaching out to pinch a nipple
roughly, squeezing until Charlotte squeaked, her mouth open in an adorable little O. “I’m sure if one orgasm helps your aching body, sweet, then another can’t hurt, right?” Tom murmured, wrapping his arms around her back.

Lotte couldn’t answer him. The only thing that came out of her mouth was a soft “ ngh ” sound. She looked down into the water once more and could see more tendrils of bright red swirling in the water. Whereas before this would have mortified her, she was currently in such an aroused state that it only served to ratchet her pleasure to a new level.

“Feels good, doesn’t it?” Tom purred, holding her body tighter against his own. Charlotte bit her lip, nodding, her eyes hooded and her face and neck deliciously flushed. “I love you, sweet. You know that?” Tom asked as he began thrusting counterpoint to Lotte’s movements. His hips were practically out of the water he was so eager to be inside of her, deeper and deeper with each thrust.


He tilted to the side of the tub momentarily, and Charlotte, with wide eyes, watched as his graceful fingers retrieved the little vibrator from the marble floor, only to slip back into the bathwater right… against… her aching button.

“Jesus Christ, Tom…” Charlotte cried, lurching forward to press herself bodily against him, hips still working frantically under the water.

He wrapped one arm strongly around her back, urging her up and down on his painfully hard erection, while his other hand remained occupied between her legs, pressing the bullet hard against her clit.

“My Charlotte comes every time, doesn’t she? Hmm?” he spoke hoarsely, licking his dry lips at the sight of the lovely girl keening and thrusting against him. “Whether we’re… ooh… in bed, or in the bath, or… yes, lovely… your beautiful body needs some relief…”

She broke through his one-sided conversation, looking him dead in the eye as she pressed his hand more firmly against her clit. “Harder.”

He obliged immediately, punishing her swollen button and snapping his hips against hers in an insistent need you, want you rhythm.

Crying out in relief at his doubled efforts, Charlotte continued feeling brave, wrapped up in the sinfully delicious feeling of their coupling.

“I said harder, Thomas. Do it…”

As if she hadn’t made herself clear enough, she dug her nails into the skin of his shoulder, leaning forward to bite at his neck. He stuttered for a moment, surprised at her forward behavior and the wantonness in her voice.

So this is what it’s like when the vixen finally comes to play…

Blindly, his mouth felt along Charlotte’s shoulder and up the soft skin of her throat until he was rewarded with the feeling of her swollen mouth pressed against his. Her panting breaths puffed warmly against him, and he took every opportunity he could to plunder her mouth with his tongue, groaning at the feel of her pussy beginning to flutter around his cock.

“Oh my lovely girl. You’re going to come again…” he moaned, wrapping a hand atop her shoulder so he could force her more harshly up and down his straining shaft.
“Yes, baby,” Charlotte purred breathily, her hand once more pushing Tom’s against her clit, the vibrations inching her ever closer to release. “All because...hahh...of you. Only you do this to me...”

She saw the pride in his eyes, the absolute male bravado at her words. He increased his efforts against and within her, hips stuttering in a desperate attempt to keep up a satisfying rhythm for his best girl.

Feeling the coil in her belly tightening to its absolute tautest, Lotte braced herself against Tom and forced his head back, fingers clutching in his long hair, to look into her eyes. “Watch what y-you do to me, Tom,” she ground out, seconds before the rapturous waves began washing over her.

He couldn’t have looked away if he tried; she managed to keep those ethereal gray eyes open as she shook and keened in pleasure, pussy contracting violently around him. When he made to pull the bullet away from her, she slammed her hand down in the water and held it – held him – there.

“Want…to come…on you...as I c-can…” she shuddered, still staring into his heavy-lidded azure gaze. Her hips continued their sensual undulations.

Tom exploded. He wanted to be everywhere, doing everything, at once. He wanted to watch her. He wanted to kiss her, to bite her. He wanted to pull her off of him and drink from between her thighs. He wanted to fuck her until she was raw, hoarse, and exhausted in his arms. In the end, he had to settle for spurting hot streams deep into her wet heat.

“Charlotte...goddammit...” he quaked against her, still rutting as the last of his pleasure drained from him. “My fucking lovely girl.”

Weakly, and with a tired smile, Lotte grabbed at his hand underwater and took the vibrator from his shaking fingers, turning it off and dropping it carefully outside the bathtub. As soon as she heard the small thud on the marble, she collapsed happily against Tom’s chest, her legs loosening their grip around his hips. All strength gone, Tom could only kiss Charlotte’s sweaty forehead as he softened inside the welcoming warmth of her body. He felt the strong thump of her heart against his own chest, and held her tighter just knowing that her heart beat for him.

“Apparently I’m not as squeamish as I thought,” she whispered, head tucked under his chin. She laughed a little, then gently moved away so as to extricate herself from Tom.

_He has to be cramped and uncomfortable at this point, she thought. Those long legs trapped under me all this time..._ 

She’d only moved a few inches when Tom yanked her back against him forcefully, causing her to shriek in surprise.

“Not yet.”

Charlotte tried again, bracing a hand on Tom’s heaving chest, coming back to her senses enough that she realized the bathwater now felt tepid at best.

“I said no, lovely.”

Tom’s commanding voice made her shiver once more, not due to the water’s temperature. “You freed me from obligations this afternoon and I’m going to saturate myself with you – literally and figuratively – since we’ll need to be clothed and civilized at Cinema Moderno this evening.”

“I just...thought you’d be uncomfortable in...this position,” Charlotte murmured, blushing at the dominance in Tom’s tone.
She liked it.

So much, in fact, that she laid her head back down on Tom’s chest and relaxed her entire body against him once more.

“I will never be uncomfortable in any position with you, my darling,” Tom purred, rocking her gently in his arms. “Especially if that position involves you straddled across my lap with those gorgeous breasts crushed against my chest and that delightfully wet pussy weeping onto my cock.”

Lotte gasped a little, colouring at his explicit words, and warming once more.

“If you keep talking like that we’ll never make it to the carpet tonight, baby,” she poked Tom lovingly in the side, tickling him.

“Oh, my love,” he rebutted, “we’ll make it eventually. Even if I have to call for a hired car with tinted windows…I’d need to remove my suit in the backseat so that when you’re coming on my dick, your blood making us slicker against one another…”

“Thomas William! Stop!” Charlotte shrieked out, smacking him lightly on the shoulder. She didn’t have the heart to tell him the thought sent stabbing bolts of arousal deep into her belly.

He laughed heartily, picking Lotte up gingerly and standing in the tub, turning on the shower to wash away the remnants of their lovemaking.

“You see, my love, nothing to be ashamed of.”

Charlotte marveled at how quickly Tom could change from deeply seductive to unbelievably loving and caring. He rinsed her off carefully, making sure all traces of blood and semen were removed from her person. After doing a once-over on himself, he turned off the shower and led Lotte onto the plush bathmat at their feet, reaching out for a towel to wrap her in.

Leaning forward to whisper against her lips, Tom rubbed his hands along her towel-clad body. “We have a date at the Sistine Chapel in thirty minutes, darling.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t have the museum cleared for us, darling, but it was short notice,” Tom whispered in apology, a pained look on his face as he led Charlotte into the quiet, reverent splendor of la Capella Sistina.

They made an odd, anachronistic pair to be sure: dressed in their evening finery amid frescoes painted over five hundred years previous to their existence. The few tourists who were there took notice of them only momentarily before returning their gaze overhead to soak in the genius of Michelangelo’s work.

Charlotte hadn’t said two words since entering the chapel, and Tom mistook her silence for disappointment at the hurried surprise he’d only just barely managed to arrange for them.

She wasn’t disappointed in the least. She was in awe.

Taking his hand and continuing to look upward, Charlotte encouraged Tom to walk with her, strolling slowly through the sacred space. “Look how lovely,” she whispered to herself, marveling at the sheer magnitude of work Buonarroti managed on the walls and ceiling.
“He did it all while standing,” Tom whispered to her, always eager to share the breadth of knowledge he possessed. “Many people think he painted whilst lying on his back, on the scaffolding,” he pointed upward as if to gesture at places where the scaffolding had once been, “but he stood, head turned upward, to paint the whole thing.”

Shaking her head subtly in amazement, Charlotte gave Tom’s hand a two-squeeze before returning her gaze to his face.

“I love how intelligent you are,” she proclaimed simply. The adoration in her eyes couldn’t be missed.

Tom blushed, smiling slightly as he looked at his shoes, adjusting his tie in a nervous gesture. “I like to read,” he murmured. “And I like knowing and sharing things.”

“I swear, Thomas, you become more and more attractive to me every second I’m with you,” Charlotte marveled, hugging him as delicately as possible so as not to crease the silk of her evening gown.

Placing a guiding hand on the small of Lotte’s bare back, Tom guided her to a quiet corner of the chapel where they would be out of earshot of the other visitors milling about.

“I can say the same about you, my darling girl. I’m afraid we’ll need to go soon,” he frowned.

Charlotte took a last lingering glance at the vivid paintings that surrounded her and breathed in deeply, committing the experience to memory.

“We’ve a premiere to get to, baby. You feeling up to it?” she asked as she let Tom lead her away from the chapel and down the elaborate Double Spiral Staircase. “You did take the other part of the Seroxat, didn’t you?”

He nodded, tensing slightly at what they were about to get themselves into before escorting Lotte to the waiting car outside.

“I’ll be with you the whole time, my sweet man,” Charlotte reminded him as he held her door open, situiting her safely before closing her in. When they were seated and buckled, ready to go, Tom reached out for Lotte’s hand and asked her to breathe with him for a few moments.

“In through your nose…out through your mouth,” she murmured, chanting the instruction in a rhythmic pattern that had Tom zoning out and focusing only on the sounds of Charlotte’s dress fabric rustling against the leather interior of the car. “You don’t have to sign anything, you don’t have to stop…we can walk straight in and you can do your thing,” Lotte continued, stroking her hands through Tom’s slightly styled hair.

He smiled gratefully, continuing his breathing. His eyes were closed and Charlotte could see, despite the bit of agitation in his demeanour, he was doing fairly well all things considered. She would never get tired of seeing him lean into her touch.

“Let’s go slowly, darling,” he breathed, “and then we’ll see how I do. Just don’t leave my side, please.”

“Never, baby.”
Charlotte remained true to her word, keeping hold of Tom in some form from the time they exited the car until they reached the lobby of the Cinema Moderno. He didn’t outright panic at all, but there were a few moments when the crowd cheered too loudly for him, or when the photographers took too many pictures in succession, shouting Tom’s name here, there, and everywhere to get his attention.

Reminding herself that touch had once helped her through some initially rough moments, she stroked Tom’s back, or squeezed his hand, or ran a hand through his hair as they steadily made progress down the carpet. As they neared the entrance to the theatre, Tom turned to Charlotte with relief in his eyes.

“We did it, lovely,” he whispered, leaning forward to steal a quick kiss from her painted lips.

The paparazzi in attendance all got a phenomenal photo that evening: Tom and Charlotte with foreheads pressed together, locked in a loving embrace that exuded peace and, to all eyes, true love.

They’d decided to stay and watch *Dark Conquest* on the silver screen, and Charlotte, for the first time, really immersed herself in the film and in Tom’s character, Harmon Weeks.

Tom, however, spent the duration of the film watching *Lotte*, staring at her emotional, expressive face as she followed the story.

He was simply grateful to have successfully walked the carpet, his love in tow, without an incident. Being able to relax – to hide – in the darkened anonymity of the theatre calmed him even more.

But he was startled from this calm when the pocket of his trousers buzzed. Reaching down to retrieve his mobile and swipe to the home screen, he saw he had a text from…

Jacqueline.

*Saw your video on Twitter…very nice.*

In Tom’s peripheral vision, he noticed that Charlotte was still deeply ensconced in the film. He breathed a sigh of relief, but then stiffened immediately as Jacqueline sent another rapid-fire missive.

*I’m sure you’re out working right now but can you call me when you’re done?*

He fumbled awkwardly, trying to delete the messages, but he knew his agitation would alert Charlotte, so he simply shut down his phone and pocketed it.

When Lotte turned to him and smiled, he was too flustered to notice the emotion didn’t reach her eyes.

He hadn’t yet realized she’d seen.
Dubai: Part I

Chapter Summary

More problems arise for our favorite couple.

Chapter Notes

Oh, dear. These two aren't cooperating at all. And that *bitch* Jacqueline…always messing things up for others!

Hope you're still with me, my pretties. Leave me some love!

“It’s okay if you need to take that,” Lotte murmured beside Tom, sadly aware that he still thought she had no idea who was contacting him.

She stared out the window as they sped back to La Cavalieri, her heart sinking in her chest. His mobile had been ringing non-stop since the final standing ovation for Dark Conquest.

Had she done something or said something to make Tom not want her anymore? Was that why Jacqueline was calling?

They’re probably getting back together, Charlotte decided to herself. He’s had his fun with me but realizes I’ll never be glamorous like her. I just make him mad when I change his schedule.

Any goodwill Tom managed to eke out with his apologies and their intimate tryst in the bath earlier vanished. Charlotte was simply convinced she’d imagined everything: his proclaimed love for her, his attraction to her, his willingness to help nurse her back to health after their ordeal.

If Tom was to take his call from Jacqueline back at the hotel, Lotte was going to place her own to Dr. Rochester. The panic that had so blessedly abated in the last several days clawed its way up her throat, blotting out her breath and causing her heart to beat erratically within her chest.

“Darling, are you not feeling well?” Tom asked, seeing tears shining in Charlotte’s eyes and watching her take a few deep, shaky breaths. He went to reach for her but Lotte shook her head, plastering a smile on her face and praying internally that he’d just leave her alone. She weakly batted his hand away.

“I’m fine, Tom. It’s fine. Just a little tired,” she breathed, barely looking in his direction. Out of the corner of her eye she registered his mobile clutched protectively in the hand that was furthest from her view. The knife twisted a little deeper into her heart.

“You really should answer your phone, Tom. Whoever is calling seems quite insistent.”

He looked down at the screen of his iPhone, a frown on his face, and then returned his gaze to Charlotte, whose forehead pressed wearily against the cool glass of the chauffeured car. If he’d been smart, he would have just answered the phone and had it out, very loudly and very specifically, with
the caller. But he felt guilt at even the notion of answering Jacqueline’s call. He wanted to protect his little Lotte at all costs.

So he made the idiotic decision to deceive her, to make sure she didn’t know he was speaking to Jacqueline Silver.

It was unfortunate that she already knew. He, however, was unaware.

“It’s just a colleague who apparently has some questions for me about my social media presence,” Tom lied as smoothly as he could. He wasn’t a great liar, to everyone’s surprise. People he was close to were often shocked when he admitted it was difficult for him to tell untruths. They cited plain evidence that he was an actor, as if this gave him credibility as a liar. He preferred to view his business as a job of truth telling, an examination of his characters’ motivations and neuroses.

