As You Act, So Shall You Be
by Spadesjade

Summary

Cosette knew Tom was trouble from minute one. But it's hard to resist that charm when it's all focused on you. A one night stand and an unplanned pregnancy later, Cosette and Tom are now stuck with each other, and are going to raise a child. The question is, what are they to each other?

Notes

Because I can't stay away from the angst. You thought my last story was bad, this is possibly worse. This Tom is highly problematic, and is built from a combination of celebrity gossip and his astrology chart. Cosette may seem familiar to you because I can't seem to write an OFC who doesn't share my morality, but she's not nearly as much like me as Agnes is. I don't know when I'll be updating but I want to be regular, hopefully every two weeks. Some chapters will be short, some will be long. Special thanks to Golddust
(thiddyastro) and exposefeetofclay for their help in beta-ing and feedback!
VOLUME I: Now
When Tom steps into the room, the first thing he sees is the little life she's holding in her arms.

The life they made.

He'd always known their daughter was very much alive. The various kicks and movement and the sound of her heartbeat and the images on the ultrasounds all told him, but he knew it deeper, from his heart.

But his heart, now, feels like it's going to stop.

It's been incredibly hard, these last three months. And he knows he is entirely to blame. It is his fault that they are not together, that they are not a family.

He doesn't like to admit it out loud, but he knows.

Sometimes he wants to tell himself that she just doesn't love him enough. If she did, she would accept that there are simply too many temptations for a man like him, and he's not a saint, he is as far from a saint as it gets. She should accept that his independent nature doesn't allow him to commit to one woman the same way it did others, but would know that he would always come home to her, that he loves her and no one else, and never will. In his way, he is incredibly loyal, even now. He wants to tell her that if she looks at their relationship, she would see that at no time had he ever failed to meet any need she had. He would have provided for her, cared for her, protected her, loved her. He wanted to give himself to her the way he had never to any other.

Was it so much to ask for a release? For a taste outside of their routine?

But he knows the answer to that. He knows the rest of the world doesn't operate that way. And that when he asked her to trust him, to give him that chance he desperately wanted, he knew it was expected, that she would be his one and only. It had been an enormous effort for her to trust him. Her instincts TOLD her she couldn't, yet she had. And he had thought he could live up to that trust.

So much for that.

"Here, Tom," she says, those stunning violet eyes that had bewitched him from the first second she'd set them on him, rising to meet his, her voice gentle, lacking the scorn and rage that had become commonplace for her these last months, "meet your daughter."

She gives her over to him. The bundle weighs much less than he expected. He touches Cosette's hands over the blanket, but she doesn't pull away -- there is no chance she would ever endanger this precious little miracle. She waits until his hold is secure and then pulls back. She is even smiling as she watches him with the little girl.

Little Beatrice.

"She's magnificent," Tom chokes, his finger brushing over the little hands, the soft curls she came with from the womb, the tiny nose, lips, cheeks. Big blue eyes that might change color (but he doubts it) squint as they examine him. Little as she is, she scowls in intense concentration as she studies him, focusing the vision that is still blurry from as little as a few feet, trying to figure out who this new person is.

"I know." Cosette sits up with her hands spread on her thighs. "She's probably going to need a feeding soon, though, but I wanted...I mean, you are her father." She sounds resigned. And something else. Tom looks up at her.

He doesn't dare ask to stay. He knows she won't let him. She wouldn't let him hold her as she
pushed their child into the world. She wouldn't even let him stay in the room.

Beatrice yawns, her eyes drooping. "I think she's tired," he says.

Cosette nods. "She's not the only one. You can put her there," she motions with a finger. The plastic bin that the hospital uses for a cradle sits beside her bed. Tom wants to hold the child longer, though, but he gives in and sets her down.

He knows this is his punishment. He is still undecided on whether he deserves it.

"Maybe this isn't the right time," Cosette says, "but I think we need to talk."

Tom looks at her, puzzled. "You're exhausted, da---Cosette. You should probably sleep when she does."

"I know." Heavy eyes stare at him. "But I don't know if I can, until I tell you something."

His heartbeat flutters. He sees a nearby chair and pulls it closer to her bed, but keeps a distance. He leans forward to listen, his elbows resting on his knees.

"Beatrice is my child, and your child," Cosette says, and her eyes are completely devoid of the bitterness, the vitriol they would sparkle with whenever she looked at him during these last few months. When hormones had completely taken control and she was a walking bag of emotions, all of it negative, all of it heaped on him.

"It would be wrong of me to prevent you from being her father. Provided you do actually want to be her father."

Tom swallows past the lump in his throat. It hurts, her implications. But he's not surprised by them. She had believed all his other words, and look at where it had gotten her, she said as much in heated moments. Why should she ever believe anything he ever says again?

"I do," he says, steady.

She nods. "Then this is what is going to happen. As of right now, you and I will never, ever speak of what happened. Ever again. I will no longer hold it against you, and you will never apologize or try explain it. Do you understand?"

He frowns. His hopes, ridiculously, peek their heads out from behind their barricades, where he had safely banished them during the emotional war between him and Cosette. "Does that mean--"

"No," she says, in a low tone that is not malicious. "As the Taylor Swift song goes, we are never, ever, ever getting back together. You and I are completely done as...well. But as parents, we sort of have no choice now, do we?"

We always have choices, Tom thinks, but says nothing. He's said so much these last few months. The words rise, they fill his brain, but he makes himself stay silent. If she hasn't heard him before, she won't hear him now, and if he pushes to hard, this tenuous truce will break before it can take root.

"So," she continues, eyes going to their little bundle that is snoozing contentedly, "all hostilities will cease. This isn't about you or me anymore. We cannot be hateful or mean to each other, not in any way. A child absorbs it like a sponge. I won't risk her being harmed by...by what happened."

By what you did, is what she wanted to say, Tom knows it.
"I will be polite, even kind to you. We will accommodate each other, work together, even enjoy each other's presence, or pretend to, when it's needed. We will never, ever speak a harsh word to or about each other, as of this moment."

Tom feels those hopes peek out farther. Is the coast clear? Is there finally a cease-fire?

"But you will understand that this does not mean at any point that I am over what you did," she finishes in a flat tone. "I'm going to forgive you, Thomas, but forgiveness doesn't mean allowing you to do it again. You will not, at any time, make any appeal of me to consider renewing our relationship. I don't think that this should be that hard, as I'm pretty sure I've been nothing but a continuous source of grief for you, but I wanted us to be straight on this. I think I'm getting the harder end of the deal; I'm still very angry at you and it will take a lot of time to let that anger go. But Grandma always said, as you act, so shall you be. Fake it till you make it, as they say. So I'm going to try it. But I don't want to be worrying that you're going to misunderstand or misinterpret anything I do. And I certainly don't want you worrying about it, either. So can we do this? For Beatrice?"

Her big, violet eyes are pleading. She's so beautiful, in this disheveled, exhausted and strangely rational state. Clearly all the hormones are taking a break, fatigued by all the work and effort of getting that new life from one side of the womb to the other. He wishes, more than anything else in the world, that he could get up, put his arms around her, kiss her, promise her the moon and deliver it.

And he knows, in that irrevocable moment, what he's lost.

"Yes," he says in a clear, calm voice. "For Beatrice. I will do that." And for you, but he doesn't say it.

She nods. "Thank you, Tom. There's going to be stuff to work out, schedules and what-not. And Beatrice is going to need both of us, so we're going to have to be around each other quite a lot. I just want us to be clear. I don't want any misunderstandings. I don't want to ever repeat this conversation." She sighs, shoulders hunching as she falls back against her pillows. God, how much he wants to hold her! Soothe her and comfort her! But he can't. He's made a promise.

"I've got the spare room ready for you," she says, adjusting the blankets as well as herself, looking ready to fall asleep.

"Spare room?" Tom echoes.

"Well, Beatrice is going to need around the clock care for a bit. I figured you might want to stick close, but it's entirely up to you."

"No, I do, thank you, yes, but I thought your mother--"

"She's camping out on the couch," Cosette replies in a murmur. She's drifting off. Then she seems to realize she's missing something, glances toward the glass of water on her bedside, and looks too damn tired to reach for it.

One of Tom's favorite things about their relationship was how they always read each other so clearly and so well. Their bond had been nearly psychic. So it is pure instinct when he gets up and reaches for the glass for her and she takes it with a grateful smile.

She has smiled at him so much. If she is going to act like she forgives him, maybe some day she will.
He adjusts the blanket for her as she drinks deeply, even asks him to refill the glass. He's nearly giddy at this moment, even if it isn't real. She's letting him be close again. Even though, he reminds himself, viciously, that she is not with him. She will never be with him again.

"I'm not doing this for either of us," Cosette says as she settles back, giving the glass back to him. "Not for me or for you."

He nods. Those hopes duck their heads down, braced for impact.

"It's about her, Tom. For whatever reason, God gave her to us. We can't abuse that responsibility. We can't...we just can't."

Tears are in her eyes. Maybe it's hormones, exhaustion, whatever. He leans over, his hands lightly bracing themselves on the edge of her bed, looking intensely into her eyes.

"May I say one thing?"

She waits.

"You have made your feelings clear, and I won't forget them, I promise," he says. "But I want to say one thing to you, before I let it go, for good. I want to make sure you know my feelings."

She still waits.

"I love you."

The hurt flashes across her face. And then, she wills it away, closing her eyes and opening them again.

"I'm not saying that to upset you," Tom says quickly, before she can reply and spoil his intentions. "I just want you to know. That won't change."

"I'm tired, Tom. If you want to stay with Beatrice for a bit more, that's fine. But I'm going to sleep. Okay?"

He nods. She turns away, pulling on her sleeping mask. She always needed her sleeping mask, even in a pitch-black room.

Tom turns to the little girl. He imagines what this moment would be like if he hadn't done what he did. If he hadn't given in to his urges and desires. How he would be curled up on that bed with Cosette, with her head on his shoulder, and they would be talking, murmuring about their future, about Beatrice's future, until Cosette drifted off, and he could watch her sleep, a pleasure he'd only had once before in his life, on that night they'd made their little girl.

And that hurts more than anything. What could have been.

But still. Cosette's words have renewed his spirit. He will be a father to Beatrice. And it will be a good life, he and Cosette getting along, working only for Beatrice's good. Isn't that what parents do, sacrifice for their children?

Then Cosette's father's words ring in his ears. Something he had said when the two of them had been at her parents' place for dinner. Her second trimester had made her glow, and she was so beautiful that night, that he wanted to talk to her about them getting married. Tom had never in his life spoken about marrying anyone, but it felt right with Cosette -- and not just because she was carrying his child. She had already haunted him morning, noon and night for the two months of
their break up. Sure, he'd had difficult break-ups in his past, but he couldn't recover from her at all. Something about her felt like she was the one with whom he was supposed to spend the rest of his life.

Cosette's father said one thing while they talked about what it meant to be a father, at dinner. "The best thing a man can do for his children is love their mother."

And he will do that. Even if he can never tell her again, never remind her. He will use that love as strength for Beatrice, and being the best father he is capable of being. He will love both of them and do as Cosette wants. She is willing to put aside her pain. Can he do less?

Tom kisses Beatrice's little head, and lets himself out.
Cosette was on yard duty. She was always on yard duty, it seemed, but truthfully, she liked being outside, as long as she could go to the bathroom without feeling like she was being rushed. It was one of the drawbacks of being a teacher -- you had to train your bladder for when it could go.

The middle school girls were gathered at the far gate. The entire playground slash parking lot was surrounded by a high, black iron gate, decorative and protective. Wide openings were at either end to let the cars through, currently drawn closed and locked. They were tucked away in a quiet corner of the city, where the big church tower loomed over them.

Today it was the site of a movie shoot. It wasn't unusual -- the church was a local landmark and Hollywood liked cheap locations, so filming at the church was a semi-regular thing, at least two or three times a year. The streets were closed on either side of the block so that they could spread out into the street -- costume, wardrobe, make-up and trailers for the celebrities who were too good to sit out like regular people. But, Cosette reasoned, they had to spend their day somewhere. Her father had worked briefly in the industry before he'd left in disgust. These men and women called actors would shoot, then go sit on their butts for an hour or two while everything was reset. No wonder it cost millions of dollars to film.

She could hear, distantly, the girls giggling. They were pointing at someone -- obviously it was someone they liked who was on the set that morning. And then she saw a tall, lanky figure slink over to them. Whoever it was, he was being very accommodating. Most of the time the kids were just plain ignored, maybe waved at, but this one was going to engage.

Always alert, Cosette started to walk over toward the crowd. The students weren't supposed to interact with anybody on the street, and while it wasn't the same thing, she wanted to be sure nothing untoward was going on. With how thirteen and fourteen year old girls could be today, some of them tall and shapely, almost like women, and their Catholic schoolgirl clothes, it didn't pay to just blow things off as harmless anymore.

"Miss Mitchells!" one of the girls, Laurie, called out to her. "It's Tom Hiddleston!"

These words had little effect on her. She had long since given up her habit of knowing who the hot actors and actresses were, even though the students kept her well abreast of current fads and trends. She gave a little shrug even as the girls parted to give her a better view of the young man signing their notebooks.

Damn, he was extremely hot.

Everything about him was lean and wiry -- except for the wide shoulders which narrowed into a slender torso. Muscle on his arms caused veins to pop here and there. His smile lit up his face and
his expression was mildly bashful as he glanced up at her.

"So sorry," he said. "I hope I'm not disturbing anything, but they were very patient."

Cosette nodded. Fuck, he had a British accent. She steeled her shoulders, telling herself she was not going to fall for a pretty face with big blue eyes and little blond curls gelled perfectly along his high forehead. She was thirty-two, not thirteen, and would not be reduced to a puddle. "It's fine," she said, moving to the back of the group. "I hope they weren't pestering you."

"Not at all. But I do have to say that I'm not allowed to take any selfies."

"That's fine," Rebecca said, one of the tallest, most outspoken girls of the class, the one most likely to keep her cool under pressure. Her dark hair and husky voice would turn her into a heartbreaker within a matter of months and sometimes Cosette worried about her as if she were her mother. "We're not allowed to have phones during the school day, anyway."

"Oh," the actor said. "Well, then it's all good then." He handed back the last notebook. Then his eyes landed on her, one eyebrow arching with what seemed like extra interest. "Miss Mitchells, is it?" he asked.

The girls around her seemed to exchange knowing glances accompanied by little smirks. "Yes?" Cosette said in the same deadpan she used on the students when she knew they were going to try to dazzle her with some verbal acrobatics.

He gave a little shrug, his mouth making an obscenely cute little twist to accompany it. "You seem very popular with your students," he observed.

Cosette scrunched one eyebrow. What was he trying to do? Her inner alarm was going off, the one that told her a man was trying to flirt with her. She hated it when men flirted with her. Flirting was so artless, done just for fun without any intention behind it and she found it tedious.

"Be sure you get your bathroom breaks in before the bell rings," she said to the others. "Mr...Fiddle?"

"Hiddleston," Tonya corrects her in a fierce whisper.

"Hiddleston, I'm sure, has to get back to work."

"Not at all, we break when the students are outside," he said dismissively, waving his hand about. "The noise. It's not that big of a deal, though. You're in quite a beautiful area here."

The girls had started to drift back. They seemed to want to continue to listen to the man talk, but others were tugging at them, hissing at each other to move off. What the reasons were, she had no idea.

"Yes, we've been here a long time," Cosette said, trying to be polite.

"Over a hundred years, according to the research I did," Tom continued for her.

"You did research on the church?" she asked, puzzled.

"I like to know things about where I go," he said. His eyes had been on her the entire time, drawing her closer. How the hell had she gotten so close to the damn gate? And where had all the students disappeared to? "So, do you teach a particular subject, or are you..."

"Lord, I'm horrible at Maths." Tom shook his head, and Cosette couldn't help but notice that he had been playing with his long, nimble fingers in various nervous gestures. "Maybe I'd have done better if I'd had a teacher like you."

There it was. Cosette let out a sigh and couldn't help a roll of her eyes. "You have no idea what kind of teacher I am," she pointed out plainly.

"I'm sure you're quite gifted."

"No more than any other Math teacher," she pointed out, "as far as you know." She was saved from further irritation by the bell signaling the end of recess. "Thank you for humoring the girls, Mr. Hiddleston."

"Tom," he corrected her, just as she was about to turn. "And you...?"

"Miss Mitchells, like the girls said," she declared, although her voice wasn't scornful. "Have fun on your shoot today." She spun and headed back toward the building where everyone was starting to line up.

8 8 8

Tom watched her go.

Hate to see her go, love to watch her leave, he thought. She was utterly gorgeous. He'd spotted her the second she'd emerged from the building, hourglass figure with a nice, round ass and wide hips, and a rack that balanced her perfectly. Shapely legs, modestly dressed in a skirt that skimmed her knees and exposed the curve of her calves. Short heels, short sleeves and a loose shirt that kept her from being too distracting of a figure to the boys she taught. They probably all had a crush on her. She was probably worshipped.

He wanted to worship, too, but in an entirely different way.

But she was cool to him. She either pretended not to know who he was, or she honestly didn't know; ego warred with his knowledge that he wasn't nearly as well known as he wanted to be. And she didn't take his smooth-talking shit.

He liked her. A lot. Those eyes -- he couldn't quite tell the color -- crackled with something underlying, something defiant, something that spoke of intelligence and passion. The lines between her eyes indicated she had a bit of a temper, while the color of her lips, dressed in a deep purple lipstick that matched the tone of her dark hair and pale skin to perfection, suggested a hint of wildness.

Or maybe he was just imagining it all. It wasn't the first time he'd turned a woman into a goddess only to be sorely disappointed in how painfully human she was.

She didn't come out again that day until dismissal time, and then she was at the far gate, directing the cars as they came out of the pick-up line, keeping the school families from jaywalking across to the other, larger parking lot across the street. When she disappeared inside, Tom took advantage of his break while they finished redressing the set to head toward the main office of the school.

He wasn't quite sure what he was doing, but he had to do something. He had to find a way to get her when she wasn't in "teacher mode," meet her as a person and not in two roles assigned to them.
He was being horribly impulsive, a little voice nagged at him, but he couldn't seem to stop himself. And he had lots of offers that didn't require him to do this much legwork, but something about her...

The second he set foot into the main office, he saw her at the copy machine. She walked over to a nearby table and started to sort through her papers, oblivious to him.

"Hi, can I help you?" a lovely Latino woman seating at the counter asked him. Tom smiled at her and turned on all of his charm.

"Actually, I was looking for Miss Mitchells," he said, turning his eyes to her.

The dark haired beauty gave a little start of surprise and turned, her curls flopping against her shoulders with the motion. She stared at him, wide-eyed, for just a moment and then recovered, plastering on a smile that she probably used to charm all the parents.

"Hello, Mr. Hiddleston," she said, coming over to the counter that separated those that entered the office and those working in it. "How can I help you?" She folded her hands in front of her as she spoke.

"I was thinking about earlier today," he said, resting his hands on the counter -- women seemed to have a thing for his hands, and he saw her eyes flick to them. He kept them immaculate and manicured more often these days. "I was wondering if maybe the girls would like a tour of the set, during their next break, of course. Under your supervision, absolutely," he added quickly.

She considered him with a little smirk. "The girls have been in the church many times, Mr. Hiddleston," she said. "How can I help you?" She folded her hands in front of her as she spoke.

"I was thinking about earlier today," he said, resting his hands on the counter -- women seemed to have a thing for his hands, and he saw her eyes flick to them. He kept them immaculate and manicured more often these days. "I was wondering if maybe the girls would like a tour of the set, during their next break, of course. Under your supervision, absolutely," he added quickly.

She considered him with a little smirk. "The girls have been in the church many times, Mr. Hiddleston," she said. "They know what it looks like better than you do."

"Well," came the voice of the woman who had greeted him, "it's kind of different if there's a movie being filmed there. Maybe they'd like to see the set-up."

Tom flashed her a brilliant grin, wanting to kiss the secretary for her help. "Absolutely. Make-up, wardrobe, and they'd be free to enjoy the catering truck. It wouldn't take long, just one recess period, which are what, twenty minutes?"

She was a bit flustered. Her eyes went from the Latino woman back to him, and one eye squinted at him suspiciously. "I would hate to have you go through all that trouble, Mr. Hiddleston," she said.

He shook his head. "Tom, please, I told you."

"And if word gets around you took one group of girls, the whole school would be clamoring to go," she pointed out, folding her arm in a full-out defensive gesture.

"Cosette, we could keep it quiet," the secretary said. "Tom is offering. The girls would love it. We'd say it's just for the eighth grade girls."

Cosette. That name sent a zing through him.

"I know we're a bit of an inconvenience, being here," Tom said, "taking up your space. We just want to improve relations a bit, make things more pleasant for all of us."

"Usually that's a job reserved for someone of a much lower pay grade than a film star," Cosette said in a low voice.

"Well," and Tom felt himself blush a bit, but didn't try to repress it. "I admit I wanted to make the
suggestion. Also so that I could ask you if you wouldn't mind having a coffee with me. I know there are a few coffee places the next block over.

Cosette drew a heavy breath, and looked around. Then she gestured over her shoulder as some other people came into the office, and Tom followed her into a room attached to the far side of the main space. It was obviously the principal's office, currently empty. She motioned him so that they were out of sight of anyone who might see them from the main office.

"Mr. Hiddleston," she started, but he interrupted her. "Tom."

They stared at each other for a minute.

"I'm afraid I'm not comfortable accepting your offer of coffee," she said, politely but firmly. "The tour is fine, I'd be happy to arrange it with the principal. But I don't know you."

"You haven't seen any of my movies?"

"I have, actually. The girls told me who you were, and of course I saw you in the Marvel films, but I also realized I saw you as Hank Williams in the trailers of 'I Saw The Light.'"

He lit up. "Are you going to see it?"

"My mother will drag me to it. She's always had a thing for Hank Williams because of grandpa." Cosette's face softened just a bit, but her professional mask was back in place in a second. "But honestly, seeing you in a film is not knowing you. I just met you today and I'm not in the habit of going off with complete strangers."

"We'd be in public," Tom pointed out, and then realized he was pushing. Pushing wasn't going to work. Needling this woman wasn't going to work. She dealt with middle schoolers. She was pester-resistant.

"Thank you, sincerely, and I'm very flattered, but no." She had not moved her arms from under her breasts once. Still folded, still defensive. Almost protective. That was driving him almost as mad as the fact that the gesture was calling attention to the very objects he was desperately trying not to ogle. He very much doubted she'd be flattered by him addressing her breasts, and besides, her beautiful eyes were so beguiling.

"Well, we're going to be here for the next month," Tom said. "Maybe you can get to know me a bit before it's done and I can persuade you otherwise."

She let out a little, flustered breath. "Seriously, I'm not going to give you any false hope. And I'm sure you'll be quite busy making your movie, too busy for playing get-to-know-you with an anonymous teacher."

Tom felt the first sparks of his temper start to rise. He'd been nothing but genteel and polite and she was still resistant. He hadn't had to pour on this much charm in a long time and he suddenly felt rather petulant about it. It was time to pull out the heavy hitter.

"I realize I run the risk of seriously irritating you," Tom said, stepping just a bit closer. Proximity had always worked for him. Sometimes it was just the smell of his cologne or a chance touch of his hand on their arm. "But I have to ask. Is it something specifically I've done that's turned you off to me, or--?"

"No," she said with a shake of her head. "I'm just very careful." She looked over her shoulder and then back at him, and there was something else in her eyes. Something defiant. "I know what men
see when they look at me. Nice ass, pretty legs, large chest. And to be blunt, you are an actor, you're part of the Hollywood culture. And I have as little to do with that as possible. That isn't how I've chosen to live my life, and I won't be sucked into it."

"So...it's because I'm an actor?"

She gave a little nod.

"And you think all actors are what...shallow? Just after sex?"

She didn't blush. Just arched an eyebrow and met his eyes. "You said it."

Tom suddenly felt very small. Her challenge unnerved him. He didn't see himself like that, but he also knew he wasn't innocent of those thoughts about her. But she wasn't going to give. She wasn't one of the set chippies who knew the rules and was willing to play. She also wasn't some repressed biddy who was desperate for a man to pay attention to her. She knew what she was, had a good, solid head on her shoulders. And she could smell his bullshit across the room.

And he just wanted her all the more.

"This is a Christian school, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes, Catholic," she replied.

"I supposed that had something to do with not listening to malicious gossip and not judging people by appearances." Her cheeks started to turn red. //Oh, great one, mate, go ahead and piss her off.// "Maybe I can appeal to your Christian values and you'll give me a chance to prove I'm not like that? I mean, I know you've got me on my back foot, and now, thinking about it, I may have been more than a bit foolish, moving so quickly. I just...I was very drawn to you." He kept his gaze focused on her face, those lovely eyes which he realized, just at that moment, were actually violet. Violet eyes. He'd never seen anything like them before.

She gave a little huff. "I'm afraid you'd be wasting your time, Tom," she said gently. "You have no idea the world I'm from, but trust me when I tell you, it's nothing like yours."

If there was anything she could have said to make him totally resolute in that moment to win her over, it was that.

Chapter End Notes

So as you've seen, this chapter deals with the past. It will be that way up until we reach the events of the first chapter, and then we shall go forward. Thank you for reading and commenting!
Forty-Six Weeks Ago

Chapter Summary

Tom won't stop pursing, and Cosette finally puts him in his place.

Chapter Notes

Before we begin, I want to say that -- HEY COME BACK HERE! I know you want to read the chapter but hang on a sec, okay? Okay. I want to say that this Tom, like all fiction Hiddles, is pure speculation. There has been a lot of nasty gossip spread about him out there and I've been coming to learn that most of it isn't true. For more, you should visit thiddyastro(.)tumblr(.)com. Scroll back about three or four pages to get the links. Some of this Tom is based on some prevalent gossip, but I've tried to stick to what we've speculated what he's like from his chart. It is, once again, SPECULATION.

REMEMBER: THIS IS ALL PURE FANTASY. All fanfiction is. ALL OF IT. All my stories are daydreams that got out of control, developed acts, themes, characters, and resolutions. And you guys happened to like them so I kept sharing them. Thank you very much. You may go now. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next few weeks passed, and Tom seemed to be determined to get her to break.

Cosette couldn't deny that he was gorgeous and she was very attracted to him. Too attracted. His physical appeal sent her thoughts into directions that were dangerous. She couldn't take the risk. She knew the culture he was from was pretty much amoral when it came to sex. If he was the kind to seduce and desert, he would be very good at it.

He gave them the tour and Cosette got a fellow teacher to take the girls instead of her, claiming she had too much paperwork to get done during her break. The very next day, Tom was playing football on the playground with the guys -- apparently the girls talked and the boys were indignant that the girls got special privileges and they hadn't, so Tom ended up playing with them during recess, in spite of his costume and make-up.

The next morning after that, Cosette ran into him as she crossed the street from the parking lot to the school. Tom was walking in from town and they intercepted paths, and she heard him call her name. He matched her stride as she continued down the sidewalk toward the school entrance.

"I wanted to ask you," he said, "why you missed out on the tour. I hope something wasn't wrong?"

"Shelly really wanted to go. She's a big fan," Cosette explained. "I've been listening to your filmography for the last three days, she pretty much has it memorized by year and month."

"Ah. Anything sound familiar?"
"No, but I did remember hearing about the Night Manager coming out this summer. I'm a big Hugh Laurie fan."

"Heh. Well, he was a gem to work with."

"I'm sure. He does well with the whole down to earth villain." She reached the steps and found her keys; it was too early for the students and the school wasn't open yet.

"So what kind of films do you like?" he asked as he attempted to distract her.

"Ones where there aren't gratuitous sex scenes," she replied as she got her key in the lock.

"Well, what if it's not gratuitous? What if it advances the plot?"

"It never advances the plot," Cosette said plainly. "And it's usually a sign that the story isn't strong enough on its own, that it needs something to keep the audience interested." She paused. "I'm almost afraid to ask, but the movie you're doing now...?"

"Uh..." he looked away, embarrassed.

She sighed. "Yeah. See you, Tom."

"Bye," he replied, sounding defeated.

He didn't understand it. The more she resisted, the more he wanted her.

It was maddening.

He introduced himself to the principal, Richard, a young man only a few years older than Tom, and built like a professional football player who had let himself gain a few more pounds around the middle than he should have, and they struck up a rapport. Richard was the kind of guy who knew an opportunity when he saw one -- and he was the master of greasing wheels. Tom found himself volunteering to be their very special celebrity guest the weekend of their big benefit dinner. He volunteered to do a photo op with the guests to help raise more money. The event took place every year to raise money for the school, and since the film was taking up a lot of their usual space, they were able to move it to a nearby country club. The day was going to be occupied by golfers and the teachers were going to be driving around in golf carts selling beer tickets, and that night everyone would be treated to a fine dinner in the country club restaurant, fully catered. There would be both a live and silent auction.

As long as it would get him beside Cosette, he was fine with it.

He was invited to play a round of golf in the principal's group, consisting of him and two other school board members. Cosette came riding up, dressed in a lovely floral skirt and pink blouse, with a lovely straw hat on her head sporting a bright pink brim. She waved at her boss.

"Need any tickets?" she asked him.

"I'll take some," Tom said, hurrying over. He pulled out his wallet. "How much are they each?"

"Four dollars each," she said. "How many?"

"Give me five," he said, handing her a twenty. "I'll buy a round for everyone."
"I need to make sure the beer truck gets over here," Richard said, taking out his radio. "I haven't seen it in a bit. Don't want everybody buying tickets for beer and then not get the beer." He and Cosette shared a smirk and a slight shake of her head. "I don't want to get stuck with all that beer like last year, right Miss Mitchells?"

"Selling it at half price during our spring festival?" she shot back with a teasing smile. "Makes you really popular with the parents!" It was obvious to Tom these two had a history. Although Richard was happily married, Tom couldn't help the slight sensation of jealousy ripple through him. This guy got to see Cosette every day, to talk to her, to know her, and he obviously had her trust.

Tom did not.

As Richard walked away, Tom turned to Cosette. "You look awfully charming, rolling around in your little cart."

Her lips quirked. "How many times have you ever played golf?" she asked him.

"Including this time? Twice." He chuckled, gave her that adorable-bashful-embarrassed potato look that seemed to get him a lot of mileage. "I think my IQ is lower than my average."

"Not such a great thing for golf," she teased. She handed him his beer tickets. "Gotta move along. More suckers to fleece." She tossed him a wink as she rolled off.

That night he could barely pin her down for more than a minute. He was surrounded by admirers in the photo op, and she was talking with all the parents and donors. Tom wanted to sit beside her at dinner but he couldn't because it would be too obvious to get her moved up to his table. After the meal was finished the dance floor was cleared and the dancing began.

And that was when he got her.

He knew his moves had somehow ceased to be perceived as dorky flailing and were now hailed as trendsetting. He'd managed to wow more than one crowd -- and television host -- with his coordination.

Cosette was no different.

8 8 8

Damn that little fucker.

She knew he could dance. Shelly had shoved the video into her face during one lunch break, the one of him flabbergasting Alan Carr on his show. The bump and grind of his pelvis was a bit much for her, but as he was currently proving, he didn't need it to whip everyone into a frenzy.

And his stupid blue eyes wouldn't leave her for more than a few seconds as he did it.

She couldn't help it -- she laughed and cheered and clapped with the rest of them. And when it settled down and the slow dancing began, he was right there in front of her, hand extended graciously for her to take.

His suit was of a deep blue that bordered on purple, with a matching waist coat and a tie that was a few shades bluer. His white shirt had a lovely texture to it, making him very touchable -- and she did get to touch as her hand rested on his shoulder, her other in his.

At first she squirmed against him -- Tom seemed to want to pull her flush against him, but he got
the message and allowed a few inches of room.

"So are you enjoying yourself?" he asked with that sparkling smile, dancing eyes, cheeky quirk of his brow.

"Not nearly as much as you," she replied. "You're causing quite the sensation."

He gave a little shrug. "Truthfully, I'm just doing it all to get your attention."

She stared up at him for a long moment, and then, abruptly, detached herself from his arms. With a gesture, she got him to follow her.

This simply couldn't go on.

She found a quiet corner in one of the halls that led to a small courtyard that was deserted at that time of the evening. The rest of the club was closed for the event and she was sure if security found them back here they'd ask them to leave, but she needed privacy for what was to come.

"Tom," she said, turning to him, her hands folded in front of her, almost in prayer. "I have to ask you to stop."

"Stop?" Tom echoed.

"This. This flirting. This game you're playing, or whatever it is."

"I'm not playing a game, Cosette," he said. "I really like you and I'm trying to show you that I'm more than your preconceived notions of me."

She almost scoffed, but she held it back, just barely. She drew a breath, licked her lips, and continued. "But you haven't, Tom. And the truth is, you can't."

"Why not?" He stepped closer. It seemed like another dance, she realized. Everything about him was seductive -- his moves, his clothes, his style, his smile, his eyes, and his voice. All of it. Turned on her like weapons. She couldn't take it.

"Because I'm not like anyone you've ever met before."

"Very true," he said with a quirk of a smile.

"Not in the way you think," she sighed. She decided it was just time to let it out. Let him have it. "I am not like anyone else because my standards are not like anyone else's. Nobody's in this culture, anyway. And truthfully, Tom, you don't meet them. You can't meet them."

"Why not?" He seemed mildly offended by her words, but she was just getting warmed up.

"Because..." she flapped a hand at him. "You're...you're you! I've been inundated for the last two weeks on you, you know. Shelly is a huge fangirl, I'm sure you're noticed, and I've been pretty much forced to watch you in all your cute little viral videos. The Loki'd, the dancing, your Muse of Shakespeare stuff, oh, and my personal favorite, why you're fine with orgies. And truthfully, from what I've seen, you've got all the sparkle, but the substance I require is something beyond anything a Hollywood actor could ever have. Because if you did, you wouldn't have your career, trust me."

He scowled. "I'm not following you."

"Tom, you're a modern man."
"Yes."

"I don't want modern. I want moral."

"I have morals!" There was a hint of a squeak in his declaration.

She folded her arms. "Okay. I'm going to ask you a question. And it's a very personal question you might not want to answer."

He folded his arms, echoing her posture. "Fine, ask."

"How many sex partners have you had?"

He went pale. Whether it was in shock, rage or offense, she had no idea, but none of them were good.

"Exactly!" she said with a pointed finger at his chest.

"Wait a minute, wait," he said, holding up his hands. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Absolutely EVERYTHING," she replied, her voice gaining force, and she had to reign it in. She knew she could carry a tone quite far, it was a teacher-thing they all had to be able to do. "And if I told you that I was a virgin, and desired my partner to be a virgin as well, you would think I was being naive and ridiculous in my expectations. Then you would tell me I was being judgmental, and I would reply, well, if he wasn't a virgin, he would need to understand the importance of sexual abstinence. Because I'm not marrying someone and having his half-dozen other lovers in our bed whenever we're alone."

He shook his head, confusion written all over his face. "I'm...I'm not proposing marriage, Cosette, I'm just wanting to get to know you better."

"And what is the point?" she asked, dialing her tone down in intensity. "What is the point of that? What is the point of dating? Maybe you just do it for fun, but if I feel a man has enough potential for me to want to go out on a date with him, it needs to be with respect to a future. And my standards would ultimately require consideration to marriage. So yes, whenever I date someone, I look at them as a potential marriage partner. Otherwise, what is the point? But you wouldn't understand that -- you'd think, why not just have fun? Well, that isn't how I think. Quite frankly, your whole actor lifestyle is utterly incompatible with my Catholic one. You exist to please the world. I exist to please God -- or at least I try to. You can't serve two masters. And I won't consider as a potential partner someone who has no respect for the sacredness of the sex act, or himself as anything other than a puppet to perform for others."

"Now hang on," Tom said, and she heard the first real blush of anger in his voice. "That is not what I do. I am my own man, I have never curtailed to anybody's wishes, been anybody's puppet."

"Haven't you? You said yourself you're a circus bear -- you can't say no. And if you can't say no to the little things, the bigger things are next in line. You honestly expect me to believe you haven't sacrificed important things to get a role? Your career ambition is written all over you, Tom. You aren't built to commit to anything outside of being a big name. You couldn't give a woman a commitment for a year, let alone a lifetime. You're in your late thirties and how many serious relationships have you had? No, it's all about the next role, the next level of exposure."

She stepped closer to him. "You want everybody to look at you, Tom. But when I look at you, I look a lot deeper. And what I see inside you doesn't work for me, and it never will. So I'm asking you, please, for your sake and mine, please let this drop."
Tom gaped at her.

He'd never, ever been spoken to like this before in his life. Not by anyone. Not even his own parents.

She had scraped him down to his bare bones. She had sliced into him and torn out every insecurity he'd ever had.

And he'd only known her two weeks.

Part of him wanted to run. Turn tail and just escape. Leave the event, go back to his rented flat and just hide. He'd never been exposed like this in his life.

But something in him dug in its heels. He would not be spoken to like that. She thought she was so high above him. But she wasn't. He would never have been so persistent if he actually believed she wasn't interested in him. He knew the signs, the signals.

He moved closer. She was defiant now, eyes flashing. Her cheeks had flushed with her exertion and her chest was heaving slightly as her breath accelerated.

He knew that effect. He had created it often.

"You want to pretend you aren't interested in me, but I know different," he said in a soft voice, deceptively soft.

"I see how your eyes dilate when you look at me. I see you blush, see your little smiles you can't control." He got closer, so that his breath brushed against the hair that lay close to her ear. "You pretend you don't want me because you think I'm just after your body, but you know better. You think I'm just some shallow man-whore, but it doesn't stop you."

"Unlike you," she said, her voice glittering steel, "I control my baser urges."

"But you still have them," he purred. "And you can't fight them off indefinitely, Cosette. It's not healthy." He glanced down at her, at the rise and fall of her breathing. Quick and stuttered. "I still say you've judged me unfairly. And I think you're closing yourself off to an experience you might find much more satisfying than you're willing to admit. If I was just some vapid movie star, we wouldn't even have to have this conversation. I'd have already moved on to the next conquest. But you and I both know that there's a lot more potential in this, and I don't think you can just dismiss it--" he snapped his fingers, "because you're afraid."

"Afraid," she sighed. She looked heavenward. God, those violet eyes...he could sink into them. He wanted to see them in all the range of emotions. Pleasure, yes, that first and foremost, but in other things, too. In thought, in contemplation, in the heat of an intense conversation, in tender caring, and yes, even this, anger and defiance and confusion and maybe even a little bit of pain. And even after he'd seen all of that, something told him he'd want to see all of it again.

That terrified him.

But for the first time, it was the same kind of terror he felt when he reached unknown territory. The kind that made him want to explore.

He'd never wanted to explore anyone like he wanted to explore her. And he just. could. not. give. up.
"It's not fear, Tom," she said with a shake of her head, her breath evening out. "I tried to let you down nicely but you wouldn't go. So now I've had to get ugly."

"And the fact that I still find you beautiful, even when you're getting ugly? Doesn't that say something to you?"

"It tells me you're not used to being told no." She cocked her head, and her cool expression infuriated him more than any of her previous accusations. None of which he could deny. Even though he wanted to. "It tells me that maybe I'm doing this wrong. That you think I'm just playing hard to get. But trust me, Tom, if you did get me, you'd get bored very fast. Your kind always do -- something new and shiny comes along, but you lose interest after you think you've discovered all its secrets. And, I wouldn't sleep with you, no matter how much you begged and seduced. Just plain no. That wouldn't sit well with you, so you'd leave, but not before you got some kind of revenge on me for being frigid. Can't we just save ourselves the time and pain? It isn't worth it. It really isn't."

He took a step back, giving her a bit of room. He folded his hands in front of him, his fingers pointing toward her. "Cosette," he said, his voice the most sincere he could possibly make it, "You were right when you said I'd never met anyone like you. And is it so much to ask to get to know you a bit? I mean, it never has to become anything, and it won't, you've made yourself very clear. But I genuinely like you, and I have no expectations. Is it so wrong for two people from such opposite worlds to connect? I mean, really?"

She stared at him for a long time. Those violet eyes flickered.

"No, Tom," she said finally. "We can't. Because you're right. I am attracted to you. And I respect myself too much to put myself in a dangerous position where I could risk being compromised. You would have a lot more power to hurt me than I would ever have to hurt you, if I did get attached to you in that way. So please, if you like me as much as you say, you will respect me and my answer. All right?"

Several moments passed. They stretched, filling time. Then, finally, in defeat, he nodded.

"If that's what you want. Then fine."

She sighed, seemed relieved, and gave him a little nod before she walked around him and went back to the party.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know Cosette and Agnes sound a bit alike. They present themselves differently but they both come from the same school of thought. I may have said this before but I can't seem to write a character who doesn't share my belief system -- they can have different hobbies, jobs, appearances, ways of speaking, loves, interests, etc., but not beliefs. Cosette is not buried under her insecurities like Agnes was. And the choices you make at the time you make them affect your life and how you develop as a person, so I hope to keep them distinct, but I may stray over into shared territory. Often.
Forty-Five Weeks Ago

Chapter Summary

When an unstoppable force meets an immovable object...sometimes the immovable object is not so immovable.

Chapter Notes

Short chapter. I'll post again later this week.

Tom kept his distance.

He still played with the boys at recess, when he could. He smiled and talked to the girls. When he saw her, he'd give her a little nod of acknowledgement, and move on.

And Cosette started to doubt.

She knew she'd been very harsh. She was desperate, though. Kicking back against the attraction she felt for him had taken more from her than she thought. No, he was far from a vapid movie star -- he seemed to have a generous, caring heart, and a charm and luminosity that lingered in her mind and made her wonder what her problem was.

Shelly had probably been trying to help when she'd shown her those videos and interviews on her phone during their lunch break. But when Cosette went home and did her own research, she heard gossip about a guy who liked to keep commitment free, who was rumored to have "friends with benefits," who was so highly ambitious in his career, there simply wasn't room for a relationship.

Cosette struggled with what she heard. Gossip was, after all, just that. There was no proof. Although that little "scandal" involving one of his costars from "I Saw The Light," where they were dating, no, they weren't dating, oh wait, they were dating, did not speak much in his favor, but still, none of that proved he was promiscuous.

But she knew things. She knew about that whole lifestyle. She'd heard stories, especially from her father. It was generally known how actors were. They were catered to on every level, and had more offers than they could field. It was a rare day when any actor was still in his first, committed marriage, be it to a fellow actress or a normal person. And the actresses weren't innocent, either. Sex was the underlying force throughout Hollywood. So it was very hard to believe that Tom wasn't involved in that, when so many others were. The gossip just seemed to confirm it.

Still, when she saw that other side of him, the side she got to see every day...she didn't want to believe the gossip. She wanted this guy, the one who told the boys of the rules of rugby and even led them through a few rounds, the one who generously accepted the letters some of the girls had written him, the one who smiled and shook hands and showed gracious modesty when people fawned over him, THAT was the guy she wanted him to be.
And it hurt that both of them were probably just two sides of the same coin.

On Friday, she was headed out to pick up her class when one of the little kindergartners came out of the boy's bathroom in tears. Tom was just coming in from the playground, probably heading for the main entrance so that he could go back to set to get his make-up touched up before resuming filming. The little boy was shirtless, the yellow polo he was supposed to be wearing clutched in his hand. He walked straight up to Tom and handed him the shirt.

The act of utter trust wasn't so unusual around there, but she could see it startled Tom a bit. But he took the shirt, straightened it, and slipped it over the boy's head. Then he bent down and she could tell he was talking to the boy, probably asking him if he was okay. Then he took his hand and started to walk him farther into the hallway. Tom looked up and his eyes met hers, and both relief and surprise flooded his features.

"He was very upset," Tom said by way of explanation when he reached her. "I don't know what happened--"

"It's fine, Tom," she said with a smile, reaching for the boy. "He's okay, aren't you, Peter?"

Peter looked up at her and nodded.

"Why don't you go back to Miss Morris' room, okay?"

The boy obeyed, heading back down the hall toward the kindergarten room.

"Do you know what that was about?" Tom asked her.

Cosette gave a little shrug. "He's a bit sensitive. Gets flustered easily, who knows how his shirt got off -- I'm sure that was enough to set him off. Not making a big deal of it is usually the best way to go."

"Oh," Tom said. "Well, I hope I helped."

"You did," she assured him. "Thanks."

He nodded, tossed her a little smile, and went about his way.

Cosette hated the tingle of disappointment that settled in her stomach. She'd gotten what she wanted, she'd done the right thing. And yet...

After school, she walked the block down the street to one of her favorite places -- Rita's Ice Custard Happiness. They made Italian ice in all sort of flavors, and different kinds of custard, and had a very interesting menu filled with different options of how to mix the two. Friday they always had Black Cherry Ice, which had chunks of Bing cherries mixed in it, especially if the week had been particularly rough and she needed a little pick-me-up.

Just as she was rounding the corner, Tom came out of the coffee shop right next door to Rita's. He looked particularly stunning in that moment -- his navy blue jacket, grey t-shirt underneath, with his little blond curls falling over his forehead, and his dark-rimmed glasses over his bright blue eyes.

She almost stumbled right into him.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "Cosette! Um...hello."
"Hi, Tom," she said, suddenly feeling shy.

"We're, uh...on a bit of a delay," he said. "I usually sneak down here sometime in the afternoon for some caffeine. Much better coffee here than Kelly's makes," he explained, referring to the on-set caterer.

She nodded. "Don't blame you. Kind of chilly today. We usually don't get too many cold days like this in L.A."

Tom chuckled. "I seem to bring the London weather with me when I come here," he said. He paused, looked back at the shop. "Were you headed in for some coffee?" he asked.

"No, actually, I was going next door," she pointed.

"Rita's? What's that?"

"Italian ice."

"On a day like today?"

She gave a little shrug. "What can I say? We've all got our quirks." She moved a few feet away, toward the shop, and then, against all better judgment, turned to him. "It's really good. And you're always saying you like to try new things. Want to see?"

His face softened, and he gave her that smile that made her just want to dissolve into a puddle. "Sure. That'd be lovely."

They spent the next hour sitting at one of the tables in the nearly-deserted parlor, both of them enjoying a cup of the black cherry ice on top of some chocolate custard, and talked. Just relaxed and talked, like friends.

And Cosette knew that was it. The end of the resistance.

8 8 8

Tom didn't ask her out again. He knew that would be a mistake. But she had made an overture of friendship, and he was not going to let that go.

So it was friends. Everything was at the angle of being friends.

On the weekends, they couldn't film, because the church was needed for its regular purpose. So Tom asked Cosette if she wanted to catch a movie, go to lunch, dinner, whatever idea struck him. Cosette invited him to go with her to the Arboretum just outside of L.A., in one of the suburbs, and they spent several hours on a Sunday afternoon walking around and dodging the flocks of peacocks, peahens, and chicks that littered the area.

She took him for a drive through L.A. and they parked by the reservoir dam and walked around. The lake there was beautiful. He hadn't even known it existed.

She tutored after school, so sometimes Tom would sneak up to her room at 5 with a bag of burgers and fries he'd bribed one of the P.A.'s to bring him, and they would sit in her room and eat dinner together and she'd make him laugh about some of the antics the middle schoolers attempted to get away with during the day. He was rather surprised at the wickedness of her sense of humor, how much she laughed at and with her students, even though she had a reputation for being strict. She had a particularly foul mouth when she would get agitated or cranky, which she struggled to
control. He found it a turn on when she would say "fuck" in complicated strings of sentences. She showed him bits of the videos the students put together on iMovie, the little news program for the school she was helping them develop. He would compliment her on her impressive repertoire of instruction, but she shrugged it off, saying most of the time she just gave the kids the tools and turned them loose. They did the rest on their own and she took no credit.

She told him about her grandmother, and how close they were. She had an interesting history -- she was close with her parents, now, but when she was younger, the situation was very different. Her father had worked in the film industry (hence, why he knew things about it) and spent long hours on sets, making him virtually absent for the youngest years of Cosette's life. He'd eventually quit, finding a profession with saner hours, but money had been tight, and Cosette's mother had been resentful, first of his absence and then of his low pay. The tension in the house had been very bad for a long time, until her younger sister had come along. For a brief while, the new member had brought some unity to the fraying family.

That was where her grandmother had come in. Cosette spent more and more time with her father's mother, Beatrice, and by the time she was a teenager, she was practically living at her house. It wasn't until after college, when Cosette started teaching full time and had her own life, that her parents had finally gotten some marriage counseling, which had turned into family counseling. Since then, they'd been very close.

For his part, he told her about all the places he'd been, the experience he'd had, the things he'd done to research for roles. Some of his movies she hadn't seen, and made it no secret why, but he didn't press too hard in those areas, keeping it light and friendly. Sometimes when she talked about her family, he would talk about his -- his parents' divorce, the struggle with finding his own path in spite of all the expectations his father had.

The month of filming was ending, and soon he would be back on a studio set in the heart of Hollywood, for the next month. His expression of missing her and their shared time was utterly sincere.

"Well, I can't say I'm too sad to see you guys go. The gossip was getting a bit out of control."

"Gossip?" he asked. "About us?"

"Yes. That we're dating. It really took off after we danced together at the fundraiser event, and these little rendezvous of ours don't help matters much."

"Well..." Tom drifted off, gazing out her classroom windows onto the street. "I'll still miss sparring with you, Cosette."

She gave a little nod. "Me too."

Gently, oh so delicately, like corralling a wild animal that could flee at any moment, he suggested, "Maybe, sometime, when you're bored, you could give me a call and we could...I don't know."

She raised one of those dark eyebrows. He imagined, sometimes, tracing his fingers over them. "I doubt you'll have much time. I know your filming schedules are grueling."