Charlotte said nothing in reply until the car came to a stop in front of their hotel. With a soft “okay”, she exited the vehicle and made her way into the lobby, Tom rushing to thank the driver and catch up to her as she headed toward the bank of lifts. He swore he could see a tear streaking down Lotte’s face as he made it to the lift doors, which closed on him before he could join her inside.

Tom had two options.

He could rush upstairs and go after Charlotte, consoling her about whatever she was upset. *Surely she doesn’t know Jacqueline is the one calling,* Tom thought.

His other option was to stay down in the lobby where Lotte couldn’t overhear anything about this ridiculous business between himself and his ex-girlfriend. He would hear whatever Jacqueline had to say and put yet another stop to it, to her, in his life. He’d actually had the gall to think she would leave him alone after their final confrontation back at Hampstead.

Agitation won out, unfortunately, and Tom made his way to a private corner of La Cavalieri’s lobby to perch on the edge of a luxurious sofa, finding Jacqueline Silver’s number still, regretfully, in his contacts list. He called.

“Hi, Tom,” she picked up immediately. The jazz singer’s throaty voice was meant to pour over him like sweet honey. She always talked in a low register when speaking with him, when attempting her ridiculous seductions, and he figured she did so now as a way to try and trap him in her poisonous web. Jacqueline knew he always loved her voice, loved hearing her rehearsing and practicing the phrasing for old jazz standards she re-recorded with so much love and care.

“Jacqueline. Good evening.”

“Oh, Tommy,” she cooed, and he cringed at her childish nickname for him. “I’m so glad you called me. I’m just taking a little break in the studio here working on a new adaptation of ‘Dindi’…”

“What do you want, Jacq?” Tom rubbed at his eyes. This was a huge mistake.

She stopped momentarily, hearing the attitude in his tone. Jacqueline thought perhaps she’d won, receiving a call from Tom after her various messages and calls begging and pleading to speak with him. His voice signaled her otherwise. Not yet completely deterred, she tried again.

“Well, Tommy, like I said, I really loved the video you did to raise awareness for PTSD, and I’d simply love to help your charities. I was thinking perhaps I could do my own bit to help you – maybe we could record a little…duet together? With the proceeds going to the causes you care so much about?”
She hadn’t even mentioned Lotte’s involvement. Somehow, this enraged Tom even more.

“I don’t sing, Jacq. You know this,” he sought to keep his tone professional and polite, despite the fact that Miss Silver was trying to use his publicity for her own gain, and that she was most likely cooking up a plan to try and re-start their relationship.

“But Tommy, you were *smashing* as Hank, babe! Everyone was so impressed with your musical abilities —”

He cut her off.

“No.”

Tom could practically hear the gears turning in Jacqueline’s head as she switched tactics. He knew the conversation couldn’t go on much longer, as his last reserve of patience was quickly depleting. The whining would start soon, followed by the pathetic apology and more pleading on her part. He knew her so well.

“Tom, *baby*, I’m so sorry about how I acted. I just…I just miss you and love you so much and I want us to go back to the way things *were*. I want us to be happy together.”

She was delusional if she thought he’d be happy, *together*, with her. It was a mistake to call her, he decided, and he silently berated himself for leaving Charlotte on her own just so he could stay down in the lobby and speak with Jacqueline. How could he be so stupid? Everything he loved and wanted was upstairs in his suite. His anger at his own hasty decision morphed into venom that he poured willingly into Jacq’s ear.

“Jacqueline, I could never – *will never* – be happy with you. You need to stop contacting me or I’ll file a restraining order. We’ve been over. We’re still over. Leave me alone.”

Just as he went to end the call he could hear his ex’s plaintive, whining voice on the other end of the line.

“I can’t believe you picked *her* over me…”

He mashed his finger against the red button on his mobile display to end the call, stalking back over to the lifts. A heavy feeling settled in his stomach and his heart as he walked through the doors and pressed the button for his floor. He’d just…let Lotte go upstairs by herself when she was clearly upset. What kind of a terrible boyfriend was he? She’d insisted in the car that she was fine, but Tom had two sisters and a smattering of female friends: he knew that when a woman said she was “fine” she was very clearly anything but fine.

And he’d ignored her.

“I know this is stupid, but it’s really not about anxiety related to the V&A stuff anymore,” Charlotte cried quietly into the phone. She was trying to multitask while talking to Dr. Rochester but was unsuccessful. She couldn’t reach the zipper of her evening gown, and she needed both hands to remove the myriad pins from her hair. In the end, she settled for talking to their therapist while she began to pack her suitcase in a one-handed, halfhearted sort of way.

“Tom’s little outburst the other night during our session has me questioning a lot of things, like my
place in his world. My job. Our relationship…” Lotte trailed off as a fresh wave of tears began leaking from her eyes.

Dr. Rochester was silent for a moment on the other end as she tried delicately to phrase what she wanted to explain to Charlotte.

“I know that, by your own admission, you’ve had very few significant relationships, Charlotte. And I also know that the most significant one aside from Tom was a very emotionally and verbally abusive relationship. Is it safe to say that, until very recently, you may have been viewing Tom as a white knight, as your rescuer? Someone who could positively do no wrong?”

Lotte stopped and sniffed, letting Dr. Rochester’s words sink in as the therapist continued.

“I think we’ve established that Tom is most definitely a wonderful man and an excellent partner to you, Charlotte, but he’s not perfect.”

“No, he isn’t,” Lotte replied sadly, looking up suddenly when she heard the sound of Tom opening the suite door. “In fact he’s been caught in a lie this evening pertaining to his ex-girlfriend.”

Saying the words out loud caused Charlotte’s heart to clench even more painfully than it had already done, and she struggled to compose herself as Tom’s gentle voice called out to her from the entryway.

“Lotte? Darling?”

Dr. Rochester brought Charlotte back to the present conversation.

“I think you need to hear Tom out, Charlotte, and keep an open mind this evening despite these new anxieties you’re having. Give him a chance to explain himself and take things slowly from there,” the doctor advised.

Signing off quietly, Charlotte discarded her mobile and quickly wiped her tears just as Tom appeared in the bedroom of the suite. He had the gall to look devastatingly handsome in his eveningwear, still, despite the trepidation currently painting his face. Seeing the traces of tears on Lotte’s dewy face, Tom rushed to her with arms open and a pained expression twisting his mouth.

“Lovely, why are you crying? What’s happened?” he murmured, trying to gather Charlotte into his embrace.

She sidestepped him, continuing to pack her luggage. The methodical folding motions gave her something to focus on other than Tom’s face. Clearing her throat, Charlotte put her feelers out.

“How was your colleague? Everything okay?” Her questions hung in the air as Tom’s arms dropped to his sides. In her peripheral vision, Charlotte could see his head bow, hanging – with what emotion she couldn’t decide. Defeat? Guilt? Resignation? Was he about to deliver the fatal blow on which she was waiting?

“Darling, it, um, wasn’t a colleague,” Tom spoke softly. Charlotte wanted very much to let him stew, but she was so worried, so upset at his blatant untruth in the car, that words slipped past her lips before she could stop them.

“It was Jacqueline, wasn’t it?”

Tom looked at Lotte, eyes wide, and nodded twice, very small nods that caused Charlotte’s stomach to flip nervously. Here it comes, she braced herself. Before she lost her nerve, she asked the question
she’d wanted to ask since their time in the car, heading back from *Dark Conquest*.

“Why did you lie about who it was?” Charlotte’s voice broke at the end of the query. She found she couldn’t look at Tom, and returned her focus to folding her garments. If she looked at him, she would begin crying uncontrollably. That wasn’t how she wanted him to remember her: as a weak, foolish, trusting girl who cried like a teenager as her relationship fell apart around her.

At the sound of her broken voice, Tom rushed to Lotte and grasped her tightly in his arms. She wanted to fight him with all her might; once his overwhelming scent filled her senses and his strong arms braced her body against his, though, she was lost. One hand pushed him away from her, but Lotte’s other tiny hand grasped tightly at his bicep, anchoring him to her.

Tom was frantic. His own panic rising in his throat, he struggled to keep calm as he observed his best girl struggling against him – against the lie he’d told which, in his mind, was meant to protect Lotte, was meant to prevent her from worrying or feeling any hurt. He ran his hands as soothingly as she allowed over her hair, down her neck, across her back and down her sides as he tried valiantly to press kisses atop her head and against her face. When he managed to press his lips against hers, a sob escaped Charlotte’s mouth before she threaded her fingers through his hair, kissing him wildly. Tears streaked copiously down her face.

“Lotte, my love,” Tom shushed her, rocking her against him in their standing position, “I’m so sorry I lied.”

All she did was hiccup another small sob. Taking her delicate face in his large hands, Tom forced his best girl to look at him, moving his right hand to the pins in her hair, which he began gently disentangling from her luxurious curls.

“I wanted to protect you from worry – from this worry you’re having right now…” he trailed off, continuing to loosen her tresses from their partial updo. “She wanted to get back together…”

Charlotte sighed shakily and tried to move away from Tom, but he gripped her tightly – almost painfully so – to his chest.

“I refused, my love. Flat out. I threatened her with a restraining order if she contacted me again, ever,” he explained, removing the last pin from Lotte’s hair and running his fingers through the long tresses to search for any strays he’d missed.

Still Charlotte said nothing.

She couldn’t look at him.

She couldn’t stop thinking about the fact he’d lied to her. Her Tom, who would never deceive her knowingly in any way, had lied. Badly. Yes. But also too easily.

She allowed him to turn her around so as to unzip the gown from her body, and he helped her step out of the dress, ignoring his body’s response at seeing lovely little Lotte in nothing but racy lingerie. It was not the time to focus on his wants and needs. He had amends to make.

“Will you please forgive me, my love?” Tom asked plaintively. Charlotte took that moment to pull away from Tom, moving to find a pair of pajamas in her already mostly-packed suitcase. She was tired and didn’t want to have this conversation. Her anger, she knew, would color whatever she said to him.

“I’d like to go to sleep. It’s been a long day,” she murmured sadly.
All Tom could do was nod, stepping back and watching as Lotte went into the bathroom to ready herself for bed. When the bathroom door shut with a resolute finality, Tom sat on the edge of the bed, head in his hands, and tried to take a few deep breaths.

*You've royally fucked this up, you stupid arse,* he scolded. He waited and waited for Charlotte to finish in the bathroom, and by the time several minutes elapsed, he had elected to strip off his suit and get into his own pajamas. Tom wanted nothing more than to hold his little Lotte and try to sleep, hoping that a good night of rest and close proximity with her would heal her unhappiness at his poor decision.

When ten minutes elapsed without any sound from the loo, Tom became worried.

“Lotte, sweet?” he walked over to the bathroom door and knocked gently, tapping his knuckles twice on the door.

No answer.

Tom barged into the bathroom, frantic at the thought of what he might find. But all he saw was Lotte, crying atop the closed lid of the toilet seat. She looked startled and embarrassed at his dramatic entrance, and her mouth opened and closed a few times before she found words.

“Give me a minute, please,” she looked back down at the wad of tissue in her hands, sniffling and then wiping her eyes delicately. When Tom made a move to kneel down in front of her, she snapped at him.

“Please just go, Tom.”

As he closed the bathroom door behind him, he thought it might be best if he slept in the living area for the night and elected to give Charlotte the bed for herself.

Neither slept very well.

Charlotte was up well before Tom the next morning, showering and mentally going over last-minute items she needed to pack before they called for the car that would take them back to the airport. Exhausted as she was, she tried to be optimistic that she could at least steal a few hours of sleep during the six-hour flight to Dubai International. Throwing back a dose of Seroxat with half a bottle of water leftover from one of their previous in-room meals, she prayed that the little half pill would ease her into a dreamless sleep high above the skies of the UAE.

She’d missed Tom’s warmth beside her in the night, and she knew that was one of a few reasons why she hadn’t slept much. They were so attached to one another now that being apart was odd. All the newfound strength and confidence Lotte had gained stemmed from the strength of that attachment.

But now she second-guessed everything. One little lie from her lover’s beautiful mouth, even an innocuous one meant to “protect” her, as Tom claimed, had Charlotte questioning all that she thought was true and real.

Would he lie to her again? Had he already done so previously?

Images of James’ first tryst, the nurse from pediatrics, flitted in her mind’s eye.
These men are all the same when it comes down to it, Lotte sighed. She zipped up her bags and moved her things carefully into the living area, where Tom sat munching on some toast and finishing the last dregs of his coffee. Dark circles lived underneath his eyes, and his face looked ashen and tired.

“You need to go ahead and shower,” Lotte reminded him gently, gesturing vaguely back into the bedroom as Tom made his way over to her.

“Did you sleep, my beauty?” he asked, trying once more to gather her into his arms. He smelled like roasted coffee and jam, and her heart tugged at his sad countenance, the delicate little traces of stubble on his face. How she loved him. How she worried about losing him.

She made a motion with her hand to suggest “sort of” in response to Tom’s query, and then sat down at the table to eat a bit of fruit and the last few bites of eggs and toast Tom left behind on his plate. When he bent to steal a kiss from her, pecking her on the cheek, she didn’t pull away. She didn’t want to.

But she made no move to embrace him.

Sensing her reluctance, Tom moved resignedly into the bedroom to gather his traveling clothes and prepare to shower and shave. Charlotte flipped through the notifications on her mobile, chewing thoughtfully on the jam-laden toast before taking a sip of freshly squeezed orange juice. She stopped at an email from Luke, sent only to her. He normally carbon-copied Tom on emails he sent to Lotte, so this was unusual.

Continuing to eat, Lotte read through Luke’s email twice, getting angrier the longer she looked at it. It seemed that Luke was as out of the loop as she was—and they both worked for Tom!

The long and short of the message was that Jacqueline Silver, after contacting Tom, had somehow managed to procure an “okay” regarding a charity single that would benefit Tom and Charlotte’s chosen PTSD-related charities. Jacqueline claimed Tom wanted to be involved and came to her with the idea, since he knew she had a lot of powerful friends in the music business.

Luke was catatonic. He practically lambasted Charlotte in the email, thinking she’d known about the situation and had given express approval for Tom to collaborate with Jacqueline.

Like hell, Lotte fumed. Her appetite vanished. Had Tom actually given the go-ahead? Was this yet another cover-up on his part? Nausea lapped thick waves in Charlotte’s stomach as she tapped out a furiously fast reply, sending it to Luke before she even finished breakfast. She explained the situation as she knew it, based only on what Tom chose to tell her the previous evening. He hadn’t mentioned anything positive coming from his conversation with Jacqueline, so Lotte told Luke that she was ninety-nine percent sure Jacqueline was still being her lying bitch of a self. Charlotte ended the email by letting Luke know she would shut down whatever she could and would talk to Tom about the situation at an appropriate moment.

When she wasn’t full of ire.

Tom continued feeling terribly about the white lie he’d told, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that Charlotte was still extremely upset at him, almost as if something else was in the works and he didn’t quite know what was happening. He was grateful when she allowed him to take her hand on their
way to the airport, and he clasped her tiny fingers in his as though his life depended on it.

It did.