"You make time for things that are important."

She seemed to grow distant from him in that moment. He waited, wondering if the withdrawal was defensive, or if she was going to come out again, with something to say to rattle their status quo. "Tom," she finally said, her tone hesitant, "how often do you find things important enough to make
that time?"

"What do you mean?" he prodded.

"I don't know, I guess...I just am surprised that you're not already involved with someone. If you
had time to be involved. Don't get me wrong, I've had fun these last couple of weeks, but...I'm
just..."

"Come on, Cosette," Tom said, knowing there was no way around it. "You've never hesitated to
just come out with what you mean. Even after your speech two weeks ago, I'm still here. You're
not going to offend me."

"I just don't know why I'm so special that you're willing to make this time for me, when I know
your career is your first priority," she said. "I mean, you could--"

"Oh, please don't say I could have any woman I want," he groaned.

"Well you could," she grumbled, folding her arms.

Tom chuckled. "Truthfully? Getting any woman...is boring. I mean, things that come easy usually
aren't worth having, are they?"

"No, they aren't," she agreed.

"And usually, they're looking to use me as much as...well." He didn't want to finish that thought in
front of her. "It gets tiring, being treated like a commodity and not like a human being."

"Do people treat you like that?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes. Maybe not intentionally." He leaned forward in his chair, toward her.
"I've never made it a secret why you're special. You fascinate me, you have from the start. And
I've liked talking to you, spending time with you. Maybe I'm just being selfish."

She chuckled at that, shaking off the deep blush that always appeared whenever he was that
straightforward with his comments about her. "I figured once the mystery was gone, you'd be, too."

He shook his head. "I've gotten to know you a little bit in these last weeks, and the mystery is
certainly not gone," he assured her. "But what about you? I mean, you're not involved with anyone.
I know your standards are high, we've established that. What made you change your mind?"

"I didn't change my mind," she said, and Tom worried for a moment he'd gone too far, too fast.
"But you were right, I do like you. I figured as long as we were clear that...that this wasn't going to
turn physical, then there wasn't any reason why we couldn't be friendly."

"We've been a little more than friendly," Tom said. He gestured around him to the empty
classroom. "This is at least the fourth time we've eaten dinner in here. How many of your friends
do that?"

"That's circumstances," she said. "But you're right, not many."

He nodded. "I would like to see you, even after we finish filming, Cosette. I'll respect whatever
rules you lay down. But I've enjoyed being with you. Whatever it is, whatever you want, I
just...don't want to let go of it just yet."

He surprised himself. He knew he hadn't considered any of that, but the truth of it was almost
painful. He rarely laid himself out to someone with such vulnerability.

She looked at him -- not just in his eyes, but he knew she was looking him over. Her gaze returned to his quickly, and he could see her struggling.

"I'd like that, too, Tom," she whispered
Forty Weeks Ago

Chapter Summary

This is our wounded nature: you know it's wrong and you do it anyway.

Chapter Notes

I almost don't want to post this chapter tonight but I wanted to post an extra chapter this week and move things along a bit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Cosette woke up, she knew, that very moment, that nothing would ever be the same again.

How had it happened? She struggled with the memories, trying to locate the exact instant when she had lost her mind. Those three words -- lost her mind -- seemed the only way to describe what had happened. How could she have done this? She'd spent her whole life living by a creed, and somehow, in one night, she'd just tossed it out the window?

Beside her, Tom slept. His back was to her, his body sprawled, one of his legs sticking back and his foot brushing her calf.

She edged away. The urge to curl herself along his body and taste just one more time of the sweetness of his skin was too strong, so she slipped out, grabbing a robe and the extra comforter she always kept around and wrapping herself into a cocoon of sorts, crawling into the recliner she kept in her bedroom.

Her head throbbed, but not with alcohol. She hadn't been drunk. Two drinks, and a good buzz, but the third one had started to turn her stomach and she hadn't even finished half of it. So she may have been slightly compromised in judgment but not so much that she would do something like this.

Carefully, she started to replay the events of the previous night in her mind. She had to be cautious, stopping at exactly the right point, although she knew those memories would haunt her like branding irons for a long, long time.

Tom holding her hand, then pulling her flush against him, both of them bright-cheeked from the weather and the alcohol. Tom suggesting that neither of them were ready to part company yet, why not spend a bit more time together? Her reluctance, knowing it was asking for trouble -- she rarely let him into her house after the sun had set, knowing instinctively that even that small compromise of her virtue would lead her down a road she didn't want to visit. But giving in because he was leaving, he was going back across that wide ocean and she wouldn't see him much anymore, knowing from the beginning that in spite of Tom's words that their relationship was something special, something he hadn't experienced before, or at least not in a long time, he was a handsome, famous actor with a full plate and high ambitions, and eventually she would fall by the wayside with nothing but memories to dust off and enjoy when she was feeling particularly masochistic.
How she had wanted him... She'd wanted him pretty much from minute one. He was, in her opinion, anyway, simply the height of male beauty. An epitome. An ideal. She couldn't find a bad angle, couldn't see an unflattering light. She had catalogued each and every one of his expressions, particularly his smiles -- the one where his lips pulled tight and his eyes wrinkled was her favorite. His lips as they moved when he talked, showing his bottom teeth; how he would worry his lips when he was thinking, when he was nervous, when he was bored; the sparkle of his eyes, how they would smolder at times, or how they would rivet on her in intense concentration whenever she talked; and most of all, how he talked with his hands, always with his hands. She was charmed by everything he had to offer -- physically, at least. And that was a powerful aphrodisiac. Her initial resistance to getting involved had melted partially because she hated not being able to look at him. That sweet rush of his attention, that this gorgeous specimen smiled at her and winked at her and flirted with her, was the most powerful drug she had ever encountered and she was addicted.

Her resistance, she warned herself, even as she found herself letting those luminous blue eyes get closer and closer to her, was going to crumble, eventually. She told herself she would just be cautious and strong. She wouldn't let him kiss her, not on the lips. The cheek or the hand, maybe, and even those did bad things to her. Most of their shared time was in public, or, because of his draw, in semi-public, far enough away to keep from being stared at but close enough to others to keep from slipping into indiscretions. She wouldn't invite him her house in unless it was the middle of the day and even then for less than an hour and she wouldn't sit next to him, most especially on the couch. She wouldn't touch him for longer than a few seconds. And one by one, those things fell, dominoes leading to the big finale.

Wow, had it been a finale.

Whether Tom was just preying on her, worming his way in slowly, or genuinely trying to respect her and was just weighed down by years of bad habits (which he had probably never considered to be bad) -- she didn't know. But either way, when push had come to shove, he let her fall right into the trap.

No, she thought. She was being unfair. She was more to blame than Tom. Tom didn't know better. This is what Tom was used to. A good time and a good lay. She had higher standards and she'd failed miserably to keep them. Still, she couldn't help that anger at him. Didn't he understand? Hadn't he even considered for a moment that she would regret her actions? Why hadn't he even paused to ask her, just for a single second, if she was absolutely sure she wanted to go through with it? He knew she was a virgin, plain and simple, and had planned to stay that way -- he was a man who was used to feeding his sexual appetite. She was on a permanent fast. She was not going to be his next meal.

So much for that.

First it was letting him into her apartment, with his reassurances that he just wanted to spend a little more time with her. Music, and slow dancing. So close, breathing each other in. Then kissing, and the kissing growing more intense, and her telling herself that it was wrong, she'd already gone over the line, but it was like gravity, she felt like she couldn't yank herself back. And before she knew it...

Tom shifted in his sleep. The blankets came apart and his nakedness reminded her that she had no secrets left. That was what brought the tears. Then the smell, as she buried herself in the blankets -- the smell of him on her skin, thick about her as if he were still wrapped around her in his passion. The taste of him on her lips, her tongue. The soreness between her legs as memory stabbed at her, conscience chided her, and remorse shook her lungs in heavy, gasping sobs.
Her confessor had once told her that St. Teresa of Avila said that committing mortal sin was like swallowing a horse. If that was so, she'd just swallowed an entire stable.

Then, just to make it all just a bit more tragic, she recalled what he'd whispered to her in the afterglow of that first time.

"I love you."

She'd said it back.

"I love you too."

Idiot.

She realized staying in the bedroom while she wept as bitterly as Peter on Good Friday was going to wake him up and she was in no state to explain, and he probably wouldn't understand, and him being upset was the last addition she needed for this self-pity parade. So she picked herself up and moved to the living room, realizing that the sun was still coming up.

She cried. Muffled into the couch pillows, she cried as her heart broke. She'd done this to herself -- and worse, so much worse, she'd known what she was doing while she was doing it! And it hadn't been just once -- the first maybe she could write off as getting carried away with passion and not flagellate herself so harshly, but the second...and third...all perfectly aware. Making a conscious choice. Giving into a behavior she had rejected all her life --where had her mind gone? All her resolve? It was like cutting herself, and deciding that since she had already done it a little, to just keep going and make it as deep as possible. Which was an insane mentality! She'd betrayed herself and everything she held dear.

She mourned as if someone had died. In a sense, someone had. That person before last night didn't exist anymore.

But Cosette knew she wasn't allowed to give up. She had to pick up and move on. She had to push on, like always. There wasn't any choice. One simply couldn't give up and die on the spot. One had to go on. But at the moment she had absolutely no idea how.

When a respite came between bouts of tears, she realized she desperately wanted a shower, but didn't dare with Tom still in the apartment. If she locked the door, he'd knock, probably needing the toilet, and if she left it open, he might take it as an invitation.

Getting a hold of herself, she drew several hard breaths and decided on a course of action. She would go make coffee, go wake him up and ask him to leave. She would tell him the flat out truth. And it would be over. That would be her punishment. She could never have him again, even though, even now, she felt more strongly attached to him than ever. She knew it was the oxytocin and the bonding elements of sex and especially since he was her first ever she was going to suffer quite a bit with this decision, but she was in penance mode now and if that was the way it was, if it made her feel like someone had strung her intestines out across the floor, then fine. Like the Gospel went, if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. She knew the saying was an exaggeration, but she hardly felt tearing out an eye could hurt worse at that moment.

8 8 8

Tom woke and hazily turned over, reaching for the warmth of the soft, sweet body he knew should still be sleeping beside him. But it wasn't, and it woke him up.

The bed was empty.
It was very early. The morning light was still grayish, indicating the sun was still coming up and morning hadn't hit its peak yet. It was a beautiful Saturday, and tomorrow he was supposed to be on a plane, but now he was considering delaying for a bit. It was time for him to rest, anyway, and being with Cosette made him feel peaceful.

Tom reached for the zebra-patterned sleeping mask sitting on her pillow and gave a little grin. Even utterly spent, she had needed to grab it before she could truly fall asleep. He remembered the slight disappointment of not being able to see her face as she covered it, but he'd been too wiped to complain, and had fallen asleep very shortly after she had.

His brain started to replay the night. Little shivers passed over him at the remembered delights of her skin, the taste of her secrets. And he felt something tugging at his spirit, something reminding him of words he'd rarely spoken in heated moments, knowing they were much more of a commitment than he could afford to make.

He'd told her he loved her. And she had said it back.

But where was she?

He listened, trying to locate her. She was in the house, but not in the bathroom -- that door was wide open, lights off. The door to the bedroom was mostly closed but light leaked in through the crack, and he could hear the slight clinking of cups.

The kitchen.

He got out of the bed, and smirked down at himself. He needed a shower. Maybe he could get her to shower with him. He hoped she wasn't regretting their lovemaking, considering how much of a resistance she'd put up all these three months. He'd respected it, at turns, but ultimately his libido had just had enough of being held at bay, and when she finally crumbled, well, who could blame him for taking advantage? It wasn't like he'd set out to seduce her...

.....right?

"Cosette?" he called as he found his trousers and pulled them on. He had the urge to just march into her living room starkers, but something warned him to be careful at this moment. Not knowing her current mood was bugging him, and he wanted to be sure before he did anything incendiary.

She was in the kitchen, with her back to him. She was in her robe, and something in the set of her shoulders set off warning bells in his head.

"Good morning," he said, clearing his throat. Just as he reached her, his arms going to slide around her, she turned, and her shoulder pressed into his chest, blocking him, before one hand went out, pushing him away gently.

"Good morning," she said, her voice solemn, and her face blotchy, eyelids swollen. Her cheeks were dry but her eyes and skin were still red and streaked. She'd been crying -- hard.

"Cosette, are you okay?" he asked her, voice soft and soothing to cover up the sudden rush of worry.

She shook her head. "No, I'm not," she said plainly. She met his eyes, and he saw...shame?

"You're...you're very upset," he said, suddenly feeling colossally stupid. "Did...I mean, are you...please, talk to me, tell me what's wrong, did something...I mean, did you not...?"
She continued to stare at him, and Tom found himself replaying the previous night in his head from a different vantage point. He hadn't forced her. She'd been willing, he had been sure of that. More than willing -- she was responsible for initiating the last time, at the very least. And she had kissed him back, she had touched him, let him touch her. The things she'd confessed to him, things that had stirred him in ways that scared and excited him. He'd wanted to ask her if she was sure she wanted this but something in him had been certain that if he did the spell would be broken and he wanted her so much...

"Tom," she sighed, and his stomach started to shrivel. He felt himself start to wall up, his defense whenever he knew the rejection was coming. This moment suddenly made him feel like he was stuck between shutting down and falling apart. This was why he always left first -- to avoid this, even the chance of this. He tried to will the steel into his arms, his legs, but for some reason, with her standing there, looking disheveled and tragic and so achingly beautiful, he couldn't backpedal enough distance into his emotions.

"You--" he started to say, but she held up a hand.

"I want to tell you how sorry I am," she said, with that same tone she used when she was talking very straight about something she believed and there was simply no argument he could make to counter it. "To say that last night was a mistake would be a gross understatement. I should never, ever have..."

"It wasn't a mistake, don't say that," Tom said, and knew his tone should be more pleading but was instead coming out rather hard and cold and more than a little angry.

She flinched. "I guess you have the right to be angry at me. I used you as much as you used me. I'm really more to blame in this than you. You're just...I guess this is just how you are. I couldn't have reasonably expected anything else."

"Now hang on a second," he said, voice much flintier than he intended it. "First off, I certainly did not //use// you. And second, you're blowing me off?"

"No, I'm not blowing you off. I'm being very honest with you. I can't see you again. It's not good, not for me, and not for you, although I'm pretty sure you won't want to see me anymore either after this pathetic morning after drama. I wish there was a way I could spare you the classic walk of shame, or maybe you're just going to lose your temper and storm out in a few seconds, from the look on your face."

Tom shook his head a bit and drew a breath. Yes, he could feel his ire rising exponentially, but not for the reasons she thought. He was angry because he was hurt. So he fell into defensive mode. "So, what, you think I seduced you? Preyed on you and waited until you were weak? Now I'm unsafe to be around?"

She raised one eyebrow. "I didn't say any of that. But yes, I do think you're dangerous. Do I think you seduced me? Honestly, I wish I could say you did. After that speech I gave you in the beginning, I'd like you accuse you of treating me like a challenge. It would absolve my conscience of a lot of guilt. But I know better than all that. I made a choice I knew was wrong. I'm no better than you."

Tom let out a noise that made him take a step back with the way it forced itself from his lungs. It was somewhere between a snarl and a gasp, an incredulous, frustrated noise that made her jump a bit as his arms flew out at his sides before dropping back down in a hard slap. "You are a piece of work!"
She lowered her eyes. Something in the set of her jaw made Tom realize she was going to let him have his little rant, and still insist he leave when the worst of it passed. She was resolving herself to this backlash.

And it made him angrier.

So he did the last thing she would expect. He pulled himself together, and redirected.

"Cosette," he said, voice much calmer, but forced. "You're...you're a bit dazed, I can understand. And maybe...maybe we did go a bit fast, but, come on, you're human! You'd waited long enough, and quite frankly, I think I did a pretty damn good job making it worth your while--"

The sudden roll of her eyes, and the "huh," that came from her lips in a small, disdainful burst almost lit his hair on fire, it enraged him so. Her eyes raised to his, and she extended an arm to him, with a disposable coffee cup already sealed, sitting in her hand. "Please get dressed and go," she said firmly.

"Cosette, stop this," Tom said, taking the cup and setting it down. "I know it was a bit sudden, but...but I meant what I said before." His face grew unexpectedly hot with humiliation when he remembered telling her he loved her. Maybe it was the flush of pleasure that had brought on those words, but he knew he'd heard her say them back. He hesitated to repeat them -- getting her to remember what she said would expose what he had said as well, and at the moment, it was just too raw. "I don't want us to not see each other again--"

She shook her head. "No, Tom. We won't. I'm sorry that it's unfair to you, but...but this is a dealbreaker, as they say. And I have to do what's right."

Anger made him say what he said next. "Kind of late for that."

She flushed. Bright, brilliant red. It went up her cheeks and down her neck and her eyes started to glisten.

"You're right," she said, her voice clear but he could hear the tears behind it. "This is my fault. This is my fault and I'm sorry. I'm more sorry than you can imagine. I'm even sorry now when I know I'm hurting you, but it has to be done, and I'm sorry for that too. But please, go."

"No," he said, and a new emotion slammed into him. Regret. It was unusual; he wasn't sure where it was coming from but he knew the taste. "Look, you want to slow down, fine. I promise, this won't happen again. We can take a big step back, evaluate things. But we can't just...I mean, what we had--"

She just shook her head. "No," she returned. "There isn't any coming back from this, Tom. It's done."

Pride finally won. He threw up his hands. "Fine! I don't have to beg any woman to keep me around, it's always been the other way!" He stormed into the bedroom and found his shirt, viciously tugged it over his head and found his wallet, keys and phone by the front door. He already felt stupid and childish for his remark, hearing how he sounded so pathetic even in his own ears. His shoes were placed neatly on the rug next to hers and a streak of pain rocketed through him at the sight of it, something so simple and harmonious and domestic, mocking him.

He didn't know where the hell his socks were, but he didn't care. He shoved his feet into the shoes and got the front door open.

He turned in the doorway. He wanted to say one more thing to her before he left. One stinging,
final word that would make her wilt, make her feel what she was losing, something that would take all this shame and embarrassment and hurt that was crawling along his skin and tear it off and deposit it onto her where it firmly belonged. He hadn't done anything he was ashamed of -- why did she make him feel like he was being punished?

She had followed him and stood in the foyer, watching him go, with an expression of resolution that seemed pinched and pained. As his eyes landed on her, his mouth opened, and he knew that last zinger was there, ready to fire.

It stalled and died.

He let out a breath, his shoulders slumping, and realizing he was only prolonging his humiliation, he turned and slammed the door shut behind him, much, much harder than it ever needed to be. For that moment, it would have to be enough.

Chapter End Notes

So you know those LAX pictures going around of Tom, and that look on his face that people are speculating about? Put the picture ahead two months and that's the look I see on his face as he goes to the airport after this chapter. Because I'm crazy like that.
Thirty-Three Weeks Ago

Chapter Summary

Cosette calls Tom with some life-changing news.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was a knock on her door. Cosette looked over from where she sat at her desk, grading papers. Shelly stuck her head into her classroom and said, "Hey."

"Hey Shell. What's up?"

"I was wondering if I could talk to you."

Cosette motioned for Shelly to come farther in. Shelly grabbed one of the student chairs and moved it in front of Cosette's, sitting down in it. She had a very serious look on her face and Cosette felt a twist of anxiety in her stomach, which didn't help, as her stomach had been upset quite a bit lately.

"I wanted to know something, straight up," Shelly said with a deep breath. "Are you still seeing Tom?"

Two things ran through Cosette. The first was relief. Relief that Shelly wasn't coming to her with a problem with a parent or a student, which was a continuous threat in their realm. But then the anxiety heightened. This was about Tom? She hadn't seen or heard from him in over a month. To hear his name brought up made her a little nauseous.

"We were seeing each other for a bit," Cosette said, "but it's over now."

"Is it?" Shelly seemed very concerned.

"Yeah, done deal. I don't even think he's still in the States, he should be back in London by now. He's gone."

"Did it...I mean...it's none of my business," Shelly quickly added, "I was just concerned if you were...okay with that."

Cosette's laugh was mildly forced. "Truthfully, yes. Very okay. I mean, he didn't belong in my world and I certainly don't belong it in his. Celebrities are like from another planet, you know? Their rules are so different from ours. I'm surprised he ever pursued me to begin with -- I think he was just looking for a break from his usual fare, something different than the regular crowd he has to run with. I was way too pedestrian for him, he should have known that from the start."

Shelly nodded, but she didn't seem to relax. "You were pretty verbal about trying to run him off. I hope he wasn't just playing you because you were a challenge. Some people, you tell them no and they're just more determined than ever. Especially those kind of people who get their every whim catered to."
Cosette shrugged. "Probably. But it's done now."

"Well, there's been something I've wanted to tell you, but I've been...I've been afraid. I should have told you before, back when it happened, but...I couldn't bring myself to do it. And now, I mean, since you seem to be okay with him being gone...I don't even know if it's worth telling you at this point, you seem to have your own idea of Tom's...motivations."

Now Cosette frowned. Whatever it was, was really bad.

"Well, why don't you tell me now and we'll figure it out?" Cosette said softly, like she would to a reluctant student.

Shelly rubbed her lips. "You know I'm a fangirl, I've never hid that. I was really glad you let me take the girls for that little tour Tom did. But it was only twenty minutes, so at lunch, I snuck back over with a magazine for Tom to sign, and they seemed to just let me wander through the set, so I went straight to his trailer -- nobody stopped me."

She hesitated. She was wringing her fingers, obviously quite upset. Cosette reached out and touched her hands, and she wasn't really a toucher, but this seemed to be harder for Shelly to say than for Cosette to hear.

"What happened, Shell?" Cosette prompted.

"I heard noises coming from inside. I'm pretty naive so I wasn't sure what they were at first. But after a few minutes -- it wasn't that long, it just felt that long, I guess -- I heard Tom and it sounded...it sounded like two people having sex." She shook her head, as if Cosette were about to tell her she was wrong. "Look, I'm not saying I hear that kind of stuff all the time, but it's hard to mistake. And I freaked out, but I also couldn't...couldn't move. But when I heard someone coming to the door I finally was able to hide around the corner and I saw one of the set assistants coming out, and she looked like...well, she was still fixing her clothes."

Shelly looked at Cosette and real fear was there. Cosette realized her mouth was hanging open, because everything inside it had gone completely dry. She attempted to moisten her tongue and her lips, swallowed, and felt her forehead ache with how hard she was scowling. She pressed her fingers against her cheeks to attempt to massage away the strain.

"I'm sorry. I should have said something before, but I kept telling myself it wasn't what I thought. Tom had come out a few minutes later and I couldn't tell...I mean, I may be wrong. I may be totally wrong. But it's been on autoplay in my head for the last two weeks and I just needed to tell you." Shelly was near tears at this point, and then suddenly stood up. "I'm sorry. I'm a horrible friend. I should have told you before..."

"No, no," Cosette said, snapping back to herself and rising to her feet. She grabbed Shelly's arm as she tried to turn and leave and tugged her back. She enclosed her in her arms for a bear hug. "No, thank you for telling me. I'm sorry...I'm sorry you've been carrying that."

"I mean, I'd always heard the rumors on the internet about him," Shelly said, muffled against Cosette's shoulder. "But I just thought it was malicious gossip and not that many people had bad things to say about him, everyone else just adored him, so I thought it was just people making something out of nothing. But...but now things make sense. And I just...I know how you are, Cosette, and I know you didn't trust him, but if you were...I don't know, pining over him or something..."

"No, I'm not," Cosette sighed, pulling back. "It's okay, Shelly. Really. You need to just push this
off. I'm not upset at you, at all." Although she was sure once Shelly left, she would end up spitting up in the trash. That Tom would do that was one thing...but across from the Church? Seriously?

And it was on the tip of her tongue, to tell Shelly, about what she'd done. But no, she couldn't. Not if what she suspected was true.

A few hours later, Cosette sat in her car, staring at the official readout the doctor had given her. Most of it was techno-jargon, but the particular line she stared at was abundantly plain.

Test: Positive for pregnancy.

Her throat had turned so dry she felt like when she swallowed she was going to choke on it.

8 8 8

He couldn't get over her.

Sure, he expected some lingering pain, especially after a humiliating experience like that. He expected a twinge now and again. Most of the time he was able to shrug things like this off after a few weeks but this one was sticking around and with far more intensity than any other he'd ever endured in the past.

He told himself it was the way they parted. He could hardly bring himself to think about that morning without the urge for a Jameson overcoming him. He still felt hurt and confused no matter how he tried -- and he did honestly try -- to understand her point of view and her reasons for doing what she did. In his mind, it was unresolved.