The longer they sat in the car, the more Tom fell into his self-made spiral of loathing. Just when he couldn’t feel any worse, Lotte passed her mobile to him, with an open email from Luke waiting to be read on the screen. She didn’t even look at him as he skimmed his friend’s message. The fresh waves of hurt radiating off of her made even more sense to Tom once he finished reading.

Tom wanted to lash out and yell but realized he was in a now-parked car in front of a very busy international airport in the middle of Italy. It wasn’t the time or place, and he didn’t have the energy to withstand the onslaught of curiosity that a possible outburst might generate.

Lotte was out of the vehicle and grabbing her own bags before he calmed himself enough to exit the car after her. He pocketed her phone so as not to lose it, mumbled a quick “Grazie” to the driver, and followed his upset sweetheart into the terminal, bracing himself for photographers and the hell that was check-in and airport security.

He was fine until the bad news at the check-in desk.

“Ma’am? Sir? It appears that there’s been a slight glitch with your seating preferences for your flight to Dubai this morning. One of you has been moved to coach.”

Charlotte didn’t even bat an eyelash. She held her hand out for the tickets and nodded at the airline agent.

“It’s fine, thank you. I’ll take the seat in coach.”

Tom’s heart dropped. They had six hours to be separated on the same flight when all he wanted to do was sit with her and console her about what an idiot he’d been and what a lying bitch Jacqueline was! He hadn’t slept with her last night…he wouldn’t see her until they were in Dubai… His breath was coming in short bursts as they made their way to security.

“Did you take your meds?”

Charlotte had to ask again, he was so distracted. “Tom. Did you take the Seroxat? You’re not looking well.”

Startled out of his thoughts as they waited in line to go through the security checkpoint, Tom shook his head, frowning that he forgot. Charlotte whipped out a small bottle of water and motioned for him to give her his stuff so his hands were free enough to take the pill and drink the water. He gulped down the medication and the water gratefully, trying to muster a smile for Charlotte. She looked away and began to load her personal belongings into the trays as they progressed forward into the security line.

“Lotte, sweet,” he started, fumbling with his shoes and belt as he placed his own items onto the x-ray conveyor, “please tell me you and Luke know Jacqueline is lying.”

Charlotte wasn’t able to answer immediately because the security agents were waving her forward through the metal detectors. She waited until she was safely through and patted down before turning back to look at Tom. She nodded once and moved to retrieve her things from the moving belt.

Well, that’s a start, Tom thought as he was given the okay to move through the rest of the security kiosk. He grabbed his shoes and belt, re-dressing, and then slung his bag over his shoulder as he walked over to Lotte, who waited patiently for him. He handed her phone back.
“Do you really think I would lie – to either of you – about something like that?”

They began to walk unhurriedly toward their gate, both feeling soothed at the other’s nearness, but also wary of the tenuous situation. With clear eyes and a hurt expression, Charlotte turned to look at Tom as they passed the various shops and restaurants in the terminal.

“I’d like to think you wouldn’t, no. But I’m obviously a little uneasy after the fiction you told me last night.”

Her tone wasn’t icy, and it wasn’t bitchy, either. Tom had often used that word to describe Jacq’s tone on several miserable occasions. This felt more like Lotte was choosing her words carefully, like she was shielding herself from him.

“Have you…have you lied to me before?” she whispered, once they’d found their seats at the gate. She looked as though she was about to be sick everywhere, all the color gone from her face.

Tom couldn’t bear the thought. He grasped her hands, shaking his head vehemently.

“No, my love. Never. It was a stupid decision and I thought, very wrongly, that I was protecting you. I don’t want Jacqueline Silver to be involved in our lives at all. I thought…that I was shielding you.”

Lotte placed her carry-on on the chair beside her and looked at her shoes, a telltale teardrop racing down her right cheek.

“I don’t do very well with lies, Tom,” she whispered brokenly.

He didn’t have to think very hard about what his best girl referenced: clearly, she was remembering all the damage wrought by James Osprey and his handful of illicit flings during their relationship. Lotte had had to live with lies, had learned to accept them as truths, because she felt she had no other options and could do no better.

“I know, my darling,” he willed her to hold onto him, to look into his eyes with the love he hoped she still had for him. “And I’ve never lied to you before last evening. I don’t plan to ever again. My goal is not to hurt you, lovely.”

Charlotte nodded, giving Tom’s hands a weak two-squeeze just in time for their boarding procedures to begin. Tom had been so distraught by Lotte’s hurt feelings that he’d momentarily forgotten they were still to be seated in separate areas of the plane for the entirety of their journey. He felt like crying, like throwing a tantrum. How was he supposed to take care of his best girl and make things right if they couldn’t even sit together?

Tom tried offering Charlotte his first-class ticket, encouraging her to take it so she could stretch out and rest. She merely gave him an empty smile and declined.

“It’s okay, Tom. You need the leg room anyway.”

As he watched his sweet little Charlotte walking gracefully toward the back of the plane, Tom could do nothing other than take his seat, the weight of his decision the previous evening still sitting heavily on his shoulders. He had six hours to formulate a plan that would help encourage Lotte to trust him again. He had to prove to his best girl that he was worthy of her trust, and that he would stop at nothing to make her feel reassured and safe.

The lull of the plane’s engines and the dose of Seroxat pulled him into a deep sleep not ten minutes into the flight, and his plan sat discarded and barely formulated in the back of his mind.
Lotte dreamed uneasy dreams in coach. Jacqueline Silver and a host of other nameless, faceless women were in all of them.
Dubai: Part II

Chapter Summary

Arrival in Dubai finally brings Tom and Charlotte back together.

Chapter Notes

Once again, sorry for the delay! This story has taken an unexpected turn, so I'm simply along for the ride. Hope you're all still enjoying, and as always, thanks for reading. Still love hearing your thoughts and reading your messages!

Arid desert heat hit Charlotte like a wall as soon as she disembarked from the plane, still groggy from her fitful sleep full of unpleasant dreams.

Not only had Jacqueline made an appearance in her mind’s eye, but also various other women Charlotte had suspected James of cheating with through their short courtship. It seemed her subconscious was revealing to Lotte just how insecure and worried she was about the current tension with Tom.

How could one phone call and a tiny white lie turn her into such a mess?

She wondered if Tom slept at all.

Running fingers through her disheveled hair, Lotte made her way through first class – Tom was already off the aircraft – and thanked the airhostesses and pilot as she exited the plane, stepping onto the jet bridge. Tom stood waiting for her, a look of apprehension on his face.

The sight of him, so handsomely striking in his dress clothes, towering over nearly every other man around her, caused her heart rate to elevate just slightly. He had such an effect on her, even if she was mad, or sad, or worried about them. When he gave her a small smile and offered his hand, she took it.

“Did you sleep, Lotte darling?” Tom guided her into the third terminal of Dubai International. His voice was quiet, rough with fatigue.

Charlotte guessed he’d slept quite deeply as he sounded like he normally did after a good night’s rest. She was envious, but also annoyed. How could he sleep soundly with the situation at hand? Perhaps she was overreacting.

“Not well,” she answered, keeping close to Tom as they wound their way through the spotty crowds of people toward baggage claim.

*Might as well be honest, since that's what I'm asking of him…*

“I had a dream about Jacqueline,” she continued, noticing Tom grimace in her peripheral vision. “And about some of James’ female friends…”
Tom gathered her to him as best he could, given they were walking through a crowded airport. Charlotte could feel the tension in his body at her mention of Jacqueline once more.

“I’m so sorry, lovely. What can I do?” he asked. He gave her tiny hand a two-squeeze for good measure, and Charlotte smiled in spite of herself at the gesture she’d always come to associate with trust and love.

“I guess I need you to tell me I’m overreacting to what happened last night, or you need to reassure me that there’s nothing going on between you and Jacqueline – or anyone else,” she sighed before continuing. “I know you told a small untruth in the interest of protecting me, Tom, but you of all people should know, as my best friend, that I have a hard time trusting in relationships. What happened doesn’t help.”

She dropped her hand from his grasp, looking around her and blinking furiously so she wouldn’t start crying. Then she finished her thought.

“We’ve been insulated together, mainly alone, since the shooting, and I’ve had you all to myself. It seems now that reality is catching up to us.”

She watched Tom consider his response carefully, multitasking as he plucked their additional luggage from the conveyor and stacking it on a cart. He didn’t look angry, not like James used to look when Lotte would sheepishly call him out on a lie he’d told or behaviour she felt was inappropriate. Tom just looked at her like she made total sense. This was a new feeling for Charlotte. Normally she’d be browbeaten into thinking she was paranoid and crazy.

“You’re not overreacting, I don’t think,” he explained to Lotte. “I made a hasty decision, my love, and it was the wrong one.” He wheeled their luggage toward the taxi queue outside, sticking an elbow out to indicate Charlotte should place her hand in the crook of his arm.

Always a gentleman, she reasoned. Gentlemen don’t purposely hurt women they love.

“I’ve promised you that I will never lie to you again, Charlotte, but I need for you to do your best to try and trust me on that. I’ll reassure you as much as you need, my sweet girl, but please don’t think I’m James Osprey and I’ll cheat on you or leave you or be dishonest with you.” He looked hurt as he finished, signaling a cab and opening the door for Lotte when the vehicle stopped at the curb in front of her. “The trust you placed in me when you were injured and hurting was easy for you, wasn’t it?”

She situated herself into the car, nodding up at Tom, who was supervising the driver packing their luggage into the boot.

“You did it before, my love,” Tom reinforced, “and you can do it again.”

He gave her a grave smile, shutting her door carefully before walking around the back of the taxi to join her.

Charlotte’s spirits lifted somewhat upon their arrival at the opulent Grand Hyatt Dubai. The combination of blazing sun, gently wafting palm trees, and the towering, gorgeous hotel relaxed her and momentarily helped her forget her fears. Europe was lovely, but this was a rather more expensive slice of paradise. She wanted to soak it all in.

She and Tom took their time making their way into the marbled lobby, savouring the Middle East’s
blue skies and warm breeze. Moments later, as they waited in the queue for the front desk reception, Tom leaned conspiratorially toward Lotte, whispering in her ear.

“I think we have a reservation for the pool, lovely. How does that sound?”

Charlotte couldn’t help herself, smiling warmly at Tom and kissing him unexpectedly on the cheek.

“What’s that for?” he asked, pleasantly surprised. Taking hold of Charlotte’s hand, he soothingly rubbed the pad of his thumb along her delicate knuckles.

“For putting up with me,” Charlotte confessed, looking at Tom with slightly embarrassed doe eyes, the gray colour revealing the shyness that sometimes overtook her in awkward situations. Tom didn’t have the chance to respond right away, as they were next in line and needed to check in.

The two gorgeous women behind the reception desk were practically falling all over themselves when they realized who would be staying in their hotel.

“Oh, Mr. Hiddleston,” the woman called Doha cooed, “we’re so delighted to have you staying with us. If there’s anything, absolutely anything we can do for you, please let me or Farah know.”

They didn’t even glance Lotte’s way.

To her credit, Charlotte tamped down on the sudden flash of uneasy jealousy that fired through her in a hot wave, trying her best to smile during the exchange of room keys and credit card information. She knew Tom always wanted to be congenial and grateful, especially to people who were serving him, and she tried to reason with herself that he wasn’t being flirtatious with the two women, but merely pleasant, appreciative of their help.

He’s a movie star. What did you expect? As if you’ve never seen women lust after him before.

Charlotte ruminated that she was in actuality missing her convalescence at Hampstead, because she had him all to herself: his attention, his physical presence, all of it. She didn’t like sharing. Her feelings for him deepened each day they were together – feelings that were in turn making her paranoid, worried, and envious.

So it was with surprise that, after he thanked Doha and Farah profusely for their attentiveness, Charlotte found herself gathered into Tom’s arms for a rather obscene kiss.

Turning back to the two women, Tom gave one of his trademark mega-watt smiles. “I know I’m breaking social etiquette in your beautiful country by doing that,” he motioned to Charlotte and the kiss they’d just shared, “but she’s the love of my life and I just can’t help it. She’s crazy if she thinks I’m ever letting her go.”

Doha and Farah practically had hearts in their eyes; if Tom were looking to get into trouble with the law, it wouldn’t be happening today.

Blushing and stammering, the receptionists waved the couple away, giggling as Tom and Lotte wheeled their luggage toward the lifts, eager to get to their suite. When they were quietly ascending the hotel floors in the gilded lift, Charlotte broke the silence, seeing as no one else was with them.

“And you wonder why I worry, with the effect you have on people,” she half-teased, reaching up to tickle Tom in the ribs. The heat from their journey and his overly warm choice of clothing had caused a light sheen of sweat to appear on his neck and the bit of chest peeking through his dress shirt.
“Do I have the effect on you, though?” he winked playfully, pulling Lotte closer to his side. His warmth and voice affected her even then, in just a matter of a few seconds.

She was self-conscious in her answer, blushing beautifully and looking at the floor of the lift. “You must know that you do.”

She gave a small squeak as he pulled her to him for another kiss, considerably more explicit than the last one. Tom growled his approval against her mouth.

“That’s all I care about, darling. No one has our history, or our friendship, or the love that we have for one another, right?”

Charlotte nodded, a few small tears springing to her eyes at the sweet truth Tom spoke.

“There will be no more of me hurting you, Charlotte. Remind me to remind you of that whenever you need to hear it.”

Her soft “okay” melted his heart.

Upon arrival at their floor, Tom ushered Lotte from the lift and feigned as though he’d just remembered something, walking backwards down the ornately decorated hallway to talk to her with a teasing note in his voice.

“Maybe a…new surprise?”

Following her into the room, Tom nodded as he closed the door behind them. Their suite was the most spacious one they’d been in yet, and Charlotte marveled at the sheer wealth and luxury of the Emirates. They’d even been gifted a rather large basket of goodies, including fresh dates and soft, almond cardamom cookies. Lotte made a beeline for the cellophane-wrapped basket, knowing that she’d never get a cookie once Tom opened the gift. His sweet tooth was as legendary as hers.

“This surprise is rather small, I’m afraid,” Tom apologized as he walked over to inspect the goodies with Charlotte. “Remember that trip to the pool I mentioned?”

Charlotte nodded, smiling, and handed Tom one of the cookies. He took an enthusiastic bite, closing his eyes and moaning in delight.

“Oh, god. These are divine.”

Charlotte bit into her own cookie, savouring the delicate taste of the almonds and cardamom mixing with the sugary coating in which the cookies were rolled.

“I’ll make more of these for you when we get home if you tell me my surprise!” she teased.

Tom looked astounded, finishing off his treat and grasping Lotte by the elbows, hauling her closer to
him in the fully stocked kitchenette. “You can make those?” he murmured, astounded appreciation coloring his voice.

“Of course I can, Tom.”

Charlotte reached toward the basket again to grab a small handful of sticky sweet dates. Nonchalantly, she popped one of the fruits into her mouth, savouring its chewy, syrupy taste.

“Would you make them for me wearing nothing but my old blue t-shirt?”

Charlotte tilted her head back and laughed, feeling bold in her relief that Tom loved her, was fascinated by her abilities, and wanted her.