Yet those were not the reasons he couldn't stop thinking about her. His mind would play tricks on him, seeing someone at a distance in a flouncy skirt that grazed her knees and a white blouse that fluttered in the breeze. He would blink or turn his head and the vision would vanish. Someone with dark curling hair that fell about her shoulders would morph from her hair to someone else's, someone bearing no resemblance to her at all. He would hear the click of heels as she approached him, and turn to see who it was, expecting, for a brief moment, for her to have come and found him and...

No, of course not.

Worst of it, though, was catching someones' eyes, and seeing that violet emerge from the blue or gray or green he'd originally thought he'd seen. Then blinking to realize it was just an illusion.

He could barely look at the color purple without feeling his stomach recoil with a terrible...emptiness.

He threw himself into work. Viciously, with the kind of rigor that startled most people and got his fanbase wagging their tongues about how he needed to learn how to rest. But they didn't know, and they would not ever know, how much it covered up the pain.

This time it wasn't working.

Usually he'd be flirting with the next attractive female who wandered into his space, but no one felt right. Either something they did reminded him too much of her, or they had no appeal because they bore no resemblance to her. After one mortifying encounter in which he'd utterly failed to follow through on physical intimacy because he actually could not get aroused, he knew he was in serious trouble.
It was his own fault for ever having anything to do to her. But she'd been a siren. Not only was she classically his type physically, but she had been that extra edge of everything unexpectedly exotic that he could have never envisioned in a partner, and that sort of flavoring had made her taste not just irresistibly, but unquenchable.

He didn't know what to do. Depression was starting to leak in at the edges. He spent more time alone than usual, although it wasn't unusual for him to be solitary. He would hear himself having imaginary conversations with her, his mind continuously returning to that final one -- that argument that had ended everything. He twisted and turned it and imagined a million things he should have said, and every time, whether the ending was happy or not, it would stop with the knowledge that it didn't matter -- he wouldn't get a chance either way.

Things that used to bring him pleasure stopped having any appeal. People starting using the word "lackluster" to describe his appearance. He had to force himself to run every day, because all he wanted to do was sleep and pretend his life hadn't sunk into this pit.

And then he had to go back to L.A for filming. It seemed he couldn't get a break.

8 8 8

Cosette had inherited her house from her grandmother when she died. It was one of the reasons she was able to afford living on a Catholic school teacher's salary, especially in Los Angeles. The house had a big yard with a high stone fence on one side and a rectangular gazebo on the other, right behind the two-car garage. It was almost too big of a house for Cosette to live in alone, but she did because, other than the yearly taxes, it was free. She had never been the kind to spend large amounts of money, so other than her car payment, she didn't have any major expenses.

Still, the thought of raising a child alone on a Catholic school teacher's salary was worrying.

Her family rallied. Her mother and father, her younger sister and soon to be brother-in-law were supportive for every single step. She didn't tell anyone, though, and wasn't going to until she got into her second trimester, when maybe she would have a clearer plan of how to handle the situation.

She was pretty much certain she was going to lose her job.

It wasn't that they would want to get rid of her. In fact, Cosette -- Miss Mitchells to her middle schoolers -- was very popular. But it was a Catholic school, and what kind of example could she possibly be, when she had single-handedly brought in a purity and abstinence program to their school in spite of the objections of several influential people, when now she was unwed and pregnant after a one night stand? It wasn't like everyone in the school wouldn't know what had happened. Everyone knew about Tom. It had never had a chance of being a secret, as the relationship had happened quite publicly for everyone to observe -- a relationship she insisted was not a romance, but a friendship. The humiliation and the shame was like a bad taste in her mouth, continuous and cloying. She was a hypocrite, a double-standard, and unfit for her job. But she had time. She had time to prepare herself. She probably wouldn't start showing until they let out for summer. She was good at keeping secrets. She would bide her time and when it came, she would be ready for it.

She had flubbed everything else up to this point. She had to get this one thing right.

8 8 8

Los Angeles was a regular haunt for him. He knew it almost as well as London, at least the parts of
it where he spent most of his time. But now, just being here was difficult for him. He had to resist driving to her neighborhood, walking around the church, the school where she worked, the restaurants he'd taken her. He felt a bit desperate, a bit creepy, and most of the time it was enough to dissuade him, but then the thoughts and feelings would reach a place where reason had no place in his brain, and he had to go, he had to drive and see it, just to take off the edge.

It brought a different kind of pain. Not one he was sure was better, but different. And sometimes, it was enough.

He'd only been there two weeks when he missed a call (no message), and then got a text -- both from her. His reaction to her words was one of fear -- she'd caught sight of him, and was going to reprimand him for his actions. The humiliation of that was too much -- he was going to ignore the text. She wanted to talk? Whatever. But then the thought of not responding made him feel childish and stupid. He was a man, he would face up to whatever it was. But his pride rebelled, and he cursed her, cursed her for ever entering his life and screwing him up beyond repair.

All of this debate lasted two days before he replied. And then, that night, waiting to wake up and go meet her as planned, he had a dream of a little girl, running around a yard, with dark curly hair and violet eyes. Running to him and calling him "daddy."

8 8 8

It was decided that Tom had a right to know.

At first, her father objected, but not for long. It was more a knee-jerk reaction to his dislike for Tom. And it wasn't his choice anyway, even he admitted that. Her mother stood by her -- her mother had always stood by her; Cosette was one of the rare individuals who could honestly say that a girl's best friend was her mother -- and advised her on how to handle things.

Tom was a public figure, and this kind of scandal could be harmful to everyone. She had to be discreet. She had to make him and those who supported his career know that she wasn't coming after him for money. She assumed, from the short time she'd gotten to know Tom, that he would feel beholden to the child, and would provide something, at the very least. She suspected, with some dread, that he would want to be a regular part of the child's life. And even worse, she feared that he would use it as an opportunity to try and manipulate her feelings. She was anxious that some -- maybe even Tom himself, if he was particularly bitter over how they had ended -- would accuse her of trying to trap him. But //she// had kicked //him// out, so how that was going to stick, she had no idea.

She debated how to handle it. Maybe it would be an act of good faith if she went to his people first, gave them the opportunity to contain the problem -- they would see it as a problem, anyway, although she loathed thinking of her baby as a "problem"-- and stay ahead of any gossip or rumors. They would then get Tom and prepare him for the shock, but already have a plan ready.

This was discarded by the simple fact that Tom was a father, and he had a right to know first.

The number he'd given her months ago was still in her phone. She hadn't deleted it because Tom hadn't gone quietly. He'd tried to call her a few times after that awful morning. He texted her, asking her if there was some way they could talk, if they could fix things. She felt awful for how she'd treated him -- but there was no way to take it back. Any attempt to soothe him could potentially lead to him trying to wiggle back in and she could not abide that -- at least not at the time. Possibly not even now, she reasoned, but the life growing inside her wasn't giving her a choice.
Just like before, she knew that she had to push on. She had to keep moving, had to just endure. What other choice did one have? In this case, she had none.

In the end, a text message to him had done the job.

She tried to call, but it went straight to voice mail. She was pretty sure that he would see an unknown number and not answer. Unless, like her, he'd kept her number for that just- in-case scenario. In hers, it was to avoid, but for him, maybe he'd held out hope for some time. Two months wasn't that long, but surely enough for him to get the message. No, he had to have deleted her number by then. And if not, well, maybe he didn't want to talk to her. She had to prepare for that possibility, and what she was going to do about it. If it came to it, she would go to his PR people. But she hoped it didn't come to that.

However, listening to his voice -- that lovely, velvet, chocolate, liquid sex voice -- had derailed her, and when the beep came, she choked and hung up. So she went with a text message. She kept it simple.

--It's Cosette. I need to talk to you, and it should be done in person. Please contact me.--

She would fly to London -- her mother would go with her, she determined -- if that was what it took. He'd gone back a few days after their...indiscretion. She had no idea where he was now, could be off on location somewhere. She vaguely remembered him saying he was going to go home to London for a few months but would end up back in L.A. before the end of the year, as the next Marvel movie was going to start filming. But there was no way to be sure.

The return text came two days later.

--I'm in L.A. Where do you want to meet?--

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He was in love with her. He had whispered it to her in the dark during that one night together, and it was as true now as it had been then. He was in love and whatever she wanted, he would do.

The dream bugged him. He knew one day he hypothetically wanted children, but that would require a commitment, and he honestly was never sure he could ever make that kind of commitment to anyone. Until now. It felt like that kind of future with Cosette was some strange, unattainable dream. She had become an ideal in his head, and unless that commitment was to her, he couldn't imagine making it. He hadn't been with a woman in almost two months except for that awful night in his trailer (which had cost him more than just his pride to keep it from being spread around) and he hadn't gone without for that long since before his big Hollywood break six years ago. There was a tension inside of him that frightened him. The thought of seeing her, being in her presence, both aggravated and soothed it simultaneously, a paradox that flustered him. But when he pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant, and saw her sitting in the outdoor section, it felt like everything else just melted away.

888

She didn't want to risk anyone overhearing them, but she also knew that a scene might be possible, as Tom was a very dramatic man and could very well throw a tantrum. She picked one of her favorite eateries, a locally owned restaurant with a wide outdoor patio, where they sometimes liked to meet for breakfast on Saturdays. They made the absolute best chile verde she'd ever had in her life, served with eggs and potatoes and her choice of flour or corn tortillas. She liked to roll it up like a burrito.
At that time of day, it was nearly empty. Her sister and her sister's fiancée talked to the manager of the restaurant, who knew they were regulars, and explained that they needed the patio for a private party, and even offered to pay an extra hundred, but he was an easygoing man, and as it wasn't busy, he didn't mind.

Tom, however, seemed rather nervous about the entire situation. He saw Cosette sitting outside and went directly toward the patio, approaching her table. "So..." he started, seeming unsure as to what to say.

"You should sit," she said politely, sparing him the awkwardness.

He did, reluctantly. And then she told him.

He stared at her for a very long moment, and Cosette recognized the shock. She suddenly felt a very unreasonable urge to burst into tears. This was not how this was supposed to be happening. She was supposed to be married to a man she loved, a man she trusted, respected, honored, and she was supposed to be telling him with joy and anticipation.

But she was telling a near-stranger that they were going to be bound together for the rest of their lives, and the living, breathing sign of their physically intimacy, which should have been a union of their committed love, was now in fact a potential unwanted hazard.

Tom's fingers sunk into his hair as his elbows rested on the table. He pressed his hands to either side of his head, the shock penetrating him and then passing through as reality started to get a grip. It felt like it took him as long to accept the fact she had presented as it had her. She didn't blame him. She'd gone through her own gamut of feelings, he had every right to do the same. She decided to just sit calmly and wait until he spoke.

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The first thing his brain did was remind him that yes, it was entirely possible, because he hadn't used a condom that night. The whole thing had felt surreal and crazy and impossible and he'd only thought of how he didn't want to break the moment. So it had fallen by the wayside.

The second thing that happened was the knot that had taken up residence in his stomach dissolved. They were going to have a child. This was a fixed thing, an enduring bond that could not be broken. For good or ill, she would be a permanent part of his life from now on, and he of hers.

Whether this was going to be a source of agony or ecstasy remained to be seen.

The words, "Are you sure it's mine?" sat on the tip of his tongue, and why they sat there he had no idea. He always knew she was telling the truth. Nobody played that coy these days. And the fact that she'd thrown him out after giving in, well, if she was playing him, it was the best con he'd ever imagined. But he knew others would require proof.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Tom says. "But we're going to need a DNA test."

"I figured," she replied, not missing a beat. He expected a more emotional reaction, and her matter-of-fact behavior made him frown. "Your career is tantamount. You're a commodity, and you have to be protected from predators. The doctor will let us know the earliest we can do a DNA test. I've already mentioned it."

Something in that statement bugged him. His career. Yes, his career, his work, was everything to him. Everything. But now, she was giving him something that suddenly made him feel ashamed of that. Something that would always be more important than a career.
"Cosette," he said, reaching across the table for her hand -- and she didn't pull it back. "I don't need to know. I trust you. But other people need it. They won't budge unless we have cold proof--"

"I understand, Tom," she cut him off. "I know the world we're living in. I'm not naive."

She withdrew her hand and placed it in her lap. "There's a few things you need to know. I'm planning to stay here, in Los Angeles. I know you live in England and that's going to be an issue, but just so you know. And this doesn't change anything between us. We're going to do this as rational, mature adults." She looked away, something in her face that showed her clear distaste. Whether it was for him or the situation, Tom didn't know, but he suspected.

Something in him bridled. She was being so calm about this. He'd half hoped that she would rush at him, sobbing, begging him for help, for his protection, for his assurance. But that wasn't Cosette. And she obviously wasn't struggling with her feelings anywhere near like he'd been, and he felt serious resentment toward her for that.

So it was not terribly surprising when his next question came out in a rather bitter tone. "So what do you want from me?" he asked.

She blinked, looked at him. "To be a father. If you wish to be. That's all."

He drew a heavy breath. "That's all?"

She gave him a tiny little smile. "I'm not after your money, Tom. But every child deserves a mother and a father. I wanted to at least give you a chance, do the right thing by you, let you choose. I'm having the child, no question. Whatever you want to do, you tell me and I'll adjust."

The resentment from before dissolved under a sudden flood of appreciation. Whatever her feelings toward him, she wasn't going to make things difficult. While a crazy part of him wished she'd make some kind of demand, show some need for his presence in her life. But she also wasn't going to cut him out. There was a foothold, there. An invitation, no matter how small.

He suddenly wanted her hands again. He wanted to squeeze them and tell them that he was terrified, but it was a wonderful kind of terror. It was ten times anything he'd felt before when getting a new role, a new adventure, a new venue to explore. It was the role of a lifetime, to use the cliché. And he wanted to tell her he wanted more than just to do this as rational, mature adults. He wanted to do this the way it was supposed to be.

"I want to be a father, too."

8 8 8

"This is my child, too, Cosette. I won't tolerate it being raised in poverty."

"I'm not poor, Tom. I live in a very nice home in a nice neighborhood. And I have lots of help and lots of people willing to donate--"

"Second hand junk. We don't need charity."

"No, you're right, we don't. People much poorer than me need it. So give the money to them."

Tom was ready to rip out his hair in frustration. He walked away from her, and Cosette watched him make a long lap up one end of the conference room and then down back to her, having resumed his cool.
It hadn't been like this all the time. From the moment he'd learned of her pregnancy, he had been nothing but supportive. At first, his expression had been fear mingled with joy -- he wanted to be happy at this news, but knew the circumstances were completely non-ideal. His child was in the world. Living inside her. Being joyfully fearful and fearfully joyful both seemed like perfectly normal reactions.

He'd ask her, after he'd made clear his intentions to be a part of this, his voice slightly trembling -- "How do you feel?"

She smiled, embarrassed, letting down the heavy guard she'd been holding up now that he knew Tom's reaction. "I can't help it...I'm so...excited to be a mother. I know it's all shit but...this little one...is mine. And I can't possibly think of that as a bad thing."

It earned her a smile. Then he reached across the table, his palms up, pleading. She brought her hands up from her lap, let him briefly touch her, but then she pulled back. Careful. She had to be so careful. Even now, she felt the power of Tom's attraction.

And since then it had all been like that. Friendly, but she had held back.

This man was the father of her child. Regardless of circumstances, they now had a shared goal, a shared purpose.

But Tom wanted to be a father in the truest sense. The thought of his child being born out of wedlock kept him awake at night. He said as much over the phone to her a few nights after she'd told him. Their phone calls were starting to become daily routine, him checking on her but not learning much -- there wasn't much to learn, everything was proceeding normally and they were weeks away from determining the gender of the child.

"My mother is going to kill me. My father is going to kill me," he'd bemoaned.

"I'm not going to marry you because you feel guilty," she told him. He hadn't precisely asked, merely talked about it, as if it was something they should consider. No declarations of undying love, just bringing up the fact that they were having a baby and they weren't married. And that he didn't like it. Not the baby, but that they weren't married. Which was a preposterous suggestion, and she'd said as much.

He attempted to argue. Her reply was to simply shut him down before any awkward confession could be made, before he could say anything he would regret later.

"You of all people do not want to live in a shotgun marriage," she declared.

More weeks of phone calls. Tom was working on pre-production, his time was consumed but still he called her regularly, wanted to come by and see her, which she permitted, and for the sake of privacy, she allowed him to come to her house, but his visits didn't last long.

So now she was sitting in a very high-class office, listening to a lawyer lay out a contract for her to sign regarding financial responsibility. Tom said he didn't want to do this but his lawyers had utterly insisted, for the sake of protecting his assets. They hadn't wasted any time. It had only been three weeks since she'd dropped the news but now everything was laid out in writing. The contract stated a very reasonable sum for child support, which Tom had insisted -- to the point of walking out -- that they double.

She didn't want it. She said half the original sum would be enough.

"What are you trying to prove?" Tom said, his voice much softer than it had been three minutes
ago. "That you're not after my money? That you aren't some celebrity gold digger? Because you
don't have to prove that, Cosette, I know that. Raising a child is stressful enough without having to
worry about having enough money, and I want to take as much stress off you as I can. And you are
the last person to care what anyone else thinks."

"Oh, you're quite wrong, Tom," she said, her temper momentarily getting ahold of her tongue. "I do
care what people think. So much so that I'm probably going to have to leave my job."

She knew she shouldn't have said it but it was too late now. Tom's lazer-like gaze focused on her
with a little scowl.

"What are you talking about?"

They'd taken a break from negotiations so that Tom could "talk some sense into her," as he put it.
Instead of them moving to a private room, he'd made everyone else leave the conference room, and
only the two of them filled the wide pace. It felt eerily quiet as he considered her.

She looked down at her feet. "I...I don't know if I'm going to be able to keep working at the
school," she said softly.

"Why?" he asked. "I mean, I'm sure you'll want extended maternity leave...see, Cosette, this is why
you need to take my offer. You need the extra money, especially if you aren't going to work--"

"That isn't why," she muttered, and then dragged her eyes up to his. "I...I don't think I can face
working there after...this." She motioned toward her belly, which, while softly curved, did not yet
indicate a pregnancy.

He stared even harder. His jaw had dropped slightly with the effort. "And please explain why?"

"Don't you see?" she cried, then lowered her volume. "I'm...I'm a...a failure! I'm supposed to be an
upright, moral example and everything I say now has absolutely no credibility! How can I go on
teaching students how to live Christ-like lives when I'm a Magdalene before her conversion? I've
done it backwards."

Tom considered her, so many different emotions flittering across his face. He seemed sad,
disappointed, confused, and then, something like compassion...something much stronger than
compassion...suffused his expression, and he took a step closer to her, closer than she normally
allowed.

"Are you ashamed of the baby?" he whispered.

"No," she said with a shake of her head. "No, not at all. But...I am ashamed that I've done this. That
my fall is so publicly known. God decided this child should exist, and for whatever reason, gave it
to me, to us. But...what I did was wrong, and everyone knows I did what //I knew// was wrong. If I
was just...if I didn't do what I did for a living, didn't profess the lifestyle I did, if I hadn't worked so
hard to be an example and fallen so hard on my face, but...but I have, and it's...I just can't."

Tom's eyes drifted away, over her shoulder then down at their feet, for another minute. Then, he
said, "Have you told them that you're leaving?"

"Not yet," she said. "I was waiting another month."

"I think when you do, Cosette, that you're going to find they won't want you to leave. The kids like
you, and respect you. They aren't going to judge you. They're going to want to take care of you."
She shook her head. "I can't be an exception to the rule, Tom. And I can't be a cautionary tale, either. Look at the poor girl who got herself knocked up, don't do what she does, look at how pathetic she is--"

"The last thing you are is pathetic," Tom said, more force in his voice. "And no, you aren't an exception to the rule. But you can still be an example. You've done everything right. You've taken responsibility. You're doing the right thing for your child. You told me and allowed me to be a part of the baby's life, in spite of your...personal feelings." The hurt flashed again.

Cosette looked away. "I don't know," she said. "I'm...I'm scared. I don't think I can do this if I feel every day that people are judging me and looking down on me. I do that enough to myself, I don't need it from others."

Tom paused, considering her very carefully, and then he said, "Can I ask you something?"

She looked at him expectantly. "How would you treat you?"

The question hit her hard. How would she treat an unwed mother in this situation? Would she scorn her? No, not at all. In fact, Cosette hoped she'd feel compassion for the poor soul, especially if she was trying her hardest to make the best of it and do things right.

"I guess I see your point," she whispered.

"I think you're not giving your fellow Catholics enough credit, and are going to be surprised. But if you do decide to leave, then you're going to need the money, Cosette. So please, for my piece of mind, for yours, will you please just sign the damn paper? It's my money, please let me make this decision? Let me do my part, take my responsibility, as a father? Please?"

She gave in and signed.

Chapter End Notes

So I've been reading a particular fic author for some time, and she is amazingly talented. But her stories make me absolutely CRAZY because what she seems to think are situations in which love has an opportunity to begin and grow are actually THE COMPLETE OPPOSITE, in my opinion. And it bothers me that so many stories PERIOD, not just fanfics but all kinds of stories, movies, novels, etc., out there portray people behaving in a totally destructive manner and passing it off as love, as romance, as relationship. Pope Saint John Paul II said that the opposite of love is not hate. The opposite of love is use. And lust is the king of users.

Cosette and Tom used each other in the last chapter. They sated their lusts. Tom didn't know any better. He's been programmed by his culture. Cosette, as most of my characters, comes from a different culture. And Cosette knows (or believes) that she can't make love happen from that. Of course, if people still didn't try to do stupid or questionable things, then there might be no stories. And who wants that?

I only say this because I know my frustration with other writers who believe so polar opposite from me, and I came to realize that of course people have to be reading this fic and TOTALLY disagreeing with me, which is fine. I don't want to argue with anyone. You like the fic because I'm a good writer who turns a good yarn and makes
you want to know what happens next. That's great and I hope you keep reading.

But I also know that that other author (and many like her) make me think. In my case, it helps me understand WHY I think the way I do. It also has become something of a personal gage in my own development, because as little as a few years ago I would never have given it much thought. The way I view sex, in particular, is completely different than how I viewed it as little as a year ago. I have also considered telling this writer my thoughts, but I am afraid of offending her and rendering her hostile to me, which really isn't my goal. Sometimes people can be very touchy and sensitive, and extremely defensive.

So there it is. I guess this little note was a way to help me vent some of my frustration. As is this whole fanfic writing business.
Twenty-Seven Weeks Ago

Chapter Summary

After the first ultrasound, Tom confronts Cosette about their past, and about a possible future.

Thirteen weeks. The baby was the size of a fig, according to the charts. By next week it would be the size of a lemon. She was on the verge of showing, and Cosette could feel her body changing. She could feel herself getting thicker, feel things gather in particular places. The pre-natal vitamins were doing their part, and she knew she looked particularly good -- it was that glow all pregnant women seemed to have. It was a matter of time before someone noticed something. Even some of her nicer students had complimented her appearance.

It was May. In a month, the students would be out. She had to worry about graduation, and everything felt more exhausting than it had previously. Thankfully, she wasn't sick past eight -- she'd throw up after just waking up, but the sickness didn't last beyond getting to work and nobody would see her exhibiting suspicious symptoms. The heartburn was annoying, but she could hide it. And she wore a lot of loose fitting clothing, but the temperature was rising so it could easily be excused.

It was hard not telling anyone. Mostly because she was, to be honest, really happy about it. Something deep inside was tremendously excited and pleased that she was going to be a mother and even though there was a lot of conflict and anxiety about what was to come, she felt strangely...complete. And she was about two weeks away from her second trimester, and that meant her risk of a miscarriage was much lower. It was the time people told others about the pregnancy.

Hopefully she wouldn't start to show until the students were done for the summer. That gave her two months time to decide what to do. If she stayed, she would return to work very much pregnant -- on the border of her third trimester. The baby was due in December, and she hoped it was earlier rather than later, so she could use the Christmas holidays as part of her leave.

If she even came back.

She decided to talk to Richard right after school let out. She would let him know the situation and ask what he wanted. She would also talk to the pastor, Fr. John. He liked her, they'd always gotten along well...but she was also very nervous about disappointing him.

Her pride still stung.

As if reading her mind, her cellular phone went off. It was Tom's ring -- she'd chosen Hank William's "Move Over" to identify him. It was the real version, not Tom's movie version.

"Hello?"

"Hello, it's me. How are you feeling today?"

"A bit bloated, but that's normal. How about you?"
"Fine, busy here, though. I wanted to ask you about what you'd decided concerning the test next week."

Oh, yes, the paternity test. She'd been the one to suggest it to him, although the PR people had been all over that before he ever had a chance to pass it along. Tom had been adamant that it be a non-invasive test. He didn't want her doing the Amniocentesis test, as it carried with it a risk of miscarriage and was, actually, rather painful. But it was very accurate. Still, it did sting a bit that she had to do it. But that was the world they lived in. Even if it was sad.

"We can do the non-invasive test," she said. "I'm not very fond of them sticking a needle in me anywhere."

"That's fine," Tom said. "If they object, I'll just point out that we have that clause in the child-support agreement, and we can do a second test after she's born."