“That’s not very sanitary, baby,” she stuck her tongue out at him, pieces of chewed-up date in her mouth for him to see. He growled, grabbing her around the waist and hauling her to him, picking her up off her feet and throwing her over his shoulder. She was laughing hysterically by the time he deposited her gently onto the luxurious bed in the master bedroom. Without a word, he turned and left the room. Charlotte sat up, wondering what he was doing.

“Tom?” she called, thinking she’d somehow managed to anger him. Had he thought she refused to make him the cookies or wear the shirt?

*I’d do anything for him*, she mused sadly, upset with herself for upsetting him. That was another remnant of her relationship with Osprey: constantly not knowing if a man was mad at her for something she may or may not have done.

She should have known that she needn’t worry; Tom returned in seconds, a cookie stuffed in his mouth and his hands behind his back – he was hiding her surprise, Lotte guessed. The mischievous glint in his beautiful eyes clued her in.

Chewing and swallowing properly before speaking to her, Tom sat down on the bed and placed a neatly folded swathe of blue-green fabric in Lotte’s lap, leaning in to peck a sweet kiss on her cheek.

“Just a little something for the water, lovely. I’m going to grab my swim trunks and change…”

And with that, Tom bounded out of the room to rummage in his luggage, which was still in the entryway of the hotel suite. He seemed very excitable, almost childlike in his behaviour. Charlotte unfolded the material in her lap and was pleasantly surprised to “unwrap” a stunning, one-piece swimsuit with a palm print all over it. The blue-green saturated the fabric, which gathered elegantly in a knot at one shoulder and dipped dangerously low in the back. She loved it; it was just to her taste and Tom knew it – she wasn’t showy, and had never been a bikini girl. The suit would do perfectly for their afternoon enjoying sun poolside.

Tom returned to the bedroom, shucking his clothes in a pile right in front of Charlotte, who didn’t know whether to laugh or stare, his lean muscles on display for her ravenous gaze.

“Someone’s excited, isn’t he?” she smirked, watching as Tom immediately pulled on his swimming trousers and a comfortable, light shirt he’d packed. “Thank you so much, love. This suit is beautiful.”

Fully dressed, Tom gifted Charlotte with a loving gaze. “You’re welcome, my lovely girl. I’m excited to see you in it. To see that beautiful back of yours, the sexy curve of your bare shoulder and collarbone on one side,” he motioned to the knot of fabric that held everything up at one shoulder. “And then I’m going to throw you in the water.”

His smirk was positively Loki-esque.
Charlotte shivered, skittering off to use the loo and change into her brand new bathing outfit. As she used the toilet, changed, and took off her jewelry, she could hear Tom right outside the door humming a somewhat-familiar tune, but she couldn’t place it. Washing her hands, she wracked her brain to come up with what he was singing.

She didn’t have to wait long, because the moment she opened the door, clad only in silky-soft palm covered fabric, Tom’s eyes widened and his mouth fell open, singing “Beach baby, beach baby, give me your hand…”

_Ah yes, Charlotte thought. Beach Baby._

“I don’t think I can let you outside with that on, darling,” he purred, pulling Lotte into his arms and kissing her forehead as his hands roamed the smooth expanse of her bare back.

“You bought it for me, baby,” Charlotte teased, pulling out of Tom’s grasp to go retrieve her own luggage and find a suitable cover-up. She wasn’t two steps away from him when he began following her, placing possessive fingers on her hipbones as they walked.

“God, woman, I could eat you alive.”

Seeing and hearing Tom’s affirmations of her looks, as well as his insatiable attitude towards her, gave Lotte yet another confidence boost. It was just what she needed after the hellish couple of days they’d endured together – and apart.

When she bent down to rifle through her luggage, she felt warm hands running from her lower back to her bum, and she wiggled playfully, earning a stifled groan from Tom’s lips. Finding a flowing maxi dress, Charlotte quickly threw it over her head and made herself presentable, asking Tom if she looked good enough to go swim in one of the most luxurious pools in the UAE.

“You look good enough to go swim with me in the bathtub, darling,” he tried to persuade her, pulling her gently back toward their bedroom.

“No, no, no,” Charlotte resisted, smiling at Tom’s sudden insistence on staying in. “There’s sunshine and beautiful weather outside, baby. Let’s go play!”

His pout, coupled with those damnable puppy dog eyes, about did her in.

“But I want to play alone with you, Lotte,” he frowned, still raking his eyes over her now-clothed body. “We can play in the bath, and then we can play in the bed…”

She tried a flimsy excuse, feeling heat flare between her thighs. “But, I’m still on my period…”

Tom was on her in a flash, pressing bodily against her, grinding his considerable erection into the vee of her legs.

“I’ve already proven that doesn’t matter, haven’t I?” he intoned deeply, tilting his head to kiss the shell of Charlotte’s ear, feeling her shiver in pleasure. “That I’ll have you whenever you’ll let me, darling…”

With a firm but chaste kiss to his lips, Lotte declined, moving away to grab her mobile and book for her poolside relaxation.

“If you’re a good boy at the pool, then we can come back and play, baby.”

He lit up like the sun outside of their windows, something she knew she would never tire of seeing.
“I love you, my Charlotte.”

Holding out her hand to him, Charlotte smiled warmly and replied, feeling her uneasy heart beginning to relax. “I love you too, Tom. Let’s go have some fun!”

“I’m great, mum…what time is it there? Aren’t you three – no – four hours behind?”

Charlotte decided to take a few moments once they’d arrived at the pool to call her parents and check in, to see how they were doing. Tom immediately dove into one of the larger bodies of water on Hyatt property, giving his best girl some privacy. Helene was so thrilled to hear from her baby that she almost dropped the phone.

“Yes, Lotte. No worries, darling. We’ve been working around the house today, puttering in the garden and all that,” Helene answered. “How are things? Feeling well?”

Charlotte filled her mother in on all of the events of the press tour thus far, including the more innocuous of Tom’s surprises and their unfortunate dealings with his newfound anxiety.

“So he’s on some medication now too, then? Good man. I’m glad he recognized he needed to just buckle down and take something for awhile.”

Charlotte agreed, not mentioning the little spat they’d had (or rather, that Tom had) regarding the scaling-back of his schedule in Rome. “How’s daddy?” she continued the conversation.

“Oh, he’s fine,” Helene answered. “Feeling a little tired today, but I figure that’s because he’s been working on some of our roofing. Lot of rain lately, it seems.”

“You’re letting daddy on the roof, mum? You know he doesn’t do well with heights,” Charlotte scolded. She knew Helene wouldn’t pressure Mac into doing something dangerous, but he was always so stubbornly insistent that he could do a job better than anyone else. “Just don’t let him get back up there, promise?”

She vaguely heard her mother’s “promise” in reply, because she was watching Tom swim laps, cutting through the water before her with graceful, even strokes. He looked magnificent.

Is there anything he can’t do?

“Where are you headed next, darling?” Lotte’s mum asked, moving the conversation past the treacherous talk of what Mac was and was not allowed to do.

“Uhm, Moscow in a couple of days. I’m excited to see the Kremlin…Tom’s been showing me amazing places and really giving the two of us time to sightsee and eat at wonderful restaurants. He even bought me a new swimsuit for today, mum! We’re at the pool, if you couldn’t tell.”

She could hear the smile in her mother’s voice when she replied.

“My goodness, daughter. That boy loves you, doesn’t he? I always hoped you two would find sense and get together,” she laughed.

“He really is wonderful,” Charlotte agreed.

“Just don’t get pregnant, darling,” Helene teased.
It had been a long-running joke, since Charlotte was in her early twenties, that her mother was always worrying about her having a child with an idiot, or worse, out of wedlock. The joke existed because Charlotte wasn’t really having any sex the majority of the time her mum teased her about it.

“On my monthly right now, mum,” Charlotte growled quietly into the phone, trying to gross out Helene and prevent the conversation from going any further in its current direction. “And besides, it’s not like I’m a teenager!”

But he makes me feel as giddy as one, she thought, continuing to watch Tom in the water.

Helene didn’t say anything for a few seconds and Lotte wondered if the call accidentally disconnected. But then her mum spoke up, almost as if she were talking to herself. “Wouldn’t be the worst thing…I mean you two would make gorgeous babies…”

“Mum! I have to go!” Charlotte blurted, embarrassed. “I love you! Tell daddy I said hello and I love him and no more on the roof!”

Laughing, Helene agreed and signed off, but not before asking Charlotte to call again soon. “I do love to hear from you, darling. Ta.”

She was reading her book, totally absorbed in Marie-Laure’s blind fumblings during the bombing of the city, when a shadow appeared on the page. She figured it was Tom and looked up with a smile for him, ready to tell him that Helene sent her best.

But it was another man, another guest, and he was smiling lewdly down at Charlotte, his eyes raking over her curves. He was very handsome, but arrogant and presumptive in a way only an American could be.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” his oily voice made her skin crawl, “but could I perhaps get your phone number? You are the most gorgeous creature here.”

He actually knelt down beside her chaise longue to get closer to her, to ogle her breasts from less of a distance. Charlotte didn’t bother to hide her revulsion.

“No, thank you. I’m spoken for,” she said politely, cutting off eye contact and returning to her book. She assumed he would get her not-so-subtle hint and move on. He didn’t.

Damn Americans, she cursed internally. Always think they can have what they want.

At that thought, Jacqueline Silver’s face flashed before her eyes.

Damn Americans, indeed.

“Well, darlin’, if you’re spoken for, why are you all alone here, huh?” the man continued, actually having the nerve to sit in the chair next to Lotte’s. She felt her stomach lurch with nerves; the man was much larger than she and he didn’t appear interested in leaving.

Feigning confidence, she threw her book down and turned to face the man full on, glaring at him, her eyes hidden behind her sunglasses. That gave her some measure of comfort.

“I’ve declined your advance, sir, and I’d like for you to leave. Now.”
The asshole actually reached out and ran a stubby finger down the skin of Charlotte’s right forearm. She slapped away his hand angrily, pulling off her sunglasses and openly glaring at her harasser.

“Now, darlin’, don’t get feisty,” he chuckled darkly. “All’s I wanted was your number. And if you actually had a man, he’d be here. Why I bet you’re lyin’ to me right about now…”

Lotte didn’t get a chance to respond, because the American was grabbed from behind and swiftly punched in the face, sending him reeling backward, dangerously close to falling into the pool.

Tom stood at the foot of Charlotte’s chair, dripping with water and rage. He looked murderous.

And also extremely sexy, she decided.

“I believe the lady politely declined your advance, sir, and you need to respect her wishes,” Tom ground out as the man began wiping the blood pouring from his nose, spitting and swearing.

“Oh so you’re the boyfriend, huh? Nothin’ to look at,” the American spat, grabbing someone’s towel nearby to dab at his wounded face. “Who are you to tell me what to do, you little shit?”

*Apparently this man didn’t see The Avengers,* Charlotte thought, amused.

Tom, for his part, remained cool as a cucumber, motioning over one of the lifeguards and whispering quietly in his ear, then shaking his hand.

“Gonna have the lifeguard protect your girlfriend, since you can’t seem to do it, huh?”

*This guy doesn’t know when to quit,* Lotte thought.

She picked up her book and settled back into her chaise, knowing Tom was taking care of the situation. She trusted that he knew what he was doing.

*Trust,* she thought. *If I can trust him in other situations, I can trust him in all situations. Might take awhile, but I think I can do this.*

“I assure you, sir, I can protect her just fine. And I’m also protecting all the other women you might decide to prey on in this vicinity. You see,” Tom flashed that unforgettable grin, “I’m having security escort you from the premises permanently. Have a wonderful afternoon.”

The American made to lunge for Tom, but he lithely stepped out of the way and the gentleman went staggering, still a little unwieldy from Tom’s earlier punch. By the time he righted himself, security had arrived to haul him away.

Charlotte waved a dainty, sarcastic little wave as the gentleman gestured angrily her way while being detained.

“Maybe that suit was a bad idea,” Tom said, taking his place in the sun chair beside Lotte’s.

“No, baby, it’s perfect,” she smiled, taking Tom’s hand in her own and giving it a two-squeeze. “Thank you for taking care of me.”

His voice and eyes were solemn as he brought Charlotte’s hand to his mouth to kiss. “I will always take care of you.”

“I know, Tom. I love you…so very much.”

“I love you too, darling. I’m afraid I have some bad news, though,” he frowned. “I have to go do a
little bit of merchandise signing in an hour at one of the nearby stores where they’re hosting a meet and greet. They just informed me of it when we were upstairs, so it’s not on our itinerary. You’re welcome to come along but it will only be a couple of hours, and I know you’re enjoying the pool.”

“It’s okay, baby,” Charlotte indulged Tom with a kiss on his hand. “I’m going to stay here and read, and then maybe we can go out to dinner this evening.”

He smiled gratefully at his best girl’s understanding of the situation. She was always understanding of his schedule when she was his PA, but now that she was his whole life, he had a hard time neglecting her for work. She made things easier on him with her loving, accepting way.

“It’s a deal, darling. You finish that book so I can read it!” he teased, tapping on her copy of *All The Light We Cannot See*.

“Will do, Mr. Hiddleston,” Charlotte cooed as Tom put on his clothes, draping his towel across one shoulder and grabbing his things to head back to the room. She watched him greedily once more, appreciating the grace with which he moved whenever he did anything, even menial, trivial things like putting on clothes.

“Oh, lovely, I do adore when you take that tone with me,” he leaned down to run the backs of his fingers gently down the curve of Lotte’s slender neck.

“I’ll take that tone with you at dinner, baby,” she winked, swatting him playfully on the bottom as he prepared to leave. “I’ve got my room key and my mobile, Tom. You let me know if you need anything, okay?”

He nodded obediently, beaming at her.

“You take the Seroxat?”

“Yes ma’am,” Tom mock-saluted, grinning. “I’ll be back in a few. Be dressed for dinner, darling girl!”

Lotte switched back and forth for the next couple of hours between reading, sunning, and swimming in the beautifully designed pools the Grand Hyatt boasted. She hadn’t felt this relaxed in several days, and she realized that despite her time with Tom in the world’s most wonderful cities, they were working at a breakneck pace and rarely staying in the same city for more than 48 hours.

Between travel and press obligations, they were only eking out precious hours for sleep and downtime. But that was why it was a tour, after all. You meet the fans, you do the work, and you give the people what they want.

Charlotte was floating mindlessly in the pool near her chair, watching big, fluffy white clouds lazily passing by overhead, when she heard her phone chiming, signaling an incoming call.

She hauled herself out of the pool, grateful there weren’t many people around to see her awkward exit from the water.

*I wonder if Tom’s okay*, she thought, suddenly starting to worry. He’d assured her he had taken his meds, and it was only a small meet and greet, so hopefully nothing drastic was happening.
Drying herself off, Lotte reached for her mobile and saw it was Helene calling. She swiped and put the phone to her ear.

“Hi mum,” she answered cheerily. “Dad on the roof again?”

“Lotte, my love, daddy’s in hospital.”

The next few moments were a blur as Charlotte’s hearing turned tinny, fuzzy. Her stomach flopped at phrases like *heart attack* and *intensive care*. By the time her hysterical mother uttered the words *he could have died*, Charlotte’s tears were flowing freely and she was trying to talk over her mother, aware that people were looking at her, probably wondering what was going on.

“I’ll be home on the next flight I can get, mum. Just tell daddy to *hold on*,” she ground out.

The ringing in her ears was getting worse and she had to sit for a moment, head between her legs, until the lightheaded feeling passed.

Helene had already disconnected the call.

Dressing quickly and gathering her things absentmindedly, Charlotte made her way from the pool back toward the hotel entrance, calling Tom’s phone with shaking fingers.

He didn’t pick up.

*I need you, baby. Now more than ever.*

She tried again once she was in the lift, headed up to their floor.

Still no answer.

She tried a third time while she was packing her things and trying to make travel arrangements via Emirates to get back to England.

Two texts and another call later, Charlotte threw her phone down in agitation and prepared to leave the Hyatt.

She had a plane to catch.
Charlotte rushes home to be with her ailing father.

Chapter Notes

It's been awhile, everyone...I lost the urge to continue to write this fic after the recent events in Paris and elsewhere...this story started with a fictional shooting and all of a sudden, in light of the latest terror attacks, I felt really uncomfortable with my story. There's a lot of evil in this world, but there's also a lot of good. That's why my Tom in this chapter is extra, extra loving.

We all could use some extra love. Love overcomes. To any of my readers who've been affected by senseless tragedy...I love ya. I'm with ya.

xoxo

Four missed calls.
Two texts.
Tom had been so busy getting to the venue and trying to fetch an assistant to find him a charger that his phone remained dead at the signing for a good half an hour until things were taken care of. He’d been so wrapped up in enjoying a few quiet moments back at the Hyatt, playing at the pool with Lotte, that his iPhone was well and truly dead before he realized it – halfway to the signing.

By the time the mobile booted itself up, he was knee-deep in fan selfies with Sharpie marks all over his fingers. During a minute’s lull in the proceedings, he happened to glance over at his phone to see the long list of notifications on his lock screen. All from Charlotte. All within minutes of one another.

Something was wrong.

Hadn’t she planned to stay at the pool and read awhile longer? His stomach flipped uncomfortably as he leaned back, motioning for the event manager.

“I’m so sorry, Ayat. Do you mind if I step out for just a moment? I’m afraid there might be an emergency and I just need to check something…”

The young man charged with overseeing Tom’s visit nodded, pulling out Tom’s chair for him and ushering him quickly into a back room away from the hubbub of fans waiting in line. Thanking Ayat, Tom hurriedly unlocked his mobile, pacing where he stood in the tiny area, heart hammering in his chest. He didn’t need to call Lotte back to ask if everything was ok; her messages told him all he needed to know.

Tom, baby, PLEASE answer your phone
Daddy’s had a heart attack and I’m leaving for the airport

The breath whooshed from Tom’s lungs as the need to sit down overwhelmed him. Not only was Mac critically ill, it seemed, but also, precious Lotte couldn’t get in contact with him when she desperately needed to and now she was trying to leave Dubai without him. Uncomfortable nausea roiled its ugly head, and Tom took a few deep breaths, trying to avoid berating himself again for being an utter clod – that seemed to be happening more and more in recent days. His nimble fingers found his contacts list and dialed Charlotte immediately.

No answer.

“You’ve reached Charlotte Hamilton, hello! I’m unable to take your call at the moment, so please leave me a message and I’ll be in touch.”

The voicemail message did little to ease the rising anxiety in Tom’s body, and he fought with his mind, screaming internally for it to calm the fuck down now, as I need to get to my best girl, thank you very much!

He listened to her voice twice more via recording, drowning in her sweet tone momentarily, letting it wash over him and loosen the knot in his chest just a fraction. When he realized she most likely wasn’t answering because she was already on a plane, Tom knew he couldn’t wait around much longer. He’d made the mistake before of putting work above absolutely everything else.

That would not happen again.

Walking as calmly as he could, Tom made his way back to the signing table and gave a polite smile and wave to the even lengthier line of fans now wrapped around the perimeter of the store. Ayat noticed Tom’s return and promptly came over to his side, observing that Tom was gathering up some things and looking quite pale.

“Mr. Hiddleston, can I get you something, sir?” he questioned courteously. Tom held out a palm for Ayat to shake, then leaned closely into the young gentleman so he could discreetly explain his situation.

“I’m afraid there is a grave family emergency that I need to attend to, Ayat. I’m terribly sorry for the inconvenience, and I will find a way to make it up to you and the lovely fans who have gathered here this afternoon. But I must get to the airport at once.”

Ayat’s brow furrowed as he nodded in understanding. He clapped Tom on the shoulder in a gesture of camaraderie. When he began to steer Tom toward one of the side exits of the store, Tom suddenly turned and rushed back to the signing table, giving his fans an apologetic look before making his disappointing announcement.

“I’ve had a wonderful time meeting with all of you this afternoon, but I’m so sorry to announce that I’ve a family emergency and I need to leave,” he spoke clearly, contritely. “I look forward to returning to your lovely country in the future and meeting with all of you again.”

The fans surprised him. Instead of heckling Tom or being hateful or upset, they smiled and applauded, waving goodbye as he left through a side entrance with Ayat at his side. The relief Tom felt was palpable: the fans wouldn’t always be upset with him for leaving or having an emergency. It would be okay.

“Sir, I’ve taken the liberty of calling your hotel and letting them know you’ll need a priority check-out and a chauffeured car to Dubai International as soon as possible,” Ayat explained, leading Tom
to the waiting vehicle outside the exit.

“Ayat, you’ve been wonderful,” Tom shook his hand. “Shokran.”

The young man bowed deeply, closing Tom’s car door. Tom didn’t even need to tell his driver where to go; he was headed swiftly back to the Hyatt. Trying Lotte’s mobile one more time, Tom was still met with her pleasant voice message. He didn’t want her to think he wasn’t trying to get to her, and he knew she would get his messages once she was off her flight, so he sent as many texts as he could whilst trying to arrange passage back to England.

My love…I’m so sorry you couldn’t get in touch…my phone died.

Is Mac at St. James’? I’m sure they’ll give him excellent care. No worries.

Lotte, I’m headed back to the Hyatt and have a car waiting to take me to the airport. I’m going to get on the first flight that gets me to Leeds, darling. I miss you. I love you. I’m so sorry I’m not right by your side. I’m canceling everything from here on out until we see what’s what with your dad.

He knew she wouldn’t respond, but he foolishly kept hoping she would after each message sent. By the time the driver dropped him in front of the Grand Hyatt, his anxiety was sharpening its claws again.

What would she have me do? Tom thought frantically as he thanked the driver and rushed through the lobby toward the bank of lifts.

Breathing – she would have me breathe.

He was blessedly alone in the lift, breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth in a now-routine way. Tom found himself wanting to bend over to get some blood rushing to his head; he’d never make it to his suite lightheaded.

At the ding which signaled his arrival, Tom fumbled in his wallet for the suite keycard, exiting the lift doors and hurrying down the carpeted hallway to his and Lotte’s room. It took him three swipes before the lock disengaged.

Breathe. Breathe. Get a bloody Seroxat while you’re at it.

Part of Tom’s panic was at the thought of gathering all his items and trying to check out, plus get a flight situation sorted, but as he crossed the threshold of the suite and made for the bedroom to get his pills, he saw that all of his luggage was already packed and waiting at the foot of the bed. Even in the throes of her own panic and despair, Charlotte had packed all of Tom’s things and left him a note on hotel letterhead.

Tom –

I’m hoping I’m not too forward in packing your things for you, but I am praying you aren’t far behind me when you read this. Dad has had a serious heart attack and is in hospital at Jimmy’s. I’m due to leave here on a flight by about 19:00 and will keep trying your phone until I board the plane. I really, really need you.

Your Best Girl

He crumpled Lotte’s note against his chest, tears threatening to pool in his eyes at the thought of her, tiny and alone, on a – what would it be…ten? – ten hour flight at best to Leeds, worrying after Mac and needing him. Tom felt worse when he read between the lines of her note: she was also worried he’d be mad at her for packing his things and assuming he would drop everything for her. His outburst and subsequent lie had really done sweet Lotte in.
How had he let it get to this point? It wasn’t so long ago they reached for one another when they felt ill, or sad, or weak. And now his sweet girl was practically afraid to ask for his help. It was no wonder she questioned whether or not he would cancel his engagements for her; hadn’t he exploded over dinner a few nights ago at the very same notion?

Steeling himself, Tom spied his Seroxat bottle atop the dresser where his other remaining incidentals were and quickly took out a pill, swallowing it dry as he took stock of the rest of his belongings. Gathering his things, he made a quick call to Luke with one simple directive:

“Clear my calendar. Charlotte needs me. Indefinitely.”

With quick thanks, Tom ended the call before Luke could ask any further questions. He then hurriedly made his way out of the suite, checking his watch as he went.

19:35. Charlotte is en route.

Deciding an actual voice message wouldn’t hurt for her to hear, Tom made a call to Lotte’s voicemail as the lift descended toward the lobby.

“Charlotte, my sweet girl, I’m leaving the hotel right now. It’s…um, a little after you’ve taken off, I think, and I’m going to finagle my way into getting the next available flight to you as soon as possible. Thank you, my love, for packing my things. And please don’t think you’re ever wrong for needing me. Luke’s cleared my calendar. You let me know where and when and I’ll do whatever you and your parents need. Give my love to Helene and Mac as soon as you can. I love you.”

He ended the call as soon as he made the reception desk, smiling his most radiant smile at the ever-helpful Doha, who was – miraculously – on duty again.

“Oh, Mr. Hiddleston!” she blushed, appraising him with her chocolate eyes. “How can I be of service to you, sir?”

“Hello again, Doha. I’m in quite a predicament,” he leaned conspiratorially across the counter to get closer to the young lady. “I’m having a bit of a family emergency and it is of utmost importance that I get a flight back to England immediately. Is there any way you can help me arrange that, darling?”

Tom winked for good measure. He felt like a tit for doing it, but it worked well.

“I can have our concierge book you a flight, Mr. Hiddleston,” Doha beamed, ushering Tom toward a nearby kiosk where a portly, smiling gentleman waited.

“How can I help you, sir?” asked the concierge as Tom and Doha approached. He worked around on his computer screen with efficient, staccato clicks of the mouse.

“I need whatever can get me to Leeds the fastest, as soon as possible. I’ll pay whatever needs paid, good sir,” Tom requested. “I would appreciate anything you can do for me. Family emergency.”

The gentleman nodded, eyes leaving Tom’s anxious face to scan the contents of his computer screen. He made several more sharp clicks of his mouse, concentration sharpening the angles of his face. It took so long that Tom began to worry, wringing his hands and watching time pass on his mobile.

“I have one remaining seat on Emirates that leaves in an hour, sir. Direct to Leeds Bradford…”

Tom nodded profusely, brandishing his credit card and exhaling in slight relief as the transaction was processed and the concierge printed his boarding pass. “You’ll need to check luggage there, obviously, but you’re all booked and set to depart, Mr. Hiddleston. I do believe Doha’s requested a
car for you,” he tilted his head toward the sliding glass doors that marked the lobby’s exit. A sleek, black Audi idled by the doors.

Tom shook hands with the concierge, again with Doha, and waved gratefully to Farah, who’d just appeared, thanking them all as he hurried toward the loitering vehicle outside. As soon as he exited the hotel, the driver popped out and began packing Tom’s things efficiently in the boot. He tipped him an exorbitant amount for the luggage handling – and for (hopefully) getting him to Dubai International in record time.

By the time he settled into the stitched leather seating, the Seroxat was slowing him down to a comfortable, bearable level and he was able to focus on his best girl. He sent more messages, wanting her to be inundated with his love and reassurance when she landed.

*On my way to the airport, little Lotte. I snagged a direct to Leeds at 21:00. Slightly behind you, baby, but I’ll be right there.*

*Everything will be okay. Just hold on for me. I love you.*

*You are the most important thing in my life, Charlotte Hamilton. I don’t want you fretting at all about anything I’ve canceled. Let me take care of you and your mum, lovely. We can all make sure Mac is getting the care and attention he needs, but I mean to look after his girls when he’s ill.*

Tom messaged Lotte for the duration of his journey to the airport. He sent her honest missives about his love for her. He sent her reassurances about the excellence of the St. James’ University Hospital teaching staff. He confessed his relief at leaving behind the press tour. He then left another voicemail message for good measure.

“I’m sorry I keep messaging you, lovely. I can’t stop listening to your beautiful voice on your voicemail greeting. I’m almost to the airport. I love you so very much, Charlotte. Be brave for me. See you soon.”

When he arrived at Dubai International, Tom remembered, out of nowhere, that he had Helene’s number stored in his mobile. He wasn’t sure if she was in a position to answer any calls, but as soon as he made his way through security and found his gate – with several minutes to spare before his flight boarded – he planted himself in the nearest chair and rang Lotte’s sweet mum. She answered on the third ring.

“Helene, it’s Tom,” he whispered, wondering if he’d overstepped his bounds in calling her. Charlotte had given Tom her mother’s number a year or so ago in case anything ever happened to her, so he could get in touch with her mum. He had no idea why he hadn’t called her after the shooting all those days ago. Perhaps he didn’t feel comfortable phoning a friend’s mum? But Charlotte was much more than Tom’s friend now. She was the love of his life.

“Oh, Tom,” sighed Helene. “Have you heard what’s happened, love?” She sounded exhausted. Not as grief-stricken as he’d hoped she wouldn’t be, so that was good.

“I have, Helene. I can’t get in touch with Lotte and we’re playing aeroplane tag, I’m afraid. I’ll be due in Leeds a couple of hours after she gets in but I wanted to call and ask if you were okay. How is Mac?”

Helene didn’t answer his question at first. She sounded dumbfounded. “You – you’re on your way to Leeds now?” she sniffed audibly. Tom could hear the faint beeps of the hospital telemetry.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get away sooner. I would have been with Charlotte but my phone died and I
was at a signing…” he confessed, guilt lacing his tone.

“What a sweet man you are, Tom. Following my daughter home at the first sign of trouble,” Helene cried softly into the phone.

“Please don’t cry, Helene. We’ll both be there soon. If you need anything – anything – you let me know.”

Lotte’s mum took a few more sniffing breaths and then cleared her throat before she continued. “He’s got extremely occluded arteries, Tom. They said by the time we’d gotten him here he’d suffered two heart attacks in a row. I knew heart troubles ran in our family but he’s always been so active, so…healthy. I never thought…” she trailed off.

“Are you at St. James’ with him now?” Tom asked.

“Yes. They’ve gotten him stabilized but he’s due for major surgery in a few hours. A long, invasive procedure, I’m told.”

He could hear her fighting to be strong, but the continual quavering of her voice told Tom that Helene was feeling anything but. So like her daughter.