"She?"

"Um. Yeah. I'm sorry, I just...we were calling it our little fig, and that sounded like a girl to me. So."

She smiled. Tom really was so painfully cute. It just made all of this that much harder.

"So if you want someone to be there," she started, but Tom interrupted her.

"I'll be there," he said. "I cleared my schedule for it. And I'm also supposed to be done a little early tonight, so I was wondering...if you would like to have dinner? I can bring something over to yours."

Cosette hesitated. She had been getting the feeling that this whole situation was putting thoughts into Tom's head that she wasn't sure about. Sure, he had brought up getting married, but she'd squashed that because it was only out of obligation, and there was no way she'd entertain that thought. But she told herself that he was excited about being a father, and she couldn't deny him that, even if he still felt...dangerous.

"Um...sure. That should be okay."

"Okay." He sounded happy. "Is there anything in particular you're craving?"

"Fish," she said. "Fried, with malt vinegar and lemon. But that's just me, and it's Friday, that's nothing to do with pregnancy cravings. Doctor Arrey says they won't come for a few weeks yet."

"How is your appetite, though, in general?" he asked.

That was typical. Tom had downloaded a pregnancy app that told him everything that was going on, week by week, including nutritional information. She knew he had a copy of "What To Expect" on his phone as well. He was always pleased to hear that she hadn't thrown up much, but always worried she was eating enough. Three hundred calories more, she pointed out more than once, was not very much. Not even an extra candy bar a day. Her appetite had always been very healthy, which explained her round hips and slight belly.

Both of which Tom had spent much time appreciating on their one night together--

Cosette viciously dragged herself away from that train of thought. She had been warned about second trimester hormones. She was determined not to get pulled into that trap.
"It's fine," she said dismissively. "I ate my whole chicken pot pie at dinner last night, happy? And before I was able to make one last two days."

"Okay. Look, I have to run. I'll call you when I'm done, okay?"

"Bye, Tom," she said before hanging up.

888

Tom had never been in a situation like this. In fact, if someone had asked him before, he would have said it was his worst nightmare. Having a baby mamma? Such a stereotype for people in his profession. And being tied to someone forever, if she had only been meant to be a few nights of fun, or just a friend he had sex with, or even someone he was dating, but not seriously, sounded like hell.

But it wasn't. Far from it. He couldn't figure out if it was the novelty and challenge of it all...or if it was Cosette.

They had decided that she was going to have the ultrasound to determine the gender of the child on the same day they did the paternity test. He knew the child was his -- he wanted to see it. Cosette agreed to meet him at her doctor's office right after work -- he'd wanted to pick her up but she said she had to drive herself to work and she may as well drive herself to the doctor.

Their dinner had been pleasant, but impersonal. Cosette was treating him like a partner, as if he were a fellow teacher and they were working on a project together, or a co-star for his next film. She was accommodating and friendly, but she kept him at a distance. Everything was about the baby. Not that he minded, but...

He was stupid to even mention marriage to her, he realized. She'd almost laughed at him, but held back because she was a nicer person than he gave her credit for. But honestly, he couldn't understand why she thought it was ridiculous to the point of not even being willing to talk about it. Sure, she had very different views of marriage than he did, but there were advantages to being married to him. He had money, he had a growing career, and if she was concerned about scandal, if she got married, it would stifle a lot of the damage that could be done to her reputation. And he knew the advantages being married to her would bring -- she would be loyal, he wouldn't have to worry about her being faithful, and he already knew they had sexual chemistry. Plus she was whip smart and talking to her was one of the things he had missed most about her the most during their separation.

Of course, he told himself, without this baby, that separation would have been permanent. Without this little life joining them, she would never have reached out to him.

She reached the office at just about the same time he did. He was checking his phone before going through the doors, and he heard the familiar click of her heels as she walked across the crosswalk from the parking lot. He smiled at her, she smiled back. He wanted to kiss her cheek, to touch her in some way, but she'd given him no signals that any contact would be welcome. In fact she had gone out of her way to avoid anything physical. Even accidental.

The weather was warming up, and in Los Angeles that meant very warm -- it was in the high nineties, not so unusual for a heat snap. Cosette had her sunglasses on, and was dressed in her typical skirt and dressy top for school.

"You look lovely," he said to her. She gave a little nod. "I know you think I'm giving you an empty compliment, but you do."
"Well, they say expectant mothers have a glow," she replied. She pushed her sunglasses back over her hair. "This is strange for it to be so sunny like this. Usually in May we get that marine layer. We usually call it Gray May, followed by June Gloom."

"I am familiar with that." He proceeded to ramble on about the time he was in L.A. for the MTV movie awards, and London had been typically gray and cold, and he'd been hoping for sunshine but had only gotten clouds.

He was only getting clouds now. In spite of her greeting, she was distant from him, obviously preoccupied as they waited to be called for their appointment. She kept examining her fingernails, decorated as they were with a deep purple lacquer. She didn't have very long nails, just long enough for them to slide deliciously across his---

No, he told himself sternly.

When they were called, they were shown to the examination room. The ultrasound machine waited beside a small little examination table. The nurse handed Cosette a few folded pieces of cloth and instructed her to remove all clothing but she could keep on her bra if she wanted. Cosette insisted on keeping her underwear as well.

"Just push them down a little, then. Open in the front," the nurse reminded her before leaving the room. Cosette caught the door and looked at Tom expectantly.

"What?" he asked.

The first flitter of impatience crossed her face. "I am going to be taking off my clothes. I would like a moment of privacy."

"Cosette, it's an ultrasound, not a hotel room. Nothing is going to happen, you're keeping your underwear on. And I've already seen you naked," he pointed out. "That's kind of how we got here. It's rather late, don't you--"

Cosette stepped closer to him, letting the door shut but keeping her hand on the handle. "Listen to me," she said, her voice flinty and her eyes blazing into his. "Do not mistake whatever happened between us as a green light toward any and all intimacy, as some kind of permanent revoking of my right to my own body and who I want to look at it and when. I want privacy. And I will get it. If you want to be here when I do this at all, rather than look at the pictures later on a computer screen, you will do as I request. Please." She opened the door again and stepped behind it.

Knowing if he raised a fuss, they'd throw him out, he did as she asked. In the hallway, he berated himself for being an ass. He'd just wasted time arguing with her, and it was pointless. When the technician came, and Tom was allowed back in the room, Cosette was sitting on the table with the robe wrapped around her and the sheet across her lap. She would not look into his face, only gave her smiles to the young man who was going to be showing her their baby.

"My name is Benji, and you are Cosette?" he asked. He had a lovely Spanish accent. Tom considered speaking to him in Spanish, just to show off in front of Cosette, but refrained. He'd done enough stupid things today.

She lay back on the table, pulling up the top they'd given her (he caught a hint of her hot pink bra, and he had a flash of the night they'd been together -- her wearing her black tank top with that bright lacy bra underneath, while they danced) and pushing the sheet low so Benji could squirt the lubricant on her abdomen. Then the wand slid across and he started tapping buttons on the keyboard.
A few moments passed, not very long. Tom stepped closer to Cosette, looking over her at the monitors. Then, with a few wiggles of the wand, the little shape appeared.

"There you go," Benji said with a smile. "There's your baby."

Tom had heard other men, especially Hemsworth, talk about the first moment of seeing your child, the little black and white blob on the screen that isn't a blob at all, that you soon see has hands, and feet, and a clearly defined head. They talked about how it hits you, how it rockets through your spine and into your feet and back up again into your head, leaving you lightheaded.

He understood now. Before it had sounded silly, like the breathlessness you get from your first real kiss -- which he never felt -- or the heaviness of the first time you realize someday you're going to die -- it had only exhilarated him, not depressed him. But this was real. It was accurate.

He felt cool fingers grasping at his hand, and he looked down to see Cosette staring at the screen, her eyes shining with tears. She'd blindly gone for his hand, and he gave it to her.

At that moment, he would have given her anything.

They watched for a long time as Benji talked, pointing out everything they needed to know. He offered to tell them the sex, and Cosette said yes before Tom could even object. Benji glanced at him, as if waiting for Tom to stop him, and when Tom said nothing, he gave them the news.

"It's a girl," he said.

A girl. More lightheadedness. Tom actually felt himself rocking slightly on his ankles. Then he turned his gaze down to Cosette, who still wasn't looking at him, but had laid her head back against the pillow on the table, her other hand pressed to her lips.

Their little girl.

He wanted to know what she was thinking. He wanted into her head, into her heart. He wanted to hear her expressions of joy and wonder, her fears and her plans. He wanted to talk with her, argue with her, plan with her and know that whatever the future brought, they would face it together.

"I recorded it for you," Benji said, pressing a few more buttons. "You can watch it as much as you want, show it to your friends and family..." He gave Cosette a little wink as he handed her a towel. Her returning smile was nowhere near as cheerful as it had been before.

"Thank you," Tom said, accepting the burned DVD as Cosette cleaned herself up. "I'll, um...wait in the hallway, Cosette, while you get dressed?"

She finally looked at him. Those violet eyes were bright with the tears she hadn't shed. Her only answer was a nod.

8 8 8

Cosette moved slowly as she pulled on her skirt and blouse. Her hand kept straying to her belly, where she was starting to show. If she was lucky, people would just think she was gaining weight. But she didn't want to draw attention, and this coming weekend she had plans to go shopping for some new clothes.

It had all been real for her before, but now it was real on a new level. Tom standing next to her, watching with her as their daughter -- their daughter! -- wiggled and swam across the screen.
And Cosette felt the overwhelming punch yet again, but deeper.

She wasn't ashamed of her baby. But she was deeply ashamed she was in this position. That she was bringing her precious daughter into a situation where she would be looked at as a scandal...where did the shame end and the joy begin?

Her child deserved better. Starting with the father.

Tom was...Tom was not a bad man, generally speaking. He was responsible, he was intelligent. But he had been sucked into a mentality that was abhorrent to her, and a pattern of behavior that he probably didn't even realize he was addicted to. Not that he was a sex-addict, but the idea of having sex when you want with who you want was something that became habitual, and she was sure if he decided, for some reason, to give it up, he would find it near impossible. He was too used to the luxury, too used to allowing his impulses to have free reign. And there were studies that proved it damaged your ability to bond when you finally did find someone you wanted to spend your life with -- defensive attachment, the situation was called. Always knowing that he could leave at any time things got uncomfortable or stopped being fun... behavior like that, in a way, "broke your brain," as her grandmother had once put it.

Cosette felt one of the tears she'd been holding back start to burn its way through her eyelashes. At least her grandmother wasn't alive to see this. Although she was sure the woman would have given Cosette her full support.

But Tom had been steadfast so far. She wondered how long it would last.

At least he was providing support. Cosette knew she'd need it. She had hidden her pregnancy so far but eventually it would be impossible. So she had decided that she was going to talk to Richard about taking a leave of absence next year. She would have to tell him the truth, but at least it wouldn't drag the rest of the school into it. During that time, she would figure out what to do next -- because hiding her daughter was not something she could do forever.

Especially because of Tom. Once the media got a hold of the knowledge that he had a baby mama, her name would be strewn everywhere, and she didn't want that to go anywhere near the school.

No, forget the year of leave. She was just going to quit. When she was ready to come back, she would go to public school, if no other private school would take her. They didn't care in public school. Nothing was scandalous there.

She exited out into the hallway. Tom was waiting for her, with a small, apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, about before," he said, looking adorable in spite of the fact that she had really wanted to strangle him. "It was stupid and pointless. Of course I respect your privacy. Can I make it up to you, take you to get some food?"

"You've brought me dinner enough times, Tom," she said.

"And I want to many times more --I like to think of it as feeding my child," he replied. "Anywhere you want. What do you say?"

So she let him take her to Tokyo Wako, a Japanese steak house. She consumed a full order of tempura vegetables -- the slice of sweet potato was her favorite -- and had ordered filet mignon for her main course. They had already been served their salad and soup when the chef came out with all his supplies to prepare their meals at the grill right in front of their table.

Tom had immediately requested a private room, but the best the restaurant could do was tuck them
in the corner at a table all to themselves -- Tom was sure to tip the hostess for insuring their privacy. They sat at the corner so they could see each other, Cosette on the short side and Tom on the long so he could stretch out his legs.

The shrimp was Cosette's favorite part - big, juicy tiger shrimp that tasted almost like lobster -- and then the freshly made fried rice. The chef went through his various tricks to entertain them, and Tom was delighted at the little show -- especially the rings of onion stacked like a volcano and the burning oil that completed the look at the top. Finally, the rice was formed to look like a heart and the chef shoved a spatula underneath it to make it look like the heart was beating.

Both tucked in as the chef cleaned up and left them to their privacy. When Cosette was done wolfing everything down, Tom apparently chose his moment to speak.

"I want to talk about us, Cosette."

She was glad she'd already eaten to bursting. Otherwise her appetite would have dissolved.

"What about us?" she asked plainly.

He reached over, his fingers sliding over the back of her hand. "We're parents, Cosette. We're going to have a baby."

"I know." It took a lot not to pull back her hand. Tom's touch...she could already feel him working his familiar magic. But she didn't want to be cruel, either.

"And don't you think--"

"So help me," she sighed, impulsively interrupting him, "if you start talking about getting married again I'm going to walk out. I promise."

Tom retracted as if she'd hit him, but he didn't take back his hand. He looked away, and she saw his eyes as he furiously worked to regroup. "Okay. Look, let's rewind a bit. When we were...dating, I guess, for lack of a better word...we had feelings for each other, Cosette." He met her eyes, and she remembered.

She'd tried hard not to, but she remembered. Lately the memories from that night were playing on repeat in her head. It seemed at times she was obsessed with recalling every detail, piecing together the sequence exactly in her head. Some mornings she woke up so frustrated that she was sure she'd been dreaming about him.

The worst part was, she still had those same feelings for him. Being this close to him and resisting was much worse than if they'd broken up and gone their separate ways, never to meet again. This way, each day she had to be reminded of why she felt the way she did about him, and also why she couldn't let it happen. It hurt more to turn him down than it ever would have if he told her he didn't love her anymore and never wanted to see her again.

"Tom," she said, trying to keep her tone gentle, "I warned you when we first met that I wouldn't sleep with you. And yet look what happened."

He was offended. His hand moved off hers and anger instantly glittered in those blue eyes. "And that's my fault."

"I told you then it was more my fault than yours," she said, still calm and even. "I knew better. Yet I crumbled. I just don't trust myself with you, and no, I don't trust you either. Especially with..." She
shouldn't tell him, she told herself.

"Especially with...?" he pressed.

"Your attitude," she finished.

"My attitude?" he said, incredulous.

She knew this conversation was coming. She just wished it wasn't right now. But now it was here. "Your attitude toward sex, Tom. That morning you took the girls on tour of the set, Shelly went back to get your autograph on something and she overheard you in your trailer with a woman. One of the crew, a make-up person, was it?"

Tom started to flush, but seemed to visibly fight it down.

"Was she your girlfriend?"

"No," Tom insisted, misunderstanding her, apparently. Assuming she was jealous.

"Exactly. That is exactly it. You just..." she snapped her fingers. "Have sex at the drop of a dime! As casually as...as brushing your teeth or...or changing your clothes!"

He seemed to be visibly fighting his temper. "Sex, for me," he said, his voice the embodiment of forced calm, "has always been about a release of tension, or a...I don't know, a way to have fun. I know you don't share that opinion, Cosette, but we weren't even together at the time, and --"

She sat back in her chair and folded her arms, suddenly wanting to just walk out. But she was stuck with him. Stuck with him in her life and she had to find a way to manage it. "You keep failing to understand, Tom, that THAT IS EXACTLY MY POINT." She had taken one hand and hacked the edge of the other one into her palm, like chopping with an axe or a knife, one chop for each word. She'd gotten faster as her words came faster and she had to struggle with her temper, forcing her hands, palms down, back onto the table. It was getting harder and harder lately to stay calm! "And whether we were together or not at the time is irrelevant. I told you before, it's your attitude! And neither of us are naive enough to expect that to change just because you're with me and I have a different 'opinion.'" She accentuated with air quotes to show her disgust. "It's too important to me, Tom. And now...now that we've been together once...it's like," she searched for an example, "A long time ago, I told a friend of mine that I was curious to try marijuana. She got very pissed at me. I mean, really pissed. I didn't understand why, I was just curious, and I didn't see the big deal."

Tom looked incredulous. "You wanted to smoke pot?"

"Just once, to see what the big deal was," Cosette continued. "But she pointed out, what if I liked it? And I realized that even trying it once was bad precisely because of that. Because pleasure is very, very powerful. And now that I know...what it's like, with you..." Hell, she did NOT want to be saying any of this. "Now it'll be harder. Now I have to put more distance. Now I have to work twice as hard. So I'm not going to put myself in danger again."

"And I'm the danger," Tom grumbled.

"For lack of a better word, yes," she sighed, regretting her voice was so sharp on that last word.

Tom looked away. There was real hurt in his expression. Then, very softly, he said, "We need to talk about that night, Cosette." He turned those large, expressive eyes back to her. "I think, after how you tossed me out the next morning, you owe me that."
Cosette flinched. She didn't want to talk about it. Talking about it made her imagine it. Imagine Tom's hands and his lips, the feel of his skin against hers, the softness of his voice, to say absolutely nothing of what coming together with him had done to her, physically, mentally, emotionally. It had been beyond anything she'd ever imagined. And it had been a continuous source of torment to her for months.

Even sitting next to Tom now...It seemed her punishment just went on and on.

"What do you want to say, Tom?" she asked, resigned to let him have his peace, now that she'd had hers.

He narrowed his eyes. "You told me you loved me, Cosette. I told you I loved you...and yes, I was first. You think I do that every time?"

Maybe this was what she needed to hear. She needed to be reminded that she was only one of many. That she was not special, even if he wanted to fool himself into thinking she was. "The fact that there are other times," she said, drawing her arms around herself as if to protect herself, "tells me all I need to know."

"Jealous?"

"Disgusted is a better word."

She saw him flinch. "Suppose I deserved that. But I meant what I said. Did you?"

She could only stare at him. She didn't want to tell him -- it would encourage it. "What I said...was probably in the heat of passion," she replied, struggling for an even tone. "I may have meant it at the moment." She wanted to tell him that she didn't really believe he meant it, either. That he'd also meant it in one moment, but maybe not the next.

"And you don't anymore?" He let out a strange sound, something like a whimper. "I know you want to paint me in your head as a heartless cad, but I don't do confrontation. This might be one of the hardest conversations I've ever had in my life. That should at least get me some credit. You could at least...try to soften the blow."

She watched him. "Either that or you're just a great actor," she said.

"And you're just afraid to admit you feel the exact same way about me because you're convinced I'm just going to take advantage of you." He sighed. "You really think I'm that callous? How are we going to raise a child with this...this level of hostility between us? If we can't be together, we at least have to figure out how to get along."

"We'd get along fine if you would just stop..." She felt her hands start to cramp and looked down. She had clenched the edge of the table so hard the muscles of her hands had protested. "Tom, please. Please just stop." She closed her eyes, shook her head. "I don't like hurting you. I'm trying so hard to do the right thing, and you're making it so difficult."

"Maybe the reason it's being so difficult is //because// you keep fighting the actual //right thing// to do!" he growled.

8 8 8

Tom felt like he was bleeding to death.

Cosette was a fucking wall. He could not get past her defenses. He considered he was to blame for
that, as well, as she had warned him she would have to work twice as hard to resist him.

But if she had to //resist,// that meant she had feelings.

And what had she meant before about his attitude? He wanted her to explain but knew if he tried it would just let her drive that sharp knife of hers deeper into him. He'd been subjected to her derision of his relationship habits -- for lack of a better word -- before, and wasn't sure he could take more dissecting.

No, that wasn't where the conversation had to go. He had to focus on her feelings for him. Which he knew damn well she had.

He turned to her, trying one more time, forcing himself to relax, mustering every last ounce of his courage to be vulnerable, to make her believe what he believed was true. "I love you, Cosette," he said, and it felt like that knife had embedded itself in his jugular. "Do you think I would be so desperate to get you in the sack that I would...I would humiliate myself like this? You think I have so little dignity? You're the mother of my child. No woman will ever, ever be you, again, in my life. I am not insane for wanting to see where that could go. And you, in spite of the beliefs you desperately cling to, are not insane for wanting it as well."

Something in her eyes flickered.

"I'm...afraid," she admitted.

"I am too," he confessed. "You've terrified me from minute one. But I have a bad habit of chasing after the things that scare me. I've rarely ever found it to be the wrong thing."

She let out a sharp little laugh. "That's the difference, Tom. I'm afraid of you changing me. I'm afraid of your influence." But her expression turned thoughtful and he could tell she was mulling over his words.

He didn't want to speak. He felt so many words coming to his mouth, so many things he wanted to say, so many promises he wanted to make that he wasn't going to corrupt her, he wasn't going to ruin her, he was going to do whatever it took to preserve all those things about her that had drawn him to her in the first place because, whether she believed it or not, he found them precious and valuable. But if he spoke any of them, he would break whatever train of thought she was on that was making her appear to be considering him.

So Tom shoved his knuckles right against his mouth, pressing them against his lips.

He couldn't claim to know her well, but he'd already gotten more than a taste of her stubbornness. Once decided on a course of action, right or wrong, she would stick to it until the bitter end.

Even that night they were together, he'd seen it.

After their first time, they laid together, idly chit-chatting. He'd commented on her beauty. Rather, he'd fawned over it.

"You're quite the Greek god yourself, Hiddleston," she teased him.

"I try very hard not to believe my own press," he chuckled. "But it is nice to hear."

"Yeah...although sometimes I wonder why? I mean, our physical looks are the last thing we can take credit for. Whether we're beautiful or hideous, we didn't make ourselves like that. It's the way we were made. We didn't //do// it. The things we can take credit for, our education, our creativity,
our kindness or generosity, our other talents, God given as they may be--" and she flinched, then twisted herself away from where that comment would have led her --"we don't put near as much of our worth on those things as we should. Instead we worry about how we look."

This was one of the reasons he loved her. He leaned over and kissed her, several times. He loved kissing her.

"This is some very profound pillow talk," he commented when they were both able to breathe again.

"Hmmm...well, would you like to pick a subject, then? Something lighter?" Those violet eyes sparkled with amusement. "Psychology wasn't a big hit, so maybe philosophy? Theology---?"

She caught herself. Her eyes darkened and she looked away. For a moment, Tom was absolutely sure she was going to push him away, entwined naked as they were under her sheet, and get out of the bed.

But she didn't. Instead she turned back to him, and there was a softness there, and a regret, but she didn't disengage.

"I liked our first subject just fine," Tom said. "But you realize it's easy to disdain your looks when you have them. Just like it's easy to disdain money when you have that, too."

She chuckled. "Looks say nothing about character. I mean, wasn't that the whole point of the 'Portrait of Dorian Gray'?"

"Oh, literature!" Tom cried. "Now //that// is a subject I can get into."

"Actually," she admitted with the most adorable little blush, "I haven't read it." At his shocked look, she rushed on. "I own a copy! I've always meant to read it! I just have never...gotten...around to it. But," she added sheepishly, "I did see the movie."

Tom sighed, shook his head dramatically, made an exasperated sound. "Probably the one with Colin Firth in it," he muttered.

She giggled.

"So you know nothing about the author, Oscar Wilde, then?" he asked.

"I know he was...a complicated man," she replied. "I read a tiny bit about his wife. I've seen comments by him that I thought were really wise. And I know he was a deathbed...Catholic."

There it was again. She did turn away this time, her back to him.

Tom couldn't quite take it. Her smooth shoulder exposed to him, she said in muffled tones, "Maybe we should just forget conversation and get some sleep."

But sleep was the last thing he wanted to do. He told her as much. And maybe that second time, he did attempt to chase away those doubts, that guilt he saw in her face. He knew it was a useless battle but he wanted to keep it at bay for as long as possible. But she had initiated the third and final time, as if desperate for just one more before she had to return to her former self.

Her saner self.

Tom blinked when he realized Cosette was talking.
"I've always believed in Divine Providence," she said. "And I don't know why God gave us this child. But I do know it wasn't to lead her to ruin. You're right, we can't be divided."

"We could be so much more," he said softly.

"It comes down to trust," she said.

And then Tom knew.

He knew what he had to do. But he didn't know if he could. And worse, he didn't know if she would believe him if he did.

"If I can prove myself trustworthy," Tom said, "would you reconsider?"

She didn't ask what he would be trustworthy about. "How would you do that?"

"I'm not in the habit of breaking my word," Tom said. "I hope you know that much about me, at least. I think I've made it clear that if I say I'm going to do something, I will. So..." Oh hell. This was going to hurt. But in that moment, his urge to prove himself had kicked in, the same urge that propelled him to pursue the parts he wanted that they said he wasn't right for, the urge that had driven him to even follow this path when it was the total opposite of everything he'd been conditioned to do his entire life.