“I tell you what, Helene. My flight doesn’t board for another twenty minutes or so. I’d like to stay on the line with you until I leave here, is that okay?”

The watery “thank you” on the other end of the line broke Tom’s heart. He knew in that moment he cared for Charlotte’s mum as much as he did his own. Just as he would do anything for his little Lotte, so too would he do anything for Helene Hamilton. And Mac. Tom needed to have an important conversation with Charlotte’s father.

Dr. Rochester probably would’ve advised against it, but Charlotte had taken a larger-than-normal dosage of the Seroxat just as her plane left the runway at Dubai. With no way to contact her mum, or Tom, and no way to know what was going on with her daddy, she knew that a ten-plus-hour flight would turn her into a catatonic pile of nauseated nerves. She was worried about her parents. Charlotte figured Tom wouldn’t be able to get to her, and if and when he did, he would probably be angry with her for packing his things and half-expecting him to drop everything for her. So she fretted about that outcome, too.

*He’s on one of the busiest press tours of his life,* she reasoned, scolding herself. *He can’t just up and walk away from his responsibilities for you.*

Try as she might to avoid it, the memory of Tom yelling at the dinner table mere nights ago replayed in her head. That was the last frightening thought Lotte had before the medication lulled her into an inescapable sleep, miles above the Middle East.

When she awoke much, much later to a mostly dark, quietly thrumming cabin, she checked her watch and realized it was almost 3:00 am Dubai time – she’d slept enough for a full night’s rest. Her anxiety and worry, plus the healthy dose of Seroxat, had knocked her out completely.

Stretching in her seat, Charlotte pressed the air hostess call button and waited patiently to be served, rubbing the sleep from her eyes and combing fingers through her sleep-mussed hair. Having such a deep and uninterrupted sleep left Lotte feeling fresh and focused: she knew she needed to be strong
for her mum and had a long day ahead of her. Who knew what awaited her at St. James’ Hospital?

“Can I help you, ma’am?” the stewardess whispered politely, leaning down toward Charlotte.

“If I could just have a small breakfast plate, please. I’m afraid I slept through dinner service and I’m quite famished,” Lotte requested.

The hostess nodded politely, noting Charlotte’s food preference and offering her a choice of juices, teas, and coffee. After placing her order, Lotte thanked the older woman and rifled around in her carry-on bag for her iPad. She needed to get organized, to spend the remaining couple of hours of the flight diverting her attention away from worrying about her father. So Charlotte did what she was best at – she made lists. It was second nature to her, being a personal assistant.

She made a list of what exactly she needed to do to get through each of the coming hours: get her luggage, contact her mum and Tom, find a ride to the hospital, speak with the doctors and nurses to see what exactly was happening. She wanted to kiss her daddy as soon as she saw him – in whatever gruesome shape he was in. Charlotte didn’t care; Mac was the only man who ever loved her completely. He always told Charlotte and her sister Eve – who barely spoke to any of them these days – that no one would love his girls more than him.

She made a list of things her mum and dad might need at hospital, already planning on making a trip to their house so she could pack some bags and bring them comfortable clothes and toiletries.

She made a list of groceries that might be needed at the house; if she was staying, she wanted to do the cooking for her mum and also wanted to make sure her dad was getting healthy, home-cooked meals.

Halfway through her grocery list, the stewardess returned with hazelnut coffee, pomegranate-blueberry juice, and an omelet. Charlotte took her intense hunger as a good sign; she was in control of her anxiety, she’d slept – she could handle whatever was happening.

As long as her daddy was alive.

Tom didn’t fare quite as well on his flight as Lotte did on hers. His Seroxat dose remained the same, and although he willed sleep to come, he had a hard time relaxing his mind. He worried about not being with Charlotte. His phone conversation with Helene had saddened him – she sounded so frail and frightened. He wanted Mac to be healthy and home, not stuck to tubes and monitors with his chest cut open in hospital.

He tried to eat one of the plane’s dinner selections, but everything was tasteless and only succeeded in turning his stomach. Tom mused somewhat forlornly that if Charlotte was with him, she would have found him something to eat that wouldn’t bother his agitated digestive system.

But then again, I wouldn’t be agitated if my sweet Lotte was here, he admitted sadly to himself.

Tired of fighting increasing anxiousness and the resignation of his appetite, Tom took another Seroxat with a swish of sparkling water and forced himself, dinner unfinished, to try and sleep. God only knew how long it would take the additional dose of meds to kick in. He thanked the air hostess who removed his meal and cutlery. A wan smile on his part later rewarded him with a blanket and pillow.
He fooled around on his iPad for a few moments, trying to distract himself with a game – none held his interest for more than a few moments.

He perused his backpack for Christopher Nolan’s script but couldn’t focus on the plot or characters.

Just as Tom’s frustrated agitation reached a fever pitch, he situated himself as comfortably as possible, resting his head against the window and covering himself with the Emirates-issued throw. He fished his earbuds and phone out of his bag, scrolling through his music in an irritated fashion.

He found what he needed as soon as he saw it.

Tchaikovsky.

Christmas was months away, but Tom began the Overture from *The Nutcracker*, turning the volume to its lowest audible setting so he could try and fall asleep to the strains of the ballet.

As the pizzicato strings washed over him, Tom felt himself relaxing, despite the energy behind the softly playing score. In his mind, he pictured a Christmas event he’d attended two years ago with Charlotte at his side, a benefit for *Unicef UK* at the Royal Ballet in Covent Garden. That occasion marked one of the first times Tom realized he was deeply infatuated with Lotte.

Their friendship was extremely close by that point, and once Charlotte found out about the benefit, she’d practically begged Tom to let her come along, too. He couldn’t have said no if he tried – and when he saw his best girl in her poinsettia-red cocktail dress, he was done for.

How inconvenient that, at that time, he’d just started seeing Jacqueline Silver.

Charlotte spent the evening excitedly explaining to Tom that she loved the ballet and had always wanted to be a dancer, but was too short to become a real ballerina. She’d apparently taken dance as a little girl but gave it up after being told her body wasn’t proportioned correctly for such artistic pursuits.

He spent the evening trying desperately to remain chivalrous while wondering what…proportions… she was hiding under that divine little slip of red.

It didn’t help that after dinner and drinks, during the RBC’s live performance of *The Nutcracker*, Charlotte sat enraptured, watching the whole thing. Tom observed her entire form change at her seat while watching the ballet – her back straight, her neck tilted gracefully just a fraction to the side, her hands poised in a most lady-like manner atop the linen tablecloth. His best friend and personal assistant transformed that evening before his eyes – and he never saw her in the same way again.

Reminiscing of that December night, Tom felt himself relaxing into the soothing lull of the Seroxat and the music, remembering each delicate curve of Charlotte’s face, her delicious neck and collarbones. His last conscious thought before dropping off to sleep was of his best girl enfolded in his arms.

*Soon, Lotte. I’ll be there soon.*
and voicemails he’d sent her every few minutes.

He was following her. He’d actually left Dubai a few hours shy of her and had made every effort to put aside all of his other obligations.

*He’s not mad,* she breathed in relief with tears in her eyes. *He loves me.*

Lotte wanted to keep reading the messages he sent over and over again, but she needed to retrieve her luggage and find a cab. And, as the current local time was just after 23:00, she needed to be vigilant about where she was going and how she would get to St. Jimmy’s Hospital. Heading to the luggage carousel, she tapped out a quick text to Tom that summed up all she felt about his loving attentions, even from thousands of miles away:

*You are the most wonderful man. I adore you, Thomas. Be safe.*

Her happiness was short-lived, though, after she allowed herself to accept the reality of her situation. Her mum’s messages were solemn, letting Charlotte know that her father was due for significant open-heart surgery. He would be in hospital recovery for several days, and the risks were innumerable. Eve, of course, called Charlotte just to let her know she wouldn’t be coming in because work “was bonkers” and that, as eldest child, it was Charlotte’s responsibility to take care of things on the home front.

How typical.

Angry with Eve, she yanked her luggage from the conveyor apparatus and headed toward the taxi queue, rolling her things behind her in the fastest manner possible. The gods seemed to know that Lotte needed a break, for a kindly, older gentleman recognized her stressed-out body language and absconded from his cab to help load her belongings into his taxi.

“Where to, young lady?” he asked politely, holding the passenger door open for Charlotte.

“I need to get to St. James’, please, sir,” Charlotte explained. “My daddy’s in hospital.”

“Right away, miss. I’ll be fast as I can.”

The tears started then, unexpectedly. She was so grateful for this stranger’s kindness. Despite her rest, she was weary. She was afraid for Mac, for Helene. She needed her Tom – and he wouldn’t be due for at least another couple of hours.

“You just lean your head back and rest, young lady. I’ll get y’there quick as a whip, don’t you fret,” said the cabbie.

With a wan smile, Charlotte nodded and thanked the man, closing her eyes briefly and willing away the almost thirty minute commute from Leeds Bradford to Jimmy’s. Lotte accessed her voice messages once more, wanting to hear Tom’s calming voice in her ear, giving her his love and courage to be brave. If she could just hold on a little longer…she played the messages over and over again.

Her phone finally chimed softly with an incoming call; although she knew it wouldn’t be Tom, she was still somewhat relieved at the voice on the other end.

“Hi, mum,” Charlotte breathed.

“You close, darling?” Helene asked, sounding exhausted but hopeful.
“Yes, mum. I’m a few minutes out…is daddy still okay?” Charlotte could barely get the question out without her eyes filling with tears. She knew she should be grateful that her dad was alive, but the prospect of losing him – of his fragile state – frightened her immensely.

“He’s okay, sweet pea. They’re prepping him for surgery and I just wanted to let you know that when you get here he’s going to be in the operating room. The doctors say it’s going to be around five or six hours.”

Lotte sniffled, thinking of her strong, wonderful father at the mercy of modern medicine.

“There are obvious risks and complications, but honestly, Charlotte, daddy needs this. They’re going to fix some arteries and work on the valves of his heart, too. He needs to have a higher percentage of heart function than he does right now and I’ve been assured they’re going to do everything they can to improve his heart health.”

“O–Okay…” Charlotte cried softly. She noticed the cabbie looking at her out of the corner of her eye. He seemed concerned for her.

“How far out are you now, Lotte?” asked Helene.

“Let me ask,” Charlotte answered.

The driver knew what she was about to ask before she could even say it. “Only about five or six more minutes, love. Almost there. You tell your mum I’m getting you there soon as I can,” he said softly.

“Thank you,” Charlotte breathed as a tear fell down her cheek.

She let Helene know she was very close and then asked her for a room number or a place they could meet. Helene explained that they were situated in the Jubilee Wing, Floor C, Ward L4. “And they’ve just delayed his surgery a few minutes, Lotte darling. Hopefully you can say hi to daddy before he goes into surgery. I’ll be waiting at the nurses’ station for you. I–”

A lump lodged itself firmly in Charlotte’s throat at this information. She needed to get to Mac before he went into the operating theatre – she needed to see her father one more time in case…

No, she scolded herself. Everything will be FINE. It HAS to be.

Helene had hung up prematurely, preoccupied with her husband’s care, and Charlotte was unbuckling her seat belt before the taxi came to a stop in front of the looming spectre of St. James’. She began fumbling blindly in her bag for her wallet to pay the fare.

“No, young lady. This one’s on me,” said the driver, placing an elderly hand atop Charlotte’s own trembling one. “I’ll get your bags and then we’ll get you to your da. ”

Eyes wide, Charlotte thanked the driver in utter disbelief. Before she knew what she was doing she’d thrown her arms around him in a bracing hug. He patted her back soothingly, speaking encouraging words about Lotte getting her things and hurrying inside to her family. “Come on, little miss.”

Wiping her eyes and taking a deep, shuddering breath, Charlotte exited the cab and helped the driver retrieve her suitcases from the boot of the car. With a smile and a handshake, she thanked him profusely for his kindness and proceeded to race toward the entrance of the hospital with all her items in tow.
“You just missed him, sweet pea.”

Unable to hold herself together any longer, Lotte crumpled at her mother’s feet right in the hallway of the cardiac intensive care unit. All the sleep and lists and planning had been for naught – her daddy was at the mercy of doctors, nurses, and God.

“I know, baby,” soothed Helene, tearing up at her eldest child’s distress. She stood Charlotte up and took a suitcase from her, urging her into the large single room where Mac had just been moments before. “He told me to tell you he loves you and can’t wait to see you…and to be brave.”

*Just like my Thomas told me to be brave*, Charlotte thought as she struggled to breathe through her quiet sobs.

“Oh, mum. I haven’t even asked you how you’re holding up,” Charlotte cried, leaning into her mother’s embrace as they settled themselves in the hospital suite.

“I was quite bad when we got here, and I’ve been worried about you getting here all by yourself from so far away…but Tom called me several hours ago before he boarded his flight and calmed me down,” Helene shared, patting Lotte’s knee soothingly.

“He…he did?” Charlotte looked up at her mother in surprise.

Nodding, Helene gave her first real smile in what was now several hours. “I guess he heard my agitation when he called to let me know he was right behind you. He knew how worried I was about you and dad, and he just…talked to me until he left Dubai. Told me how good the doctors are supposed to be here…let me know if I needed anything he could get it or have it sent…”

Charlotte could do nothing but stare at Helene, mouth agape.

“He really is the most wonderful man, my girl. You are so lucky to have him,” Helene smiled oddly at her daughter as they talked, seemingly reflecting on Tom’s earlier call. She said nothing else about their conversation, though, when she saw Charlotte’s body sagging in the chair where she sat.

“Daddy’s going to be in surgery for awhile, love. I think you need some rest. The doctor promised he would come find us as soon as he finished.”

Charlotte shook her head stubbornly as Helene took a seat across from her on a long sofa. “I’m too worried, mum. I can’t lose daddy – and Tom will hopefully be here soon. I need him so much…”

She began to cry once more, starting back up with her tiny hiccupping sobs. Helene moved to where Charlotte sat, coaxing her up to walk over to the larger, longer piece of furniture so she could stretch out a bit more comfortably.

“Just rest with me, Lotte. It’s almost midnight…isn’t Tom due in around one?”

Charlotte nodded her head, sniffling as she did so.

“Okay then, my girl. He’ll be here soon. I know I’m a poor substitute for him, but I’m very glad you’re here with me,” Helene whispered, running a soothing hand through Lotte’s dark hair. “Daddy knows he needs to get better and do well in surgery so he can hear all about your trip with Tom, doesn’t he?”

Once more Charlotte nodded, the movement markedly heavier and laced with fatigue. Helene’s
A soft, deep voice caused Charlotte to stir what seemed to be moments later, but was actually about an hour and a half after she’d fallen asleep in Helene’s arms.

“I’m fine, Helene, love. You lie down and I’ll keep watch here.”

Lotte’s eyes flew open and looked down at her watch – almost a quarter to two in the morning. When her eyes lifted from the timepiece at her wrist, she was flooded with warm relief at the sight.

Tom, sleepy-eyed and covered in light stubble, was tucking her mum into a makeshift bed and holding her aged hand as if Helene were his own mother. Charlotte noticed how her normally-stubborn mum did as Tom instructed, seeming to ease into an immediate sleep now that he’d arrived. As soon as he turned his back to Helene and caught sight of his best girl, awake and staring longingly at him – as if he were some mirage-like remnant of her time in Dubai – he rushed to her with open arms, picking her up and immediately sitting down with her, arranging Lotte in his lap.

She clung to him, tears wetting his neck as she squeezed Tom to her person, reveling in his familiar scent and the warmth exuding from his body. His large hands rubbed calming circles along Charlotte’s back and she frantically searched for Tom’s mouth in the dimness of the room.

He kissed her fully, deeply, crushing her tiny body to his own and feeling relief overtaking him.

“You came,” Charlotte’s small voice whispered when she broke the kiss. She kept crying, burying her face in Tom’s chest once more. Her grip on him never loosened.

“I’m here, my love. Of course I came. Everything is okay, Charlotte. I’m here,” Tom murmured against her, rocking her in his arms and continuing to rub her back. She was shaking. “I missed you so, sweet girl.”

“Daddy’s in surgery,” Charlotte began to cry in earnest, trying desperately not to wake her mum. She couldn’t help it; now that Tom was here she felt she could safely fall to pieces. “It’s going to take…a long…ti-time.”

“Shhh, my baby,” Tom cooed, running fingers through Lotte’s long, dark curls. “I’m here. Mac is strong, isn’t he, darling? He’s got the best doctors working on him,” Tom reasoned, dropping his voice to a deep register that he knew would soothe her. “This is a teaching hospital, isn’t it, Lotte?”

She gave a small nod, tears still coursing down her face at an alarming pace. Tom noted how she kept herself pressed fully against him, as if she could absorb his calm courage.

“Then that means they must have excellent surgeons, mustn’t they, my love?”

Another nod; another sniffle.

“We’re just going to rest and relax here, baby,” Tom breathed quietly. “You remember when you first slept in our bed and I kept you with me all night so you wouldn’t be scared?”

Tom was rewarded with a tiny, trembling smile at this question.
“Don’t be scared, my lovely Charlotte. I’m here. Your daddy will be so pleased to see you, won’t he?”

He kept rocking his best girl, touching her and soothing her shaking frame with gentle passes of his strong hands.

“Yes,” was her barely-audible reply.

“Did you eat, lovely?”

It took her a moment to respond. Tom figured she was getting sleepy but he could hear her trying to calm her breath and fight the anxiety that was taking hold when she thought too much about their current situation.

“On the p-plane.”

“Good girl,” Tom praised, kissing her delicately on the ear and temple. “Do you think you can sleep some more, or do you want to just sit with me and rest?”

She sniffled again, prettily, and wiped a tiny index finger under each of her eyes. “Sit…with y-you and…r-rest,” she gazed up at her handsome man.

Tom chuckled pleasantly and Charlotte almost purred at the familiarity of the sound. It felt like home to her, despite being in a hospital suite as her father faced life-threatening surgery.

“Well if you can’t sleep, my love, I need for you to think about something for me, yes?” Tom smiled. He moved Charlotte just a fraction to his left as he felt around in the pocket of his trousers. She rested her head on his shoulder as he fumbled, thinking he was going to show her something on his mobile.

He pulled out a small red box.

“Open that for me, my beautiful Lotte.”

Charlotte sat up gingerly, eyes wide at the recognizable *Cartier* stamped in gold foil atop the box lid. She stopped, mid-reach, and looked at Tom, a fresh round of tears filling her eyes. He had his own tears to match hers. Smiling, he urged her on.

“Go ahead, baby. Open.”

An enormous solitaire diamond ring winked at Lotte as she propped open the box, holding it in her little hands. Her breath caught in her throat.

“This was meant to be a surprise at the end of our tour, Charlotte. But I want to ask if you’d like to have it now, since I love you so,” Tom swallowed thickly, his voice suddenly husky and emotional. “Do you think you might want to be my wife?”
Helene, Charlotte, and Tom move forward after Mac's surgery.

Here we go, my loves...this story is still giving me fits. I'm not really feeling it of late, but I'm trying to stick with it and see where it takes me.

Love hearing from everyone (*ahem* that means leave me a message!)

xoxo

If someone would have told Charlotte Hamilton she would feel apprehension and indecision on the day that a man proposed marriage to her, she would have laughed at that person – quite heartily. Charlotte was a romantic, a naïve dreamer of true love (despite only recently experiencing it)…

But when Tom Hiddleston asked to be her husband, with a princess cut diamond in her father’s hospital room, after a romance that started with a literal bang only a couple of weeks prior, she didn’t know what to say. Suddenly things felt very…rushed.

Lotte had been so busy trying to tamp down on the anxiety disorder she’d acquired, work through new feelings for her best friend, establish an intimate relationship with said friend, arrange a press tour for the very same friend, and process the significant health crisis her father was facing, that she hadn’t actually stopped to think about timetables.

Sure, Helene had often told her daughters, “When you know, you know” to reference meeting someone who was meant to be a significant other. And it was no secret that Mac and Helene had a somewhat whirlwind romance starting after their shared zoo experience. However, if she really thought about things – rationally – Charlotte had to admit that Tom’s proposal of marriage after ending his previous relationship a handful of days ago (what were weeks, after all, than a handful of days?), and after both of them fell into one another’s arms mentally and emotionally scathed (and physically in Lotte’s case), wasn’t quite right.

When she didn’t move to take the ring out of its snug position in the Cartier box, and when she didn’t answer Tom’s question – either way, yes or no – he became flustered in a way she’d really never seen before.

“Lotte? Darling? Have I frightened you? You look like you’re going to be ill…”

She clutched at Tom’s hand that had been absently resting on her knee, keeping her calm moments ago when he’d come to her rescue after her lonely, highly emotional sojourn back home. The physical action of holding his hand softened the blow of her speechless, confused state.
Tom was astute enough to snap the little red box closed, pocketing it once more as he gathered Charlotte against him, extricating his hand from her hold so he could wrap his arms around her. Her head instinctively pressed into the soft, warm skin of his neck, and when she spoke after a few quiet minutes, Tom could barely hear her muffled words.

“Was that really for me?”

Despite the quiet question, Tom could clearly hear its intended tone: doubt. Or was it suspicion? Mistrust?

His heart sank when she made no move to repeat herself or inquire further. She just…waited. Tom thought he heard her snuffle slightly and pulled her away from him just a bit to look her in the face. Her eyes were wide, fearful.

“What do you mean, my love? Of course it’s for you…” he searched her face, voice rising in pitch, his stomach churning at the thought that something was very wrong but he couldn’t place a finger on it.

Very softly, almost as though she was worried about upsetting him, Charlotte responded. “I didn’t know if it was for Jacqueline and you just kept it…” she trailed off. Her face was blushing as she looked away from Tom, pretending to be interested in a piece of lint on her jeans.

Tom was astounded. His mouth opened and closed again before any sound came out.

How could she think that?

“I’ll start by saying that I bought that ring for you the day you were packing in Soho for our trip,” he whispered, tilting Charlotte’s chin upward lightly with his index finger so he could look in her eyes. She blinked twice, looking at him, and then her eyes resumed their downcast position. When she made to get up off of his lap – he almost cried out at the action – Tom held her tightly, fear colouring his voice. “Lotte, please…no.”

She elected to stay sat in his arms, but her words didn’t match the loving embrace she still gave.

“So we’d been together for…” she swallowed apprehensively, “just a few days after a life-altering event and you decided to buy me an engagement ring?”

This wasn’t how Tom thought things would go. Lotte continued, her voice getting slightly louder, but still soft enough not to wake her dozing mum.

“And now you’ve decided to propose in hospital…why? In case my father dies?”

Tom shook his head vehemently, a few tears filling his eyes. Hadn’t he just told her he was going to wait until the end of their press tour? He was embarrassed, and frustrated that she thought he took this situation so lightly. Granted, he didn’t have time to get the perfect ring he thought she wanted before they left for Paris, since he was in such a hurry…

Oh.

It was Tom’s turn to look away from Lotte’s stare as he accepted the weight of their situation – he felt like a desperate, lovesick fool at best; he looked like an insensitive, insincere cad at worst. He wanted to say the right words – say all the right things – in that moment to make her understand how deeply he loved her and wanted her. And in his mind, he’d felt this way about her for several years; this much he knew he’d intimated to her. All of the heartfelt confessions on his part about feelings in the days after the shooting at the V&A were honest and real. And compounded with the idea of
losing Charlotte – a worry he constantly brought up to both her and Dr. Rochester – he couldn’t help wanting to put a beautiful, sparkling reminder on her elegant little ring finger of his enduring love for and commitment to her.

But none of those words would come out.

The tears had loosed themselves from his eyes just as Mac Hamilton’s chief surgeon walked into the hospital suite. Charlotte jumped up quickly, as though she’d been electrocuted, and rushed over to Helene to rouse her. When all three occupants of the room were awake and attentive, the gentleman began his explanations.

Charlotte and Helene wiped relieved tears from their eyes as Dr. Blaxill vacated their room on the cardiac floor. His news had been promising, but there was much of it and both women were overwhelmed.

Tom was just glad that Lotte held onto him for the entirety of the good doctor’s visit. It was a sign that she wasn’t shutting him out – that she still needed him as much as he needed her. He would just have to step back a bit and give his lovely girl some space. Perhaps they had moved too quickly?

But it stabbed at his heart that she thought he’d even considered buying a ring for Jacqueline, let alone gifting a diamond to her that would’ve been for someone else.

Dr. Blaxill succeeded, in the lengthy procedures performed on Mac’s person, to unblock several of the major arteries leading to his heart. He’d also tried his best to repair some of the tissue that was most damaged during his heart attacks. There were no complications, the doctor reassured them, but Mac’s recovery would be uncomfortable, slow, and tedious to preside over.

All three of them – Tom included – vowed to do whatever it took to speed Mac’s recovery and get him back to excellent health. They pored over the doctor’s provided pamphlets regarding restrictions during the first few weeks post-op. They read through all of the recommended and restricted food items on the lists given to them. They wrote down timetables and dosages for the various medications that would be part of Mac’s daily regimen for the foreseeable future. Tom even offered to Helene the option of contacting his father, who still had contacts in the pharmaceutical industry and could see to it that Mac was getting the safest, most effective drugs available.

“Goodness, Tom,” she smiled at him, walking over to give him a grateful hug where he sat with Lotte, “that’s quite generous of you.”

“No, it’s really not,” he demurred. “I want Mac to have the best care he needs because I know how important he is to you and Lotte, and as I said to you during our phone call earlier” – here he looked at Charlotte very plaintively – “I want to ask his permission for Charlotte’s hand in marriage, if she’ll allow me.”

Charlotte was alert enough to pick up on the phrase as I said to you during our phone call earlier. This somehow managed to unnerve her.

“Mum…? You, you knew about this?” she gestured to Tom in a vague manner as Helene nodded, smiling more widely than Charlotte would’ve liked.

“I could hear you two talking about it over there on the sofa, you know,” she answered. “And Tom, I do agree that this isn’t the best time, my dear.”
Tom blushed, looking at the floor in a dejected manner, nodding his head.

“But I also know, Charlotte, that this man loves you, and I know that you love him – you’re both lucky enough to have founded this relationship, however fast it accelerated, upon a trusting, loving friendship. What do I always tell you and Eve, Lotte?”

Charlotte’s answer was for her mum, but she looked at Tom when she said it.

“When you know, you know.”

Helene continued, giving Tom a look that meant it’s okay. “And do you know, my sweet child?”

Lotte couldn’t help babbling; she was still overwhelmed with the entire past 24 hours of her life.

“Yes, mum, but…don’t you think it’s fast? And Tom and I have been through the ringer, and I haven’t told you that we’ve had some communication issues on our tour…and you know my trust problems are so…cloying and there all the time…”

Tom released a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding when Charlotte spoke the word yes.

“All couples go through the ringer, Lotte. All couples have communication issues. And your trust issues are due to a man who had no real heart or commitment to you,” Helene countered, referencing James. “There is a man right here in this room with us who canceled a press tour to fly ten hours nonstop to be by your side right at this moment.”

Tom clasped Charlotte’s hand in his own and pressed it against his heart as he rejoined the conversation. “I don’t want to have to convince you of anything, my darling, but isn’t it also good for us that we’re in therapy together? We’ve already got a head start on so many other couples.”

Charlotte smiled weakly, nodding in agreement. He did have a good point.

“Take the ring, Lotte,” Tom nudged her gently, “and just keep it with you. You don’t need to give me an answer, but I’d like you to have it as a reminder of just how much I want you to be my wife, how much I want to love and honor you. Will you do that for me?”

She watched as he scooted her away from him just a bit, reaching back into the pocket of his trousers for the elegant scarlet box. Placing it in her free hand, he curled her little fingers around it and brought her knuckles up to his lips for a reverent kiss. “I will spend my life proving to you that you can trust me, and that I have only the best of intentions for you, and for us. Just…hold on to this until you decide, lovely.”

Charlotte relaxed a little, now that she knew her father was out of imminent danger and that Tom wasn’t upset with her for questioning his actions. Reaching over to press a full kiss on his lips, she whispered a softly sighed okay and laid her head on his shoulder.

They’d momentarily forgotten Helene was even in the room, but she was looking at them with barely-concealed pride and delight in her eyes. “For not accepting a proposal right off the bat, you two are still off to a very strong start,” she mused, smiling at her daughter and the man she’d always wanted her child to be with.

Helene was very skeptical when Lotte announced, years ago, her dream of working in public relations. She and Mac had raised their girls with the belief that they could both do and be anything they wanted, and that their choices would be wholeheartedly supported (as long as drugs, prostitution, or being a politico’s wife weren’t on the menu, so to speak).
When Charlotte began working as a personal assistant for a small firm in Leeds, Helene had scoffed— to herself— about her eldest child’s desire to wait on other people hand and foot in a position that offered no regular hours, stodgy pay, and forced Lotte to rub shoulders with stuffy, entitled people who appreciated nothing.

And then she had transferred to London on the recommendation of a colleague and had the fortuitous luck of working with Tom Hiddleston, an up-and-coming actor from RADA.

Helene’s first inclination that this wasn’t a normal actor gig happened when she received an email from the young man, introducing himself as Charlotte’s main charge. He apologized that he would be taking so much of her daughter’s time, as his career was on the up and up, and he wanted to meet her and her husband at their leisure to get to know his assistant’s family. He wanted everyone to be comfortable.

This simply wasn’t done in the entertainment industry. Helene wasn’t privy to much insider knowledge about the world of acting, but she knew enough to realize that Tom’s gesture was truly one of a kind. And he proved himself to Mac and Helene, throughout Charlotte’s tenure, to be reliable, thoughtful, and wonderful to their child. Even when he was dating the Silver woman, Tom treated Lotte as though she came first. While Helen found it sad for the girlfriend (despite the nasty things Lotte told Helene she did and said), she could tell very early on that Tom was smitten with Charlotte.