If he asked himself, in that moment, if he was doing it out of genuine love for her, or if he was doing it to prove he could, maybe he might not have known for sure.

"So," he said, "I give you my word, that no matter what happens...there will not be a repeat of what brought us to this situation. I will not allow us..." there had to be more delicate way to put it, "to be intimate again."

She considered him, and then a rueful little grin tugged at her lips. "Remember, Tom, you're only half the problem."

"Maybe, but I said I love you. And I protect the people I love, even from themselves. I'm very loyal. I realize now that what happened was you betraying yourself. I even saw it when we were together, but...I guess I was too caught up in what I wanted. So if I have to protect you from yourself, then that's what I'll do."

She chuckled. "And if I strip naked in front of you and throw myself at you, you're going to have the strength of character to throw your coat over me and lock yourself in the bathroom?"

His cheeks instantly turned scarlet at that thought. "I think you might be surprised. And I also highly doubt you'd do that."

"Don't be completely sure. I've heard things about pregnancy hormones. All that blood rushing to one place..."

"Well, if we were married, that would solve a lot of problems, wouldn't it?"

She opened her mouth to reproach him, but he stopped her.

"I'm not proposing. I'm simply pointing out a logical argument. Physical issues aside, if we were married, you wouldn't have to worry about scandal."

"You would. You turning up suddenly married? It would be worse than what happened to your
friend Cumberbatch!

"I'm not living in the same world as you are, as you are fond of pointing out."

"And I'm not marrying you so we can be fuck buddies. I take marriage much more seriously than that. If I did get married, I wouldn't get divorced. Period. I don't care what happens, I will work it out with my husband. And...and," she softened, and Tom felt himself tense, knowing she was going to say something that was going to hurt, "I hate to point this out, but aren't your parents divorced? I mean, how committed are you to the idea of spending the rest of your life with one woman? Like you said, we live in two different worlds, two drastically different mentalities about a relationship this serious."

He had to seriously consider that. "I'll admit, I've not been the fondest of the idea of marriage," he said. "I always thought it was because I hadn't met the right person. But it's probably because I've been so entirely focused on my career, and it doesn't lend itself to familial stability. And, I know I get bored with things."

"And when you get bored with a human being?" she challenged.

"I can't imagine ever getting bored with my daughter," Tom said. "And truthfully I can't imagine getting bored with you."

She gave a little laugh. "Oh Tom...of course you will. With me, with our daughter. That's not special to you, that's just...life. But you work through it, find things to sustain you. Emotions are fragile, fleeting things, as the poets say. Interest and boredom are just two of them. But it's the ability to stick with it, that's what I'm worried about. Quite frankly I don't think our culture produces human beings who can. I don't even know if //I// can," she added. "And our daughter is going to have enough challenges before her without her parents dragging her in two different directions."

"I know how important your faith is to you," Tom said. "And I don't think I'd be off the mark at all to say that you'd want our daughter raised in that faith, yes?" She nodded, eyes widening at him. "Well, teach me, then. Teach me what it means."

"I find it hard to believe you're serious about converting. And anyway, you can't convert for someone else, Tom," she warned.

"I'm not saying I'm going to convert, but," he continued, "I promise I won't interfere at all in raising our daughter as a Catholic. I will help, and encourage it at every step, if you teach me what I need to know."

"It's not that easy," she said, but her expression was more hopeful than her tone. "It's not like memorizing a play--"

"But it is a start, isn't it? I mean, who knows what might happen? And I know I'm curious to learn more about it because it will tell me more about you. We've always had such great conversations, this will be a great opportunity for us, I can feel it. And I can put your mind at rest at least in this respect."

She sighed, biting her thumb as she considered his words. "I...you would do that?"

"Yes," he said without hesitation. "Being together, being unified? Isn't that the best thing we can give our daughter?"

She nodded.
"So we're both in the same place, then," Tom said, latching onto that thought. "People grow and change. Can't we try to do that together? Reach an understanding? We can try," he said, reaching for her hand, hoping the sudden warm gesture would finally put down the fight rising and falling between them, "to bring our two worlds into harmony, can't we? I'm not asking you to get married tomorrow, I'm asking you to give the idea of us, as a couple, a serious chance."

She met his eyes. They looked at each other for a considerable time, and she seemed to be searching his face. He let her, although it was not a comfortable feeling.

"If I'm as honest as I hope you're being, I'll tell you that...I want to," she said. "If you meant what you said about learning the faith, and about helping us both remain chaste."

Sexless. It wasn't the first time he'd gone without. It was just the first time he'd choose to.

"I swear it on our child," he said.
Cosette, suffering from exhaustion, finds herself getting sucked in by the Hiddleston Effect.

Graduation was an utterly exhausting ordeal.

It wasn't the planning. She could do that in her sleep. She'd been graduating them for eight years now and she knew what to do and when to do it.

It wasn't the ceremonies. They were by rote and even if something went wrong it was usually easy to fix. How hard was it to call up twenty five kids and hand them diplomas? It took time but it wasn't difficult.

It wasn't the parties. The loud music, the food, the endless pictures were what the kids loved about them, and she couldn't help but laugh and smile with them, even dance with them when they insisted.

Truth be told, it was the students themselves. They were so excited, they became unruly and seemed to lose their minds. They were also terrified of leaving the warm cocoon of their elementary and middle school for the scary world of high school, where they were in a much bigger crowd and lost in a sea of faces. Identity had been easy when they were in a familiar place but now they had to discover it all over again and it made them all a little insane.

So when Cosette finally walked up the steps to her front door, she was a giant mass of aches and pains. She'd hugged and kissed everybody goodbye, although she'd see them on Monday for their big graduation trip to Disneyland. Sometimes they went to Knottsberry Farm -- she particularly liked that, because it meant a trip to the chicken restaurant. Once they'd even gone to Universal Studios.

This time was a bit worse. She'd gained weight -- at least ten pounds in the last month. She knew she was overeating but she was hungry all the damn time. And Tom didn't help, constantly taking her out to eat or bringing her take-out. She was a bit desperate for a home-cooked meal and considered asking her mother if she could come over to dinner next week. And yes, probably bring Tom with her, he'd have a mild fit if she didn't. He'd been pestering her to meet her parents for a bit now, and she knew she had to give in; after all, they were family, connected through the child in her womb.

The child that was starting to make herself a little more difficult to hide.

Cosette was waiting to have this conversation with Richard after all the graduation stuff was over. It hung over her head, though, like a spiderweb getting ready to fall. She dreaded it, but the longer she waited the more she wanted to just get it over with.
She was in a very bad mood that night. Hurting and anxious. A bad combination. She was going to remove someone's head from his neck with her teeth.

"Cosette?" came Tom's voice behind her. She turned, weary, as Tom came prancing up the walk. Well, maybe not prancing, but he moved far too lithely for her at the moment, she felt like she was limping. And damn, did he have to be so fucking handsome? In something as simple as a white button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled just past his elbows, showing off his long, tanned forearms, and a pair of simple, straight lined black trousers, complete with shiny black patent leather shoes, he looked like a fucking supermodel. She literally felt herself throb, and was too tired to even be ashamed of the open flush of lust. "Are you all right? I've been calling but you haven't answered your phone."

She didn't think before she spoke. If she had, she would have lied, said she was "fine," and he would have maybe just let it go.

But no. The state she was in was like a truth serum.

"No, I'm exhausted and aching all over and I just want to lie down, but I'm also starving and I can't decide what I want to eat because I can't think because I just want to close my eyes and sleep. I've had the phone on mute for the graduation and probably forgot to turn the sound back up again. What do you want?"

Not a good plan. Tom was all over her in an instant. There was no way he was going to leave her be, not when her physical state affected the state of his child.

Tom considered himself to be well versed in many subjects, and child-bearing seemed to be his new obsession. Lately he had taken to what she was starting to feel was "bossing her around," concerning how much she ate, how much rest she got, how she took care of her body in these delicate months. He sugar coated it by being as sweet and caring and nurturing as possible, only wanting to help, only wanting to make her life easier. She was sure if he was asked, he would say he doted on her. But every now and again, she would catch a glimpse of that force, of that bullheadedness she didn't think he even knew he possessed. A kind of self-righteousness she was surprised to find in him.

Truthfully, it was starting to feel a tiny bit suffocating. Even though his dominating attitude was starting to become a giant fucking turn on at the exact same time. She wasn't sure which contradicting thought she hated herself for more.

But she couldn't really blame him. She'd put him in an anxious state the moment she agreed that they were unofficially "together." He was so desperate to keep things amiable between them that she couldn't bring herself to pop off at him, or be negative in any way.

Besides, it was kind of nice, being hustled to the couch, all items she was carrying taken from her and neatly arranged on her dining room table, as he knew she liked.

"You're not craving anything in particular?" he asked as he sorted through a half-dozen take-out menus. "Pizza? Chinese?"

"I want a giant order of chili cheese fries from Topps. But they don't deliver. You'll have to go get it."

Tom gave a little start. "That sounds very decisive for someone who five minutes ago said she didn't know what she wanted to eat."
"Just came to me." She managed to smile up at him. "I'm sorry. I should have just picked it up myself on the way home."

"No, that's okay, darling," he said, and bent over, kissing her on her temple. "I'll be back in a few. I'll take your key so you don't have to get up when I come back."

Cosette let him go, and then started to berate herself.

She didn't want to go down this path with him, but it was hard to resist it. It seemed so innocuous. But having him around in such close proximity, and alone, was going to lead to disaster. Her hormones in the last two weeks had revved up and she had to remind herself that she wasn't going to marry a man just so she could have guilt-free sex with him. Even though she wanted to. Badly.

She laid there for a good twenty minutes, but when she didn't fall asleep, she got up and headed into the kitchen and pulled out the eggs. Tom would be back very soon -- she checked her phone and turned the sound back up so he could call her if he needed to. When he returned, her found her at the stove, fixing three eggs, over hard and "stepped on," as Grandma called it.

"What are you doing?" he asked, an edge to his voice. She resisted rolling her eyes. She was supposed to be lying down, she knew, and even this little bit of work was taxing. Especially after her week.

"Getting dinner ready." She took the box of chili-cheese fries from him and pulled out a knife and a plate. Then she cut the huge order in half and placed it on the plate, and set the circle of eggs over it, like a blanket.

Tom watched her work. "That's interesting," he murmured.

"It's really good," she said, taking the plate to the small kitchen table. "You want to try? There's more eggs in the fridge."

Tom cooked his over easy, but it worked just as well. He always seemed overly-delighted whenever he discovered one of her little quirks. Like the time she'd known the entire words to "Thriftshop" and had sung along with them in the car had nearly choked him with shock. He looked at her like he'd never seen her before.

"So how did it go?" he asked.

She nodded. "Fine. No bumps this year. Although one of the boys nearly knocked me over when he hugged me. Everybody got a little chuckle about that."

Tom didn't laugh. She recognized the little frown on his brow as he continued to tear through his chili-cheese fries and eggs. But to his credit, he didn't fly into one of his over-protective rants, maybe out of consideration for her "exhaustion." "You know this makes perfect sense. Eggs, potatoes, cheese and meat."

"Four basic food groups," she muttered. Then, because she was feeling particularly cranky and seemed to get a vicious satisfaction out of baiting him, she added, "Good thing you weren't there. You probably would have punched the poor kid, the way you've been acting."

"Well, if people knew you were in a delicate condition--"
room, heading to her bedroom and grabbing her stuff for her shower. She didn't even humor Tom by replying to his comment.

She just should have kept her damn mouth shut.

8 8 8

Tom was not a stranger to keeping his private life private. In fact, he preferred it that way. He was good at being himself and yet not airing all his laundry for the public to see. He was a pro at walking that fine line.

But this was starting to wear on him.

One of the major reasons he'd gone along with staying silent was because of Cosette's job. She wanted to tell her principal, and she was biding her time. The stress would not work well with the busy time of the year, she said. After graduation was done, she would go talk to Richard and let it out. And then the school year would be done, and if the paps wanted pictures of "Tom Hiddleston's baby mama," and she referred to herself (which he hated), at least they couldn't harass the school to get them, because she wouldn't be going anywhere near the place once the story broke.

He didn't want her to quit her job. He knew how much it meant to her, how happy and fulfilled it made her. He ignored the little nips of guilt that he was the reason that she thought she could no longer keep it. He determined himself to look forward and do whatever he could to take care of her. Focus on the future, not the past, which cannot be changed.

She'd told him of her plan to take a year's leave of absence, and he was happy about that -- she would ultimately be dependent on his generous child support for a period of time before she went back to work, but she'd made it clear she might not being going back to her school, and would have to find a new job where her scandal made less of an impact.

He knew when she used the word "scandal," and he used it, they meant two different things. But they intersected in one very important place -- they were having a baby and they weren't married.

It wasn't going to help his image if the media decided to paint him as an irresponsible cad. It wasn't the main reason he was putting so much effort into taking proper care of her, but it was a big one.

When she used the word "scandal," she meant showing a massive defect of her character. A defect that was proven by the clear evidence growing in her body. A defect that made it impossible for her to hold her current position.

This continued to baffle him. He just didn't see sex the same way she did. He enjoyed it, very much, as a stress relief. He enjoyed it as a way to share affection, a way to have fun, a way to explore the pleasures of the body. She saw it as some sacred act -- not an alien idea to him, but she was definitely the first he'd met who took it so seriously.

And worse, she was not just averse to the act itself, but with anything that even surrounded it. Anything she felt was even potentially going to lead to it was taboo. Even something as innocuous as him being in her home at night. Or kissing her on the lips -- he had to be satisfied with her cheek. Every. Damned. Time. The closest she'd let him get to her, usually, was the distance it took to hold her hand. Which he took every chance he got.

Tom glanced out the window as he finished washing the few dishes in her sink. The days were getting longer, but it was almost seven and soon the twilight would deepen and she would ask him
to go.

When she came out of the shower, she was not in her pajamas, but in lounge clothes. California was always warm, so she was in a simple pair of yoga leggings and a tank top. She had to be wearing a sports bra or something underneath -- he'd noticed her starting to get bigger, and she was already generous to begin with, and never went without support when in his presence. It was probably for the best. Her figure was hard enough to resist as it was, and he wasn't allowed to touch her except in the most benign areas.

He followed her into the living room, where she laid down on the couch. He could tell by her movement that the shower had helped, but she still ached. The extra weight, the changes in her body, all of it was making her particularly prickly and he wanted to do something to help soothe her. If she'd let him.

"Where does it hurt?" he asked, sitting down in front of her on the floor, knees pulled up, arms holding them in place.

She gave a deep sigh as her eyes slowly ran over him. Her gaze particularly dragged over his arms - he wanted to put them around her as much as she seemed to want them, but true to his word, he didn't offer. Then with a grunt, she rolled over and curled away from him, facing the back of the couch. "My feet still hurt," she murmured.

Tom stood up and went to her shelf of DVD's. "You feel like a movie? Something soothing?"

Her collection was a bit strange, he'd always thought. Some horror, some comedy, the entire collection of "House," as well as "Big Bang Theory," but most of all, her gothic romance. Fassbender's "Jane Eyre" and Vincent Price's "Dragonwyck" were her two favorites. She had almost a shelf of all of Price's other movies but that one was her favorite of his. Tom had brought up "Crimson Peak," thinking she would like it since she seemed partial to the genre, but she told him, much to his chagrin, that she had read a complete spoiler of the movie online and it hadn't appealed to her, first because of the incest, and then because of the gratuitous exposure of his bare ass.

"Nice to know you're okay with the entire world being able to ogle your butt cheeks at their leisure," she'd quipped. It launched them into a rather heated "discussion" (argument, if he was honest) about how she hadn't even given the movie a fair chance by reading the spoilers, not letting the characters speak for themselves but instead becoming prejudiced against them. She'd silenced him by saying it was a necessary risk she had to take considering the "things they put in movies these days." He accused her (playfully) of talking like her Grandmother. She'd taken it as a compliment.

"No," her voice finally came after some thought, "too tired." He noticed that she'd brought her sleeping mask out with her into the living room, and was slipping it over her face.

Without waiting for an invitation, he took a risk: he sat down at the end of the couch and put her feet on his lap. Her ankles were slightly swollen. The yoga pants only went to her knees, exposing her calves, and he could feel the tightness of the muscles. He went to work, massaging the muscles into compliance, and was soon rewarded by the sound of her soft breathing.

She'd fallen asleep.

Tom didn't stop, but continued until she felt relaxed enough. He pulled and stretched her tendons in her toes and heels, knowing she'd thank him later.
And he didn't wake her up. Once she was asleep, she was asleep. But the opposite was true as well. One time she'd dozed off mid-morning while he had insisted on dusting her living room, and he'd made the very grave mistake of waking her in the effort to get her to go from the couch to the bed, and realized he'd raised a beast from hell. And picking her up was out of the question. He wasn't allowed anywhere near the bedroom after...that day.

The sun was down by the time he finished massaging her legs and feet. She had a large front window that she liked to keep open in the evening and watch the people from the neighborhood as they went by. People were still meandering about, enjoying the late spring weather. She lived in a nice neighborhood, with a mix of all ethnic groups. Her grandmother had known just about everybody, and Cosette kept up with them, even though her grandmother was gone.

Tom blinked and realized he'd fallen asleep. The street was quiet and the clock on top of the television told him it was after one in the morning. If Cosette woke up and found him here, she would freak out.

Very gently, he moved her legs off him and started to stand, but it was no use. He was stiff from being in one position too long, and the effort to get off the couch jostled the cushions too much.

"Tom?" She raised her head, pushing away the familiar black and white pattered sleeping mask covering her eyes, sleep still on her face but blinking rapidly to dismiss it. "What...what time is it?"

"It's late. I'm sorry, I dozed off." He had to stretch, had to move, his muscles were pissed from being left in one place too long. "I'm going. It's okay."

She pulled herself into a sitting position, pulling her knees tightly to her chest. "What time?"

"After one," he admitted, knowing it was better to just tell her than argue.

The expletive that came from her lips almost embarrassed him. "Easy, darling. You're going to kiss our child with that mouth."

8 8 8

Six hours. She'd been asleep for six hours. That wasn't a nap, that was a full night's rest. And Tom was still here.

Tom was still here and he was very respectfully trying to get distance between them.

She had been dreaming about him again. And her body was totally working against her. Tom needed to go.

Why wasn't she letting him go?

"Cosette," he said, and his voice just made things worse. She had pressed her fingers against her eyes until the world started changing colors, and she very reluctantly cleared her vision to look at him again. Even slightly rumpled from sleep -- or maybe especially rumpled -- he was drop dead gorgeous. "I'm going to go. You need to go to bed."

"I won't fall asleep again for a few hours at least." She stood up, realizing she had to pee. "I...I didn't even ask you. How's filming going?"

Tom stared at her for a moment, puzzled. "It's...it's fine. We wrap in a few weeks. I have the weekend off, but I was going to ask you..."
"Wait, hang on a second," she said, rushing off to the bathroom. When she came back, Tom was pacing the living room. Realizing what was making him uncomfortable, she went to the front door and pulled it open.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To sit on the steps," she said. "I know I'm uptight about us being alone at night. So let's go outside." She motioned, and he followed.

She sat down on the high concrete steps. They were very old, and hadn't been touched since the house had been built. They were a bit high and steep, but they were rarely used. Her grandmother had always used the side door that led into the kitchen, and that was the door she usually used as well.

Tom sat down on the step a few feet away from her. The early June air was cool at this time of night, and the sounds of the city were still clear, even at this hour. Traffic passed periodically on the main street just a few blocks away, and the lights from the gas station on the corner were still lit, as it was a twenty-four/seven place.

"I used to sneak out of the house sometimes, when I lived here with my grandmother," she said, pointing, "and go to the convenience store at three in the morning when I couldn't sleep and get a snack. Usually some sugar. I'd eat it, crash, and be able to fall back asleep."

"That's...interesting," Tom commented. "Sugar puts you to sleep?"

"Too much of it," she said. "Of course sometimes I'd get hot chocolate or something. I even brought a pack of cigarettes there, but that didn't last the first smoke."

"Ah. Well, good for you."

"You don't smoke, do you?"

"When I was younger, a bit. I gave it up. Can't run much on smoker's lungs, and it just got in the way of having control over my body. Yoga helped. I admit I almost got back into the habit when I was playing Hank Williams, but I managed to shake it off. Barely."

" Barely? They're still open if you need a pack."

He gave a snort of outrage. "Really? Fine talk from a pregnant woman!"

"I'm just teasing, Tom, relax," she sighed. "So how much longer will you be in town?"

It grew quiet between them. "A few more weeks," he said softly. "Then I'll...I don't know, honestly. I don't want to leave." He looked at her. "More specifically I don't want to leave you."

"You don't want to leave her," Cosette corrected him. "Our daughter. I don't blame you. But...do your parents even know?" They had all been very quiet about this. Only her family and his publicity people knew, as far as she knew.

"I've wanted to tell my mother, a few times," he admitted. "But I felt it was something I should tell her face to face. I mean...she deserves...I mean, she'll be happy, of course, but...with the circumstances...she'll just have a lot of questions."

Cosette considered his words. In her silence, he added, "And I meant what I said. I don't want to leave either one of you."
She looked at him. She wanted, very much, to scoot closer to him and tuck herself underneath his arm, have it wrapped around her. She wasn't sure if she should. She wasn't sure it would just stay that innocent. She wanted it to be.

"I should probably come to London at some point to meet her," Cosette mused.

Tom gave a little start. "You...you would want to do that?"

"Sure, I mean...she's my child's grandmother. I wouldn't want to...she's family now, you know? And as long as it's before twenty-eight weeks it shouldn't be a problem."

"Have you ever been to London before?" he asked.

"I took a little tour of Europe with my grandmother when I graduated from college, that summer, actually," she said. "We did one of those group tours. She kept pushing me to go out and hang out with the younger people in our group. She was getting tired then...when we came back that's when her health issues started."

"How old was she when she died?" Tom asked.

"Eighty-seven," Cosette replied. "I was hoping she'd make it to her nineties, but...wasn't meant to be. It was a typical way to go, you know? She fell, broke her hip, and then the pneumonia came." She fell silent. She didn't like talking about it. And there was also the nagging thought of how disappointed her grandmother would be with her.

"I'm sorry," Tom whispered.

"Are either of your grandparents alive?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No, my father is pretty up there, in his seventies, considerably older than my mother."

"Mine too," she pointed out. "A good twelve years."

"They're already grandparents, my parents," Tom pointed out. "My sister Sarah has two. Emma's just gotten married but none on the way yet. When are your sister and her fiancée planning to tie the knot?"

"September," Cosette said. "She wants me in the bridal party but...I'll be a whale then." She puffed out her cheeks and encircled her arms around her waist.

"Oh, stop it," Tom admonished.

"A pregnant, unmarried bridesmaid," Cosette laughed. "Oh, the joys. I almost don't even want to go to her wedding, I don't want to upstage her, the way everybody is going to talk."

Tom gave her a very pointed look. "Don't," she said before he could open his mouth.

"So you want to come to London," he said, taking her hint.

"Want is a strong word," Cosette chuckled. The night air and the sleep seemed to be putting her in a melancholy mood. "I can only imagine what your parents will think of me. Who is this stupid girl who won't make our son an honest man?"

"Actually they'll be more pissed at me, but do we really have to spoil the mood right now?"
"I'm going to go talk to Richard this week," she said. It seemed spoiling the mood was all she wanted to do.

"And I still think you're going to be surprised."

"We'll see." She looked away, down the other end of the street. It was very dark, and the trees fluttered in an evening breeze, playing tricks with her eyes. She'd been utterly terrified of the dark when she was a little child, insisting in nightlights in her room, the bathroom, even the hallway outside her room in case she had to go out there in the middle of the night. Somewhere, she'd gone from that to needing total darkness to sleep.

"Have you thought about names?" Tom suddenly asked.

"For our daughter?" Cosette replied. She hesitated. She wondered if Tom would be open to the idea..."Well, not really a first name, but I'd like her middle name to be after my grandmother, Beatrice."

"Middle name? Not her first name?" Tom asked.

"Well...I thought you'd want more say in it, her first name," Cosette said.

Tom regarded her thoughtfully. "I think Beatrice is a lovely name. We could call her our little Beebee."

Cosette couldn't resist any longer. She slid over to him and lifted his arm. He slung it over her without needing further invitation and she snuggled into his side, just like she'd wanted. She drew in a heavy breath, smelling the fresh night air mingled with his familiar scent.

"You're cold," he murmured into her hair.

"Not anymore," she whispered.

8 8 8

At about three in the morning, Tom kissed Cosette's cheek goodnight and went back to his rented flat. When filming ended that week, he'd have to either extend the lease or find someplace more permanent to stay.

At around five, he realized he wasn't going to get any more sleep, so he dressed for a run and went for the regular routine he'd developed in this neighborhood. He'd stayed there before, several times, and the neighbors either didn't care who he was or just respected that he was a normal guy doing normal things and didn't bother him.

When nine-thirty came, he wondered if Cosette would be up yet. He knew she could sleep until noon without shame, but she had been sleepy when he left and if she was still in bed that would be a total of over twelve hours in her sleep tally. He texted her at first, to see if she would hear the chime, and her answer came back.

(Him) --Up for breakfast?

(Her) -- Where?

He brought it to her -- the chile verde and eggs she loved so much from the restaurant where she'd told him he was going to be a father.
"I don't know what's wrong with me," Cosette murmured as she shoved a mouthful of pork, potatoes and eggs into her fork. "I can't seem to get enough of eggs lately."

Not a typical pregnancy craving, but definitely much less weird than some he'd heard about.

After breakfast, he suggested they go shopping for some clothes for her. She needed to build up her maternity wardrobe, and already many of her clothes were starting to become too tight.

"You're lucky I'm feeling level headed today, Hiddleston," she teased darkly, "or else I'd be all over your ass for implying I'm getting fat."

He made it up to her by pulling out his credit card and paying for nearly all the clothes. She tried to fight him, saying it could come out of the child support fund, but he wouldn't listen. And then on the way back she sidetracked into a Sprinkles shop and bought a half dozen cupcakes. That time she was able to pay her own ticket.

The initial problem had been fear of them being spotted. If Tom Hiddleston was out and about with a strange woman and was seen buying her maternity clothes? He wore his hat and sunglasses, and she insisted he wear a rather grotesque Hawaiian shirt that was two sizes too large, and a baggy pair of trunks to hide his familiar frame. Tom loathed the shirt but she wouldn't go anywhere with him if there was even a chance he'd be spotted. And what helped the most was that they stuck to malls where there were not going to be any paps -- places celebrities were not expected to be seen. Which meant not going to the Grove, or to Santa Monica's Promenade, much to Tom's irritation.

Of course, there was always the danger of getting spotted by fans. But no one came up to them, and he kept a sharp eye out for seeing any phones zeroing in on them so that he could turn his back.

Nothing came of it.

Tom couldn't remember having spent a more pleasant afternoon with Cosette. She had a rather delicate taste in clothing, especially since she wasn't going back to school. She picked flowery prints and deep, vibrant colors. He patiently sat outside the waiting rooms after he insisted she model her choices for him. He even got her to try on a few things that weren't quite her taste but looked fantastic on her.

Plus her appetite wouldn't quit.

Sure, he tried to keep her away from some things that were just pure fat, but realized quickly she was not going to stand for him dictating anything that went into her mouth, and if he said anything contrary it just made her more dead set on doing it. Half of him found this utterly infuriating and the other half secretly delighted in it -- because he knew he could find a way to use it to his advantage at some point. Of course, when she complained that her stomach hurt after consuming that chocolate and pecan covered apple from Rocky Mountain Chocolate Company, he only answered her with a smug grin.

But he did provide her with a bottle of ginger ale and some Tums about five minutes later.

"Our child is going to have high cholesterol before she's even out of the womb," he teased her as they sat and relaxed.

Cosette was staring into the window of Hot Topic. "Shut up and go buy me that Captain America shirt," she ordered.

Tom spluttered. "There's a Loki shirt. Wouldn't you rather have th--"
"The Captain, please, and in a double X, I want to be able to wear it for a while." She folded her arms and gave him a haughty look. "Maybe I'll tell everyone I'm carrying //his// love child too while I'm at it."

She was in a feisty mood. His eyebrow twitched at her, and when he returned a few minutes later, he had the Captain shirt, the Loki shirt, and a Maleficent shirt -- the cartoon, not the movie, which Cosette had not liked. It was the human form blended into the dragon, which was breathing a swirl of green fire around the edges of the shirt.

"There was a sale. Buy two, get one free. Thought this suited your mood," he said.

She smiled in delight. "I love it." She popped up and kissed his cheek. "Thank you," she said sweetly, wrapping her arms around his torso in a quick hug, and they were off again.

At around three in the afternoon, Cosette got a call from her parents. Specifically, her mother -- she stepped a few feet away from him to have the conversation, but quickly returned.

"Are you sure?" she asked, her eyes flicking to him. "Okay. I'll...um...call you back?" She hung up and then turned to Tom. "Do you have plans for dinner tonight?"

He shook his head.

"Want to have dinner at my parents' house?"

He felt a bit stunned. He knew it was coming but he thought he'd have more time to prepare...and stew. "Um, well...yes, I would love to." He glanced down at himself. "Are you going to go let me change before then?"

She giggled. He had to smile -- her giggle delighted him. It almost irritated him, how much her little quirks were growing more and more endearing to him. He was getting ridiculously attached to her, and while he'd already thought he was in love with her, it seemed that feeling was not stagnant, but kept morphing as the days went by, expanding and altering itself to meet the circumstances.

"Yeah, I will," she promised. "Look, um...they're not going to grill you. I mean, they know..." she sighed, her mood deflating. "They knew after it happened between us. Before we found out I was pregnant."

"You told them?" he asked, puzzled.

"Yeah, I told you, we're close. And it wasn't something I could hide..." She started to fidget.

Tom glanced around. There was a Jamba Juice stand not far away. "Why don't we go over and get a drink, sit down, and we can talk about it, okay?" He kept his voice gentle, soothing. He wasn't sure where her mood swing was going, but he didn't want to fight with her, not today, not as nice as it had been.

Cosette had a thing for mango, so her favorite drink at Jamba was usually the Mighty Mango, but today she was craving strawberry, so she went with Caribbean Passion. As she sucked on her drink -- the smoothies were always thick and it took a while for her to get through even a small -- Tom stirred his green whatever-it-was, and she watched him with bemusement.

"Is that actually good?" she asked.
Tom glanced up at her. "What, you don't like Kale?"

"No, not unless it's cooked and in a soup," she replied. "Do you like the taste? I mean, does it actually taste good?"

Tom shrugged. "It's fine. I used to have to drink these every morning when I was doing the Marvel movies to stay trim. I got used to the taste...it helps clean out the system, actually."

She shook her head. "So you're choosing to drink it because it's good for you."

"That and the fact that when I'm around you I have a tendency to ingest some rather unhealthy choices. Like those chili cheese fries last night."

She couldn't help it. She felt a sense of admiration for him. She was not good at making herself eat and drink things that were "good for her" just for the sake of it. If it didn't taste good she didn't touch it unless she had to.

"This one is actually pretty good, there's other things in it that give it a pleasant flavor," Tom continued. He offered it to her. "Want to try?"

She stared at it for a long moment. "You know, I tried one time to drink a Green Monster from that brand called Naked? Couldn't get past the first sip. Sorry." She shook her head. "Baby wants strawberry, not...algae."

He chuckled. "I'll bring you some Kale chips some time. They're pretty good, you might like them. And they make good seaweed squares these days, flavored with different spices. I've seen you, you like to munch chips, it would be a good idea to consider something a bit healthier."

She gave him a look. If he was implying she needed to lose weight, she was going to throw this drink all over him. He caught it fast and shook his head, smirking at her.

"I'm concerned for your health, love. I mean, you are the mother of my child. I do care about your life span and the quality of it."

"I didn't take you for a health nut," she quipped.

"I'm not a 'nut,'" he protested. "But I will admit, as an actor --" she couldn't help it, she rolled her eyes, "hey, mock at your peril, I was just saying that in that particular profession, your body is your instrument and requires you to give it a certain amount of care, or else you won't be as flexible as you need to be."

"Flexible," she teased. "So that you can do whatever they want you to do. Dance monkey dance."

He was still smirking, but a particular fire lit his eyes. "It's not just that. The more you're able to do, the more they'll give you. It gives you a lot more variety in your choices."

"Yes, you love your choices," she murmured.

He let out a deep sigh. "Why are you picking a fight?" he asked.

"I'm not, it's just...I just can't imagine the satisfaction that comes from a job where you have to do what everyone tells you to do. I mean, you're so intelligent, Tom, and you work so hard to be good at just about everything. I just think you'd want more control over yourself."

"Exactly. Acting gives you a ton of variety -- all sorts of created scenarios from all walks of life. By
being able to do more things, I'm able to exert more control over the kind of roles I pick. And it's by pretending to be someone else that you get a chance to examine yourself, and know more of who you are."

"Do you?" she asked, wonderingly staring at him. "Do you know who you are?"

"Sometimes," he admitted after a pause. "Sometimes I think I'm still figuring it out. Sometimes I feel like there's more than one of me living in this skin. I don't know which one is the most me." He sighed again, looking away. "My father used to say the same thing, you know. Why would I want to spend my life being other people rather than being my own man. I told him the same thing. He got it, eventually. It took him a while, but he did." He turned his eyes back to her. "Do you?"

She was struck in this moment by his sudden vulnerability. She'd been caught in a mood swing most of the day, riding out the emotions, but now, seeing him, she clamped down, not wanting to damage this fragile creature that was suddenly sitting in front of her. Or maybe this was part of the swing, and now it was tenderness that had her in its talons.

"Why, Tom?" she asked softly, leaning forward on the table, getting closer to him. "What's your goal? I mean, yes, we all want to know who we are, but what's your ultimate purpose? Why do you act?"

He frowned at her. "I thought I just--"

"No, you did, but that's not what I mean. I mean, for instance, while I was on my journey of self discovery," she said, motioning to herself, "which I am also still on, just like you, I knew it was for a reason. I had to figure out who I was, so that I could find my path in life, the vocation God wanted me to take. And whatever purpose that was, when I found it, I knew all the things that had happened to me in my life would prepare me for that purpose. They would all suddenly become relevant, would all be tools in my wheelhouse, if you will." She sipped her drink, considering. "But when I did get it figured, it was for the purpose of accomplishing a task. It all works toward a single point. And now I'm teaching, and in particular I'm teaching religion. And I'm not doing it for my glory. I'm doing it for the glory of God, as trite as that sounds, even as I say it." She shook her head. "But what about you? I mean, there's a lot of glory for you, in your acting. People know who you are. Fame was inevitable, and don't deny it, you like it."

"I do, to a certain extent, but that wasn't my only goal for pursuing it," Tom said, his smile returning but still seeming puzzled.

"Really? Because all of you actors seem to have that external locus of identity -- that insecurity that comes from needing the approval of others to approve of yourself."

He gave an uncomfortable shrug. "Maybe. You don't worry what other people think of you?"

She shrugged back. "I used to. I do, sometimes, especially if I'm giving a bad example. But most of the time I know it doesn't really matter -- I've never been understood, I've always been considered eccentric and different because of how hard I try to keep to the Faith. I'm still going to do what I do because that's what I'm put here to do, whether others like it or not. You need approval or else you can't keep acting."

"So if all the parents got together and decided they didn't like you and didn't want you teaching their children, you would still be able to teach? I mean, what if they took their kids out of school? You couldn't teach without kids, could you? They're your audience."

"True, but..." She shuddered. The fear that that would happen, that all the parents would turn on
her and shut her out, leading to her dismissal...those thoughts had haunted her periodically throughout her career. Now, more than ever, they loomed over her. "I always trusted that God would put me where He wanted me. I mean, even St. Louis DeMontfort was drummed out of his own order by his followers. I figure if he can survive that and still achieve Sainthood, I need to be ready to follow that example."

"But that wouldn't happen to you," Tom reassured her. "They love you too much, I've seen how the kids are around you. But still....it's not so different than what I face."

"You face it on a more blatant scale," she said. "I don't get your level of feedback. I don't have a fanclub and a group of people who've named themselves after my last name, and are pining for my autograph, or want pictures with me, or are desperate to get into my bed."

He sipped at his drink. "It is part of the deal. You treat it with graciousness. Just like the Christmas presents and the flowers you get at graduation. It's not the same intensity, no, but you deal with it."

"Well, that's just it, because it's not the same intensity, it doesn't really influence my work," Cosette said. "You, however...I mean, if no fans were waiting outside at an appearance you'd feel you'd been abandoned. Sometimes I'm lucky if one kid remembers me at graduation -- most of the time they don't even say thank you. It just seems you depend more on accolades. You guys have ceremonies a dozen times a year to award yourself and each other for your work. I can't remember the last time I even heard about an award ceremony for teachers. And more to the point, when I teach, yeah, they're listening to me, but they aren't listening to me for my sake. It isn't even about me. I'm just a catalyst."

"So am I," Tom argued.

She shook her head. "No, not in today's culture. People go to see you act, as opposed to a different actor. It is about you."

"I know that is a strong aspect," Tom said, "but ultimately, it really isn't. It's about the people. It is about the audience -- how they feel, react, think. And movies are a unifying experience. They bring people from all different backgrounds and cultures together. All their differences disappear and they're just enjoying a film. And I get to be part of that. That's what the goal, is Cosette, what you asked me before."

She considered him carefully. "But to what end are they unifying?" she asked.

He blinked. She could see him processing her question, turning it over.

"If they're unified, they'll eventually work toward the common good, be more inclined to care for each other," he said.

She shook her head. "Not on their own. On their own, people are not capable of it, not truly. People are damaged and flawed and yes, some of them want to be good, but they also want to look out for themselves. And our nature is fallen. We can't do true good without the grace of God. We can't do it alone. And I venture that your unifying force of all these people sharing a common experience is not enough. It needs a higher motivating force. It needs God, Tom. And instead of God being the focus on most of -- okay, nearly all of today's movies, He's not just absent, He's actively reviled. Even your most precious directors, like Spielberg, for instance, take their swipes at the Church every chance they get."

"The Church, yes, but not God."
"The Church is the Body of Christ, you can't separate the Head from the Body," she pointed out.

"That's what you believe. Not everyone believes as you do."

"Yes, and at one point, not everyone believed that the Earth was round and the sun was a star, and all kinds of things. Didn't change their truth. The quantity of believers doesn't affect truth. But I digress. I'm just saying, Tom, that it's empty. The path you pursue. Because it doesn't end in God. And that's why I have trouble with it. And I have proof because my dad worked in the industry for years and quit shortly after I was born because he didn't want it to affect my upbringing. He knows, and has shared with me, how debauched it was, and don't say it isn't like that anymore because I dare say it's worse. Let's put aside the fact that producers and directors and other executives can expect sex from people who want to get ahead, which is bad enough unto itself. Let's even ignore that everyone wants to fuck a movie star and you're inundated with people throwing themselves at you continuously. People want you wearing their clothes and their jewelry -- if one of you is caught wearing off the rack you're pretty much crucified for not having any fashion sense. People are paid to do your hair and make-up whenever you go out -- and let's not get started on the freebies and the goodie bags you get on a regular basis. It's just so materialistic that it can't possibly be good for your soul. And I'm not saying you're bad to be a part of it, but you are a part of it and it has affected your lifestyle considerably, and I'm worried that it's going to affect my daughter," she finished with a sigh. "Just...be aware. I mean, Mel Gibson tried to use the film industry for something truly wondrous and his demons got to him faster than anything, and the whole industry turned on him, and your friend, Robert Downey Jr. was totally right, the whole industry is guilty of a lot more that is morally worse than what Gibson did. Downey knows it more than most. No, what Gibson did wasn't right, but it wasn't as wrong as what others have done, like Woody Allen, and yet he still makes films and gets people like you to work with him all the time!"

Cosette grabbed her drink and started gulping. She'd said too much. She'd ranted and now it was out there. Of course, it wasn't like she and Tom hadn't had these kinds of conversations before.

"Well," Tom said quietly after a thoughtful pause. "I can't say I agree with you. But I do understand where you're coming from."

"Good, but I don't want to talk about it anymore, because you'll just try to justify it and it'll just upset me more."

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- Tom meets Mom and Dad! (and it ain't pretty)
Chapter Summary

Tom goes to dinner at Cosette's parents' house. Yeah. Batten down the hatches!

Tom was grateful that after their conversation Cosette seemed to calm down a bit. But he knew it was just a dress-rehearsal. He knew going to her parents' house was going to be far more intense than a friendly argument over smoothies.

He took a shower when he got back to his flat and changed into his standard uniform -- dark pants, white button-up, and a waistcoat. He knew it was a particularly dashing look on him. And he wanted to impress.

Although he had a sinking feeling it was slightly hopeless. In their eyes, he was the man who had knocked up their unmarried daughter. While he hoped Cosette had made clear to them his desire to marry her, he still wasn't quite clear her reasons for refusing, and had a feeling tonight he might find out.

He couldn't remember the last time he was this nervous. It was worse than auditioning. There was a kind of assuredness to it, knowing he was the only one who was the father to their grandchild and that they HAD to accept him, in some way, to a certain extent. But knowing he was stuck with their negative view of him woke up the competitor in him. He had been trained throughout all his life to convince people, to persuade them to his side. From his earliest days at Eaton, to his life as an actor, he had learned how to manipulate people's point of view.

It hadn't worked terribly well on Cosette, and he suspected her parents would be no different, but he had managed to get her to at least give him a chance, which was all he needed.

It was six o'clock sharp when he arrived -- none of that fashionable lateness would serve him now, being on time was of the utmost importance. It was Cosette's younger sister Christina who answered the door. He'd met her a few times, but only in passing. She had the same dark hair and was a bit plumper than her older sister, and she didn't have Cosette's violet eyes but instead a bright shade of blue. Their features were similar enough, both round cheeked and full-lipped, but she had a much lighter walk, either made by youth or attitude, he wasn't sure which.

Her smile was genuine, and Tom felt grateful. He hoped he had at least one ally in this family, and couldn't entirely count on Cosette, not in her current state.

"Come on in, Tom," Christina said. "Cosette's already here."

"Yeah, I saw her car," Tom said. He had wanted them to come together, show some kind of unity, and he was unclear as to why Cosette refused, but she had.

"Hi Tom," Cosette said as they entered the living room, and she stood up and crossed to him. She seemed to hesitate -- Tom scanned the room and saw what could only be her father, dark-haired and blue eyed, and obviously the one they'd gotten their particular features from, sitting in an armchair, glaring at him and trying not to look like he was glaring. But then she straightened her shoulders and seemed to gather her courage, and kissed his cheek before taking his hand and
guiding him over to where her father sat.

Tom heard someone enter the room. He looked to see a woman enter through the archway that must have led into the dining room. She was older, slightly gray, and very petite -- much more petite than either Cosette or Christina. She was much lighter-haired and brown-eyed, with slightly darker skin. But there was a sharpness in her eyes that Tom always saw in Cosette's -- the kind of look that examined carefully everything that it saw, evaluating it for worth.

"This is Tom," Cosette told the couple. "This is my dad, Raymond, and this is my mother, Isabella."

Cosette's father stood up. Although it seemed mildly distasteful to him, he extended his hand toward Tom. Tom met his eyes as he took it, and was surprised that Raymond's eyes were blue. It made him wonder where Cosette got her eyes from.

"Hello, Tom," Isabella said, as Raymond gave him a curt little nod. "Welcome to our home. I hope you like pork?"

"Love it," Tom said.

"Mom's a quarter Latino, so she takes a lot of pride in her carnitas," Cosette pointed out.

"Sounds delicious," Tom said, adding a smile. He did catch a slight huff from Raymond, but the man didn't say anything rude or snide. "I wanted to bring some wine, or something, but Cosette wouldn't let me."

"Oh, no, we're not drinkers," Isabella said. "And Cosette--"

"Mom, a glass of red wine is fine. It's actually good for me," Cosette said, with an air of having argued over and over on the same topic. "My parents are convinced that one glass of wine is going to make you an alcoholic," she said to Tom. "They're what you call tee-totalers."

"More for the rest of us, though," Christina added brightly. "I brought a Riesling. Henry and I will probably finish it off, and maybe Cosette can sneak half a glass if Dad doesn't kill you with his death rays." She shot a challenging look toward Raymond, who looked mildly abashed, but not by much.

Cosette looked at her father, as if daring him to say anything, but the man instead cleared his throat. "Well, I think dinner is probably ready. My wife serves everything flaming hot out of the oven. Nothing is allowed to cool. So shall we?"

And that was how the night began.

Dinner was pleasant. Cosette's mother proceeded to ask him all sorts of polite questions, and those led to more questions, which Christina and Henry both helped with and occasionally Cosette interjected. Her father mostly just listened, making a small comment here and there but not getting too involved with the conversation, and when he did speak it was directed at his family, never at Tom.

Tom kept his attention riveted to the conversation, but he could feel the hostility coming from the man at the end of the table. Raymond was behaving, probably under threats on his life by both his daughters, but Tom's earlier fears were all confirmed. The man couldn't stand him. And as Tom sat there, he had a flash of the future -- his own daughter coming to his home with a man who had gotten her pregnant outside of a secure relationship, and how Tom would feel about that man.
He understood, then, quite suddenly. And it made him want to share that with the older man. If he could just find the right way...

"...so the bowl tipped and all the strawberries and glaze started to pour out," Christina was saying in between bouts of laughter, "and Cosette...Cosette was still on the floor!"

"I could have been injured!" Cosette shot back. "I could have been lying there with a spinal injury!"

"Oh shut up, you were fine. Until that strawberry goo started to rain down on your face!"

Her father laughed heartily. Cosette's mother was a bit more sensitive but even she was smiling, and Tom attempted to mimic her but it was too funny of an image, Cosette on her back with strawberry sludge pouring down into her face.

"In her hair, mostly...we were cleaning strawberries out of the shower drain for days!" Christina had to fan herself, she was laughing so hard. "We called her 'Strawberry' for the rest of the summer."

Tom shook his head. "I was wondering. You don't look like a 'Strawberry.'" and Tom thought even her lips were a bit too dark for the color strawberry, but he kept that to himself.

"Well, nicknames come and go," Cosette sighed. The whole thing had started because it seemed everyone in the house called her "Cozy," short for her full name, and Tom had asked if anyone else had any nicknames. "We used to call Christina Tinkerbell."

"Because I was obsessed with Tinkerbell," Christina explained. "I liked that nickname. Except I wasn't crazy about green, I'm more of a pink girl. I swear if those Tinkerbell movies had come out when I was younger Mom and Dad would have gone bankrupt on the merchandise."

"Do you know I did voice work in one of those Tinkerbell movies?" Tom offered, and immediately sensed the mood shift in the direction of Cosette's father. He stuttered a bit, but managed, "I, uh...did the voice of a young Captain Hook."

"Oh, I did see that one!" Christina enthused. "That was you? That was hilarious!"

Tom looked briefly at Raymond. His face was turned down, focusing on his food, but it may as well have been made of stone.

"There is something else I've been curious about," Tom ventured cautiously. "Cosette, I've been looking to see if there's anyone else in your family that has your same eyes, but neither your mother or father seem to have them. Was it your grandmother, or someone farther back?"

"Oh, nobody has those eyes," Isabella said.

Tom frowned. "Nobody?"

"It's a mutation," Raymond said, his voice toneless.

"Yep," Cosette said, jumping in. "You're with a mutant, Tom. A genuine mutant. Fits with your Marvel universe, doesn't it?"

He frowned. "A mutant? So what exactly does that mean?"

"Mutations only occur within a particular member of a generation," Christina explained. "They're
completely unique. Elizabeth Taylor had them, too. Nobody will get those eyes. I'm sorry, if you were hoping the kid might get them."

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter, I was just curious," Tom explained. "Did Cosette tell you on the name we decided?"

Cosette, at this point, had settled her eyes on her dad. Tom waited for her to say something but she didn't.

"What did you decide on, Tom?" Isabella asked nicely.

"Beatrice," Tom said, wishing Cosette would say something. "After, um...after Cosette's grandmother."

"After your mom," Cosette finally said, looking at Raymond.

Raymond looked back at her. He glanced at Tom. "I'm sure it was your idea, Cosette, you and Grams were close."

"It was Tom's," Cosette said. "I was going to go for the middle name but Tom insisted we make it the first name."

Raymond seemed to consider this for a moment, then gave a little shrug and went back to his dinner. "She'd like that." But his tone was still empty.

"Sir," Tom started with a nervous clearing of his throat, and then felt Cosette fist his shirt right at his hip, giving it a tug, hidden behind the table.

"Look, it doesn't matter to me," Raymond said, putting down his knife and fork with a bit of a clatter. "You two can do what you want. You're grown adults. You take responsibility for your actions." His eyes flitted to Tom, appraising him. "I'm sure you won't have too many financial problems, your boyfriend makes a good living...right now, anyway. Hopefully he's the kind who saves his money, Hollywood is fickle."

"Beatrice won't want for anything," Tom said, but Cosette twisted the shirt and gave it a tug. //How was that the wrong thing to say?//

Raymond shrugged. "Not bad for a kid to want for a few things. Don't want to raise spoiled kids. Long as they aren't cold or hungry, you've done a good enough job. Best thing a man can do for his children, though, the very best thing...is love their mother."

Raymond looked at his wife at this point, and folded his arms. He had not looked at Tom directly except for a quick flick here and there throughout his whole speech. And certainly never met his eyes.

"I'm going to start clearing the table," Christina said, grabbing her and Cosette's plate. "You done, Dad?" she asked. Her question was obviously double-sided, as was her look.