She waited for it to pass. Actors flitted from one diversion to another; the same could be said for many of their relationships. She waited for Tom to hurt Charlotte, or for Charlotte to quit because of some scandal he’d caused that she couldn’t cope with.

None of it happened.

And then they’d lived through a mass attack, clinging to one another in the midst of a bloodbath. Tom had never left her child’s side.

“I think since your father will be sleeping for most of the day today and on a lot of medicines, we should go home for a bit, shower, and eat…possibly rest,” Helene suggested. “Tom, you’re welcome to stay with us; we have more than enough room, but I completely understand if you would prefer a hotel or you need to get back—”

He cut Helene off immediately. Politely, but immediately. “No. I stay with you and Charlotte. My publicist knows I’m not to be bothered until further notice, and he’s been instructed to make my apologies for the remaining venues on the press tour. They can do without me. I know Lotte wants to wait right here to see her daddy, and then we can go home and get cleaned up.”

There really wasn’t anything to argue with. Charlotte took that moment to hug Tom tighter against her, whispering to him very softly as she did so. “I do love you, very much. Thank you.”

He kissed her sweetly atop her chestnut waves, murmuring, “I love you, too. Anything for you and your mum.”

Knowing Charlotte was very emotional, still, and that she was worn out despite resting, Tom wanted to brace her for what might be coming when Mac was wheeled back into the room. “Darling, let’s not be scared, but your father is going to have lots of IVs and tubes on him, all right? He’s going to be scarred a little bit, as I’m not sure if they took any veins from his leg for the bypass, or how large his chest scar will be. He’s going to look worse than he is, love…very pale, and probably a little puffy.”
He felt Lotte stiffen a bit, absorbing these facts, but she nodded slowly and whispered that she was okay. “I didn’t want to read anything about his procedure beforehand because I knew I would worry more,” she confessed.

Tom smiled warmly at her, explaining that he’d done some reading on the plane so he could help prepare her for what might happen. He was thankful, to himself, that some of the possible outcomes he’d read hadn’t come to pass. He wouldn’t share those with her.

As if they’d summoned him by name, Mac suddenly appeared on his hospital bed, wheeled into the room by an attending nurse and coming out of his anaesthesia. He was very groggy, very quiet, and his lips were barely moving as Helene leaned down to kiss his forehead and welcome him back.

Charlotte began crying copious tears, relieved that her daddy was alive and well, but frightened at seeing him so helpless and weak. She didn’t want to approach him at first, clinging to Tom and shuddering as she cried, watching Mac from afar. Tom coached her through her anxiousness, running his fingers through her hair and speaking to her in a soft, calming tone. “See, my love? He’s just fine. A little scary, isn’t it?”

She nodded, still crying and sniffling. She couldn’t look away – if she did, she feared Mac would disappear.

“He’s on good medication so he doesn’t feel any pain, and his heart won’t be struggling to pump blood anymore. Do you see the monitors over there?” Tom pointed out the various machines that were connected to Mac’s tubes, wires, and IVs. “His blood pressure is quite good, his pulse ox rate looks like he’s getting adequate oxygen flow…”

“How do you know all of these things, Tom?” Lotte chuckled, a tiny sound that hinted she was calming down.

“I told you, darling, I read up on all this on my jaunt over,” he kissed her cheek lovingly, letting his lips linger against the satiny smoothness of her skin. “I’ll do anything to keep you safe, darling. Anything to help you. Let’s go see your dad, yes?”

Charlotte nodded, moving slowly from her position against Tom to walk over to Mac, where Helene sat perched on the bed by his side. “Charlotte and Tom are here, honey,” Helene whispered, and Charlotte’s eyes filled with tears once more as she knelt down beside her recuperating father. She reached out to gently take hold of his hand, and she gave a little sob as she felt him squeeze her hand. It was a two-squeeze, just like the ones she and Tom always shared.

Just as it had for them, it meant that her daddy was okay and that she needn’t worry. The tenderness and meaning of the gesture somehow made her cry harder. It was yet another example of how profoundly important Tom Hiddleston was to her – his manners and respectfulness toward her, his tendency to protect her, his love for her. He was the closest thing Charlotte would ever be able to find, even if she scoured the globe five times over, to a man as wonderful to her as Mac Hamilton.

She was going to keep that ring.

Tom was perched patiently on the bed in Lotte’s old room, freshly showered and in comfortable, clean clothes, when she came into her room, toweling her hair. She’d taken a long shower because the travel had made her feel greasy, and hospitals – despite how antiseptic they really were – made
her feel as though she had infinite germs all over her.

She gave a start at seeing Tom sitting there, no phone in his hand or any other distraction present. He’d been waiting for her.

Lotte looked over at her open toiletries bag, splayed out on her bed, and saw that Tom had taken out her hairbrush. He motioned for her to climb onto the bed with him, patting the space between his long legs.

Dropping the towel and pulling at the shoulder of her shirt that kept drooping off of her right shoulder, she sleepily positioned herself against him as he delicately began to run the brush through her still-damp tresses. Her eyes closed at the intimacy of the gesture, the gentle tugging at her scalp relaxing her just as the heat from the shower had done.

“Feeling better, my little Lotte?” he asked, running his hands through the dark brown strands to fluff more of the moisture out of them.

“Very…tired,” Charlotte yawned, taking the brush from Tom and moving some of her items from the bed onto the floor at their feet.

“It’s early morning still,” Tom said. “Your mum told me to tell you she was going to sleep for awhile, and then we can all get something to eat later. Would you like me to stay in here with you or go into the guest room? All my things are in there.”

For the first time in what seemed to be a very long time, Charlotte reached for Tom’s face and gave him a searing, heartfelt kiss that said all she was afraid to say during his disastrous hospital proposal. “I need for you to stay in here with me, please,” she smiled genuinely, relieved that her father was okay, that she was clean and warm, and that her handsome man was proving to be quite the doting, thoughtful boyfriend once again. “Can I sleep in your arms?”

Tom didn’t waste any time, purring his pleasure at Lotte’s answer as he pulled her backward against him, arranging them both underneath the soft duvet. “I could never leave you alone, love. You’ll have to force me,” he teased, covering her face and eyelids with light kisses.

Not realizing how tired they both actually were, it only took the pair a few minutes to situate themselves into a comfortable position – Tom curled protectively around his best girl as usual – before they fell asleep. Right before he dropped off, though, Tom heard her dulcet voice.

“Thank you for my beautiful ring, Thomas.”

He squeezed her more tightly against him.

Tom woke to soft kisses along the scruff of beard at his throat and neck, inhaling the divine scent of his sweet girl pressed against him.

“Rise and shine, baby,” Charlotte whispered lovingly at his ear, pressing another kiss to his sleepy, smiling face. “I can smell something cooking downstairs.”

Stretching languidly against her, curling one arm protectively around her shoulders as his muscles pulled taut and then relaxed, Tom kept his eyes closed for a few more blissful seconds. “Is that pasta?” he asked, eyes suddenly opening and nose pricking at the rich scent of tomato and cheese
wafting through the open door of Lotte’s bedroom. “It smells so good.”

His stomach gave a rather loud growl at the smell. Laughing, Charlotte sat up in bed, urging Tom upward beside her, too. “Most likely. Mum loves to cook Italian food.” She made to throw off the covers and bound down the stairs, but Tom captured her in his grasp for a moment more, pressing her head against his chest as he held her in place.

“How did you sleep, my lovely? Are you feeling better?” he asked, nuzzling against her ear and silently thanking the gods above that she hadn’t run screaming away from him after his faux pas in Mac’s recovery room.

“Much better,” she nodded, reaching up with one hand to tangle her fingers in Tom’s mussed curls. “I’m so glad you’re here with me, Tom. I don’t know how I would have handled all that back at hospital without you.”

“You’d never have to,” he insisted, closing his eyes and practically purring at her loving touch. “Work is very important to me, darling, but I’ve realized that you are – more than anything – the most important priority in my life. After my little outburst on the phone with Dr. Rochester, I realized that I’d gotten those priorities reversed, even for the sake of my own well being and our growing relationship.”

Charlotte was about to say something else, about still being sorry she made an important working decision without consulting him, but he continued. He felt it was important to get everything out in the open once more, especially now that he’d confessed his long-term intentions to her.

“I made the same mistake by allowing Jacqueline to have access to me, to come between you and me by contacting her – I neglected you as my most important priority.”

This admission warmed Lotte’s heart; he had offered her the confession without her having to bring up that awful woman again. “I appreciate that very much, Tom. You know I don’t mind when you make work your foremost priority, don’t you? I know it’s your passion and you’re living your dream…”

“With you beside me,” Tom added.

Smiling shyly, Charlotte nodded. “I just don’t want you to work yourself to death, or to allow yourself to be subjected to situations that might increase your anxiety.”

“I know that, darling,” Tom replied, pulling the duvet off of them and situating Lotte on his lap, carefully picking her up and standing with her. “What say we have a chat with Dr. Rochester after we eat some lunch?”

This time it was Charlotte’s stomach’s turn to emit a loud, unladylike growl. Clutching her abdomen and laughing heartily, she accepted Tom’s invitation. He held her hand, like some love-struck teenager who’d just been asked out by the prettiest girl in school, as they made their way downstairs to share a meal with Helene.

“I was wondering if you two sleepyheads were going to wake,” Helene teased, pulling out a large casserole dish of lasagne and a baking sheet of garlic bread from the oven. The scents that assailed their noses were richer and more mouth-watering than when they’d first smelled the food from upstairs.
“Mum, everything looks so wonderful,” Charlotte moaned, motioning for Tom to help her gather some cutlery and plates so they could set the table together. “I haven’t had your cooking in forever.”

Helene mock-scolded her eldest daughter, cutting into the dish of lasagne and then placing the garlic bread into a little cloth-covered basket. “Well if you didn’t work so much, my darling girl, you could come home more often and eat with dad and me!”

As soon as she’d said it, Helen regretted the jibe she’d just thrown at Lotte – and Tom, by extension. “Oh, you two,” she retracted, bringing the food to the dining table and thanking Tom when he pulled out her chair for her, “I don’t mean to imply that either of you should be working less or not enjoying your travels and experiences. I think it’s wonderful that you two can maintain such a good working relationship, combined with your newfound personal one.”

Ladling a generous helping of the pasta dish onto everyone’s plate, Tom agreed, smiling widely and thanking Helene for her hard work in the kitchen. “I’m so lucky to not only have Charlotte by my side as my assistant, but also, now I can truly let everyone know how important she is to me,” he agreed, tucking into his food with a pleased groan at the spicy, rich tomato sauce, the perfectly-cooked noodles, and the herbs and spices intermixed with ricotta.

“I loved the video you two did, by the way,” Helene added, gathering some of the sauce on her plate with a hunk of the baked bread. “If anything else good came from that horrific event you two went through – besides you finally admitting you loved one another – it was that now more people know they’re not alone, and you both have helped give them a push in the right direction to seek help.”

“It was Charlotte’s idea,” Tom beamed, wiping his lips politely after a particularly satisfying bite. “I was so down the evening before, feeling like our combined anxieties were too much for the both of us to handle, and she came up with this wonderful plan that would turn our struggle into hope for people worldwide.”

Lotte only smiled as she sipped her ice water, cleansing her palate before continuing to dig into what was her second helping of lasagne. The in-flight meal had been hours ago and turned out not to be as satisfying as she originally thought.

“Darling,” Helene placed her hand atop Charlotte’s on the table, “I know you probably don’t want me to dredge this up again just now, but seeing you and Tom together” – here she looked back and forth between the two of them – “working, playing, overcoming grief and fear and anxiety together, in therapy…traveling the world, helping others…I feel very safe in saying that yours would be a very satisfying, happy marriage. If that’s what you decide,” she added at the end.

Lotte, for her part, felt less exasperated about the topic than she did earlier at hospital, and she nodded in acknowledgment of her mum’s assessment, but didn’t really say much of anything. Chewing thoughtfully on a buttery, salty piece of the garlic bread, she merely reached across the table with her left hand and grasped Tom’s own, holding it with pride and not a little love.

“I meant what I said,” he stared in her eyes, putting his fork down to concentrate solely on his best girl. In a quiet voice, as though Helene wasn’t even there with them, he reiterated his earlier request. “Just keep the ring. I’m not going to press you, lovely. But it’s yours for as long as you can stand it. I want to be your husband.”

His sentiments were lovely.

Her mother made total sense.

And Charlotte wanted nothing more than to be Tom’s wife, to be by his side, to be his partner, for
them to be together. But it started feeling a little like an inquisition again.

“Can we take things a bit slower, then, baby?” she asked. Her bright smile and hopeful tone were enough to telegraph to Tom that she wasn’t outright dismissing him, but that she really, truly needed things to relax a bit. She couldn’t have handled anything else in that moment.

“Of course. Shall we give Dr. Rochester a call when we’re finished, Lotte?” Tom said.

“I think that’s a good idea, loves,” Helene piped up. She’d finished eating and was relaxing at the table, hands folded in her lap. “I’m going to head back to Jimmy’s to see daddy and bring him his comfy socks that he likes, and hopefully I’ll see you two later?”

Tom and Charlotte nodded, finishing the last remnants of their meal. Lotte thanked her mother for lunch, offering to make a dinner and something sweet for all of them to have later in the evening, knowing her mother was still exhausted. “Thank you, sweetheart. Tom, glad to have you in our home,” Helene winked at him before heading toward her bedroom to get her things.

“Hopefully you’ll be seeing much more of me here, Helene,” he called after her. He stood when Lotte did, following her to the sink with their dishes so he could help her with the washing up. Charlotte had warmed to his words, trying desperately to hide her pleased blush at the thought of Tom becoming a very permanent part of her family. She didn’t want him to see just how seriously she was still considering his offer, and she was desperate not to get ahead of herself.

Let him continue to prove to me that I can trust him, and that this can work as something beyond being thrown together after a traumatic event, she reasoned to herself while they loaded the dishwasher.

When they’d finished, dishes put away and worktop wiped clean, leftovers in the fridge, Tom gathered Charlotte in his arms against the sink and gave her a long, luxurious kiss. One large hand rested on the delicate small of her back, and the other tangled itself thoroughly in her still-slightly-damp, wavy hair. She was breathless when she pulled away, eyes wide and a flushed, smiling look on her face.

“Do I still have it, sweet girl?” he chided her playfully, noticing how the kiss had affected her.

“You’ll never not have it, Tom. I love you more than you realize,” she answered. “Let’s go relax in the living room and see if Doc is available.”
Hi all.

I just wanted to apologize for the really long, unplanned hiatus I've taken.

I'm still planning on finishing this fic (probably in one more chapter or so), but don't have any immediate plans to continue writing at the moment. My muse is being difficult, and work and some personal health issues are really putting everything else on the back burner, so to speak.

I appreciate those of you who read my stuff and keep in touch via message, and again, I'm so sorry it's been so quiet. I promise I'll be back - but it might take a little while.

Thank you. Love you.

LaLumiere

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