"I'll help," Isabella said, eyes averted. As she passed her oldest child, she gave her a squeeze on the shoulder. Henry followed, having been mostly silent during the conversation, and not eager to witness the fireworks.

"So what, now I've embarrassed everyone and now you all have to run for cover?" Raymond said, voice mildly elevated. "What have I said wrong? Tell me!"
"Nothing, Dad," Cosette said, voice low and soothing. "But you've been like a statue all night. And your tone and your expressions are not exactly warm."

"What, I'm supposed to welcome this boy with open arms?" Finally he looked at Tom, and Tom felt the full weight of that glare. Truthfully, nothing Cosette's father had said was offensive or inflammatory, but the obvious closed-ness of his attitude had not made him comfortable in the least. "I quit an excellent job with excellent pay and benefits and made my first born grow up without seeing her dad for her first five years just to keep the Industry out of my house, for excellent fucking reasons. But you get to make your own mistakes, Cosette. I can't protect you from yourself."

"If you were still so pissed, why did you let Mom invite him over tonight?" his daughter demanded.

"I didn't realize I was still this pissed until I saw him," Raymond confessed. "I mean, I have to admit, I thought he'd be better looking, but all I see and hear is a smooth talker. Is that all it takes these days, a pretty accent?"

Tom started to stiffen under the onslaught. He knew he should have expected this. He even braced for it. And he was determined not to lose his temper. But it wasn't exactly easy. And there was little reason to talk about him as if he weren't here.

"Dad," Cosette said, burying her face in her hands. "I've explained this to you."

"Have you even thought about how this is going to affect your child?" Raymond went on. "The things she'll be exposed to? Even if he wants to help teach the child the faith, he can't change his spots--"

"All right, I am done being discussed as if I'm not here," Tom said, his voice diplomatic and cool, but very firm. He adjusted his chair a bit to get a clear line of sight on Raymond past Cosette, to where he sat at the head of the table. "What exactly are your concerns about me, Sir? You are correct, I do have money, and I have been careful with it. I'm not wasteful nor am I naive about my future, I know I still have many dues to pay. And I've been nothing but supportive of Cosette, I've set up a continuing child support fund for her and eventually Beatrice, when she turns eighteen, will have a considerable nestegg."

"Money is all well and good, but what about being a father?" Raymond demanded. "You seduce her and have your fun and then the next day you're running off with your--"

"I threw him out, Dad," Cosette said, her tone rising to be heard over him. "I broke it off with him!"

"As you should have! A man who has sincere interest in a woman doesn't take advantage of her the first chance he gets."

"We went over this, Dad! I'm the one to blame, not Tom!" Cosette was leaning forward on her hands, and her hands were balled into fists as her voice got louder and louder.

"So I'm supposed to believe that you throw away your innocence in one impetuous decision after all the years of discipline and --""

"YES, Dad, that is EXACTLY what happened!" she roared over him.

Tom grabbed her shoulder. "Cosette," he said, concerned at how she was working herself up. "Don't upset yourself, the baby--"
She pushed herself back into her seat, letting out her breath. "Tom isn't some...Lothario--"

"Oh, he's not, is he?" Raymond shot back. "Didn't you overhear him fucking some other girl in his trailer?"

"That wasn't me, Dad, that was a woman at work---"

"What are you talking about?" Tom interjected, his face suddenly grown hot.

"I told you about that," Cosette muttered. "What Shelly overheard."

Oh, that was *not* a good thing. She told her father about that? Talk about nails in the coffin!

"And that was before we started dating," Cosette said. "And...I don't know. It is what it is, Dad, we have to make the best of it! It's not going to be good for Beatrice if she grows up with you hating her father!"

"I don't hate him, I don't know him enough to hate him," Raymond objected. "But I don't trust him, damn straight."

"There isn't any reason not to," Cosette said, exhausted. "He's been good as gold to me so far."

"Again, I am sitting right here," Tom said, his voice much more level than he expected it to be. "Mr. Mitchells, I understand how you must feel. I am a new father, true, but I know I would want to kill anyone who did this to our daughter, to Beatrice, but you have to believe me that I love your daughter and I never meant to take advantage of her. I love her and I want to make her my wife and raise our child together. I know you think actors are frivolous and shifty because you used to work in the industry but I come from a very well-respected family. I went to Cambridge—I earned a double first in the Classics. I'm not frivolous in the least—it's what my father worried about. He's a scientist. I was raised in a family of academics."

"Smarts don't make you moral," Raymond said. "But back up a second. Getting married?" He looked at his daughter. "You're serious?"

Cosette shook her head. "We're not even talking about it. Too soon."

"Because you couldn't, you know that, right?"

"I'm sorry?" Tom said. "We couldn't?"

"The Church wouldn't let you. Father Francis certainly wouldn't let you."

"Why...why not?"

"Because I'm pregnant, Tom," Cosette explained. "The Church is very, very concerned about making absolutely sure that whoever gets married in the sacrament is absolutely free to do so."

"And being pregnant doesn't make you free?" Tom questioned.

"No," Raymond said. "You know the hell I went through when her mother was pregnant with her?" He motioned toward Cosette. "Quite frankly you've gotten a sweet deal so far. Women are going through so much, their bodies accommodating an entirely new human being. You know what that does to a person? You think Cosette is self-possessed enough to make a decision about who she wants to spend the rest of her life with? Even the secular psychologists say to never make any serious decisions when you're pregnant."
"Too many pressures," Cosette said, her voice weary. "We couldn't even begin to consider it until after Beatrice was born, if then."

Tom rolled this information over in his head. Cosette had made a few attempts to explain, but this explanation was a bit startling.

"Tom," Christina said, suddenly appearing in the kitchen doorway. "Can we get your help in here for a second?"

Startled, Tom started to object, but Cosette patted his arm. "Please," she said. "I need to talk to my dad."

Confused, Tom went into the kitchen where Isabella was preparing coffee and a New York style cheesecake sat on the counter, waiting to be sliced into. It was his favorite, or at least one of them.

Christina shook her head at him. "We'll hear it from in here, but...they don't need distractions."

"We're going to listen?" Tom asked, also whispering to match Christina's tone.

"We don't keep secrets in this family, Tom," Isabella said, and for the first time, Tom realized how she looked at him. She was the peacemaker, the polite one, or at least he thought -- but her gaze was icy. The older woman had her arms folded, closed to him. For a moment, he wondered if Isabella hated him more than Raymond did.

8 8 8

"Dad," Cosette said, her voice shaking, "you are really not helping."

Raymond grunted, looked away. It was a standard in their family -- father knew best. They had always hated the sitcoms where the children were smarter than the parents. And Cosette knew from long years of experience that her father would not take kindly to a lecturing tone.

"You have to accept that I'm the one who made a mistake," Cosette began. "This is my doing. Punishing Tom isn't going to make things right."

"That man," Raymond said, pointing at the kitchen, "is going to hurt you."

"Well, it's only fair, considering how much I hurt him."

Raymond snorted.

"I'm serious, Dad! I was the one who kicked him out -- I tried to tell you this but you've got it fixed in your head that he seduced me and ran off. He...well, he did his part, yeah, but you know me. You know I'm not stupid--"

"Which is exactly why I can't figure this out," Raymond grunted.

"I made a choice. It was a wrong choice, but I made it," Cosette said, her voice getting harder. "Me, Dad. Not just him, but me. He couldn't have if I hadn't let him. I'm not some weak, simpering fangirl who swoons at the attentions of a good looking guy."

Raymond snorted again.

"Daddy, please!" She was near tears. "I need your support."

"You know you have my support, Cozy, no matter what," Raymond said quickly, defensively.
"And that means you have to be more accepting of Tom. Like or not, he's connected to us now. He wants to be a father."

"He says he loves you, wants to marry you. That true?"

"He loves me, yes. He says he does. And he has brought up marriage a couple of times but right now we're just dealing with one hurdle at a time."

"Do you love him?" Raymond asked, much softer.

Cosette shrugged. "Almost against my will," she admitted. "I didn't want to. I didn't want ANY of this, Dad! You know I...I mean...it just..." She was having trouble fighting down the sobs, but if she started she'd be unintelligible. "It kills me sometimes, worrying I won't have any of those things...the white wedding, the first time being with someone I've committed my life to, the marriage where we both understand what's at stake. Maybe it was all pie in the sky but...but when one domino falls you have to take the rest with it. That's what you and Grams always said, right?"

Raymond shook his head, looked down at his folded arms. "I just don't like him, Cosette. I'm sorry, I just can't."

"I know, Daddy," Cosette said, reaching out and grasping his arm. "But I need you to fake it, okay? As you act, so shall you be, remember? Because I can't raise a child in a war zone. You know that."

Raymond sighed deeply. "I'll try, Cozy."

She nodded, tears filling her eyes and spilling over a bit onto her cheeks. It was the kiss of death for her father, who had to get up and embrace her, hugging her tightly.

"I'm sorry, Cozy," her daddy whispered. "I've been protecting you my whole life. And now I just see you in a bad place and I want to protect you more than ever."

"I know, Daddy. But this is on me. I know that's hard for you to take. But imagine what it is on me...and when you want to say something, just remember it's not just him you're hurting..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know." Raymond heaved a great sigh. "Come on, your mother got a cheesecake for this boy, let's eat it."

8 8 8

Tom stood outside, enjoying the warm air of summer. Soon he'd be in London again, where the summers were always cool. But not for too long.

Cosette came out of the house. The porchlight cast a warm pool of yellow light around them, and she descended the heavy concrete steps to approach him to say goodnight. He'd insisted on following her home, still wondering why she'd made him drive separate from him, but he didn't want to talk about that anymore.

Her conversation with her father, that he'd overheard, had bothered him. Not so much all of it, but one particular part. Cosette talking about what she'd wanted with her life, and how she didn't think she could have it anymore.

Did she really not see a future for them? She didn't see them getting married, having that marriage she always dreamed of? Sure, his ideas about marriage were different than hers, but he was willing to try it her way. His parents certainly hadn't done too well, maybe she had learned something from hers that would keep them together. Of course, he'd hardly borne witness to a "happy family" this
night, but his conscience told him it was his own fault. He had disturbed the equilibrium of the
Mitchells' home.

"I'm sorry," she said, approaching him. She had her arms wrapped tightly around herself, as if she
were cold. "I'm sorry about all of that."

He shook his head. "Wasn't your fault."

She chuckled, scuffed her toe against the front walk. "Oh, yes it was. But my dad...sometimes he's
kind of impulsive. Makes quick decisions and doesn't think them all the way through and then it
sort of blows up in his face."

"Sounds familiar," Tom murmured.

"Yeah, like father, like daughter," she smiled ruefully.

"Actually I was referring to myself," Tom amended. She looked up at him, startled.

"That's surprising to hear," she said. "To my view, you're much more...careful."

"Yes, so careful I had a one night stand with a girl and forgot to wear a condom," Tom sighed.

She nodded. "Yeah. Fair enough." She looked pained and Tom heard on rewind what he just said.

"I don't regret it," he told her, stepping a bit closer. She looked even more perplexed than before.
"Us being together. I know you do, but I don't. And I don't regret our daughter. I know you don't
either," he added quickly when she opened her mouth. "I just...what you said before. About not
having the life you wanted."

"And this is the life you wanted?" she asked with a frown. "An oopsie baby? Stuck with a woman
who frustrates you at every turn?"

He shook his head. "You don't frustrate me."

"The hell I don't," she said with a smile.

"Well, I'd rather be frustrated by you than appeased by anyone else," he said.

"That's a good line," she said.

"It's not a line." He frowned, his face darkening. "Cosette, you heard what I said this evening. I've
said it before. I love you. I'm in love with you. And I know it makes me horribly selfish to say this
but you becoming pregnant with my child was the best thing that ever happened to me, because it
made you come back to me. I was gutted when you tossed me out-- and I know why you did it, I
do, but that didn't stop what I felt. And I admit, I like that what you feel for me makes you not trust
yourself. It means it's powerful."

She stared at him, taking in his words.

"But I'm making you miserable, aren't I?" he said sadly. "The constant battle...being at odds with
your father, thinking you have to give up your job...it just hit me tonight when you were talking
about the life you wanted. A husband who saw things like you did, who could understand you and
what you believe in, who could share it. Who would treasure you and respect you, and wait until
you were married to bed you. And it kills me that you don't think I could give you a life that's just
as happy, even if we didn't wait until our honeymoon. Because I could, Cosette. I could make you
happy if you would just let me."

Some part of him wanted to throw in the towel. Some part of him recognized that he was fighting a battle that couldn't be won, that she would never give herself to him, never surrender to him like she had that one time. But the other part that had always rebelled against anyone telling him what he could and could not do, that part kicked and insisted that she would, she would if he was patient enough, insistent enough, worked hard enough. It was the same part that hadn't let him give up when he'd worked as an actor for years without a major break, slogging away in local sitcoms and period pieces and the occasional play. Even when a potential break appeared on the horizon and came to nothing, that part had insisted he keep trying. It was the same part that always dug in its heels whenever someone told him "you can't."

That first part, though, whispered to him that if he loved her as much as he said, he would just let her go. But he couldn't. He couldn't. The thought of doing that was equal to dying, to just lying down and giving up, something he wouldn't allow himself to do, ever.

Cosette looked up at him, looked into his eyes, studied him. "I haven't been very fair to you, have I?" she whispered.

"It isn't...it isn't that," he said, softening. "Last night, you and I had a lovely time, sitting on this porch, talking. We had a lovely day today, and then this evening, it was like none of it had happened. I know you defended me to your father, I appreciate that, but...sometimes I worry you're just trying to make the best of a bad situation, and--"

"Because I am, Tom, I've never hidden that from you."

"But I'm trying to tell you that it doesn't have to be a bad situation," Tom insisted. "You said you would give me a chance but I still feel like I'm fighting to convince you to take me seriously."

She looked down, scuffed her toe a few times, and bit her thumb. When she looked up at him, those violet eyes were so lovely, and so sad.

"I'm afraid that you're going to wake up one day and realize you've gotten all you're going to get from this," she said. "I mean, I think I've gotten to know you a bit, and what's the big thrill for you? The chase. I recognized it when you pursued me, and I see it now. So when you catch me, Tom, what happens then? I mean, a few years, long enough for Beatrice to be born, for you to become a father, and then...you lose interest. Maybe not in her but in me, when my role of mother changes and all my attention goes to her. When I'm no longer flirty and fun and bantering with you and don't have time for our late night talks and our intense discussions...you say you were crushed when I chucked you out but how long would it have taken, really, before the next thing came along?"

"You think I'm not committed?"

"I know you're committed, but for how long? A movie lasts a year? Maybe a bit longer? Then it ends and the next one comes. People aren't movies. We aren't roles to play. I do love you, Tom, but I'm afraid of you. I'm afraid of how much it's going to hurt when you fall out of love with me. So that's why I keep fighting. Why I keep making you chase me. Sometimes why I want you to stop. But it breaks my heart as well to think that I'm going to share a child with a man I can't...//really// have. For good. I mean, honestly, you say you want to marry me but can you imagine being with only one woman for the rest of your life? Seriously, and don't answer me now. I wouldn't believe what you said. I don't think it's fully hit you. If you want me, Tom, it's all of me you'd be getting, not a part, not just the parts you like, that make you feel good. So please, you have to think about that."
Gingerly, he placed his hands on her shoulders. "And you need to realize," he said, "that everything you just said? It's the same risk you would take with anyone. Even if you did everything right, even if you both waited, even if you were identical in your faith and devotion. It could all explode in your face, no matter how careful you were. This, what we have? It's the same risk, Cosette."

He didn't say anything else. Not because he didn't want to, but because he saw by the set of her shoulders that anything else wouldn't penetrate. He leaned over, kissed her cheek, and told her he would call her, and then he left.
Cosette had always liked Richard. She was fortunate that she felt comfortable talking to him about things that were relatively personal. But this was not going to be an easy conversation. She'd spent all of Sunday dreading it, and she knew she was showing, so it wasn't going to be a big shocker to him once he saw.

"Come on in, Ms. Mitchells, have a seat," her boss greeted her. She sat down in the wooden chairs across from his desk, and watched him as he observed her. His face seemed a bit strained, and his voice had a distinctive undertone when he asked, "What can I do for you today?"

"I wanted to tell you before rumors started going around. I'm pregnant. About eighteen weeks along. I'm starting to show. And I don't think I can continue working here under those circumstances. I wanted to tell you after the students had left so you wouldn't worry about me finishing out."

He stared at her. Trying to absorb it. "Pregnant? You?" He was flummoxed. "I mean, yes, it's possible, but...you? I mean...I don't want to pry, but I can't help but wonder...did...did something happen?"

She gave him a warm smile. "I'm fine, Richard," she said. "Nobody attacked me. I did this of my own stupid free will. No, I didn't plan to get pregnant, but when you--"

"Yeah, you don't have to go on," Richard said with a shake of his head, dropping his pen down in front of him rather dramatically. His hands spread, still absorbing the shock. "I just don't know how...but no, you're a grown woman, you don't answer to us."

"Well, to a certain extent, I do," she explained. "I have a reputation, which I've just blown out of the water. And it's not going to take long for people to realize who the father is -- I almost don't want to tell you because the paps are going to be all over it and I don't want that to touch the school at all."

"The paps?"

"Paparazzi."

"So it was one of the...oh. It was him, wasn't it?" Then he shook his head. "No, no, don't answer--"

"Yes it was Tom," Cosette said without shame. "There's going to be scandal when it becomes public and it's going to become public very soon, and I don't want this place harmed by it, in the slightest."

"But, Cosette," Richard tried, "don't you think leaving is a bit...extreme? I mean, until at least you know how things are going to play out? Maybe it won't be as bad--"
"Even if it isn't, it'll be bad enough around here," she interrupted him, for the second time. "What people will say...things are going to be stressed enough. And how can I teach the faith when I so clearly failed to practice it on one of the most important points?"

Richard shook his head. "People don't make as big a deal about those things these days."

"They will with me, since I've preached such a high moral standard," she said, starting to choke a bit but harshly dismissing it. "And seriously, how can I expect to be taken... seriously?" she said for lack of a better word. She shook her head. "No, it's for the best if I...if I don't...come back next year."

Richard let out a deep breath. "Okay," he said softly. "Look, I understand that this is a difficult time, and everything coming out of my mouth is about to sound very clichéd and lame, so give me a minute." He considered his hands, playing with the various pens and paperclips on his desk. "First things first. Are you all right? I mean, do you have support with all these things going on?"

This was why she liked Richard. He asked the right questions. "Tom is very much involved," she said. "Technically, we're together. He wants to get married."

"But...?"

"He says he loves me. I think he does, but...I just worry that it's coming from the fact that he feels responsible for me. That's great, but I want to get married because a man wants to spend his life with me, not because of an accident. I can't know for sure at this point whether it's one or the other with him. But this situation is putting us together anyway. I mean, we're going to raise a child together---try to, anyway. We'll see what the future holds. One hurdle at a time." She gave him a half-hearted smile.

"What about the rest of the staff? Do you want them to know?"

She considered this. She had worked with many of these people for years. It felt dishonest not to tell them what was going on-- even though she had few actual friends among the staff. But it had to wait a bit. "I do, but not yet. It's going to come out in the media. I think maybe I should send them an email, since we're all scattered for the summer, before the big news drops. It feels impersonal but it's not like I want to have a big dramatic meeting. I think they'll understand."

"They'll respect your privacy. And I don't think any of them would want you to go. Not the parents, either, or the kids. Sure, you should take the time, provided that you can. I mean, I'm assuming that since Tom is involved..."

"Yeah. No worries on that front. I was planning on taking this next year as a leave of absence."

"Good. But when the year is over, rethink your decision. And if you change your mind before then, call me. I know this next year is going to be difficult. When is your due-date, can I ask?"

"December."

"Okay. So I'll get a teacher in here on the condition of it only being a year. Probably go with a long-term sub. If, at the beginning of the next school year, you still feel the same, then we'll terminate your contract. It only goes year to year, anyway."

Cosette shook her head. "That's a lot of trouble to go through for me, Richard. It isn't right to put someone else there only to yank them out of the position if I want it back."

"Well, I can promise you that Fr. John is not going to be happy about you leaving."
"He might once he finds out why."

Richard shakes his head. "I doubt it, Cosette. You need to speak to him. Unless you want me to do it and then have him call you. Because he will call you. He'll have a fit if you try to leave."

"He likes me because he thinks I try to live a moral life," Cosette said, her tears choking her again. "Once he finds out, he'll be glad. You go ahead and tell him. If he calls me, I'll talk to him, but I doubt he will, except to wish me well." She stood up. "Sorry, I tire so easily these days. I'll only pack up what's mine from my room and leave the rest for next year's teacher."

"Talk to me again before you leave for the summer," Richard said, and Cosette obediently nodded her head.

8 8 8

Tom was meeting with his team that morning. They had gone over the plan a few times, but he could see the tension, the white-knuckled grip they had on his image.

It was not going to be pretty -- him showing up with a pregnant girlfriend.

He'd watched what happened to Benedict. But Benedict was of a different mind than him. Benedict didn't care as much about what people thought, it was no wonder the man was Sherlock. Sure, he was charming and intelligent and he was Tom's mate, but fame, for him, was an unfortunate side affect of this for him, not a part of the package. Sure, he proposed to Sophie the second they knew about Christopher, but that baby meant more to Ben than anything else on the planet. Fatherhood was his dream. Screw what anyone else thought.

Tom, however, was much more conscious of his press. And they had argued this for hours, trying to find the right way to minimize the damage. The fans were going to lose their shit. He was going to get serious backlash for this. But he also knew that those who truly were worth it, who liked him for his work, would wish him well and go on with their lives. Not that he didn't get a private kick out of the fact that he seemed utterly irresistible to some. But the level of obsession in some of his fans...he could probably afford to lose some of those people, even if he still didn't like the thought.

Still, there was going to be an outcry. He didn't look forward to it, but some things were more important. He'd learned early on that a hearty level of bravado was tantamount to success.

This was going to be done delicately. First pictures of him and Cosette at the wrap party. Then the interview, in which he would declare plainly, with no room for confusion or misinterpretation, that he was very much "with" someone and that they were expecting a child. Her privacy was to be respected for her health and the health of her child, but they had been together for quite a while and were keeping it quiet. But Tom was going to stick to what he'd said long ago, a quote his fans like to toss at him again and again -- "Shout it from the rooftops." And then they were going to figure out some way to get Cosette to appear at his side at a public function, solidifying her status.

He knew no matter what he did, it was going to be rife with conflict. On one hand, they'd bemoan he was off the market, and criticize him for being deceitful. The other, they'd villainize him for not making an honest woman of her, for not marrying her like a responsible and respectable man of a highly regarded British family. He wasn't about to expose her to censure by admitting it was her decision not to marry him, unless she decided otherwise. Quite frankly he wasn't much for giving her the choice.

"I'm sorry?"

His long-time PR Agent, who had flown in to deal with this crisis, gave him a small smile. "Come on, mate, you adore Wimbledon. And if we get pictures of the two of you there it would be just like a red carpet event."

Tom felt a slightly uncomfortable itch on the back of his neck. He'd taken Jane to Wimbledon. He didn't want there to be comparisons. Cosette would freak out if she was compared to one of his former "fuckbuddies." Even though Jane had been more than that... or she'd wanted to be more. He'd like her a lot, but it just hadn't worked out in the end.

"Can we try and find a movie premiere?" Tom asked.

Luke nodded. "Is that a no on Wimbledon?"

"I'm always up for Wimbledon, mate," Tom laughed. "And it'll actually work well because Cosette wants to come to London to meet my family. But I'm just...I don't want that to be the final word on things."

"You're thinking about Jane." Of course Luke would know. Luke knew his pattern of thought almost as well as he did. "The last girl you took to a movie premiere was Susannah with Avengers. So if you're trying to say, 'this is it,' this plan should work. Remember, you're not just declaring that you're off the market, you're assuming the role of fatherhood and trying to deflect the criticism by taking responsibility. She needs to look like a permanent part of your life. Not an accident, a fling, or worse, a gold-digger."

"It's Wimbledon, man," one of the Los Angeles based assistants said. "Not a presidential inauguration."

"Too bad we can't get an invite to one of those," Rebecca, one of Luke's, murmured.

"Don't think you could afford the donation, mate," someone else said. The room broke into a chuckle.

They broke up, patting each other on the back, and most of them with hugs of thanks from Tom, and he was on his way back to the car when his phone buzzed with Christina's name appearing on the screen.

Immediately alarmed, he answered with, "What is it?"

"Hey Tom. Look, can you come by my parents' house?" Christina asked. "I know it's a lot to ask but Cosette is here and she's...just not in a good place. She told her boss today that she wasn't coming back next year, and...she's kind of having a meltdown."

The first thing he felt was a sharp, bitter pang that Cosette hadn't called him. She was upset and she didn't call him; she went to her parents instead. But he had to push that aside. At this moment, it wasn't about him. He had to go to her, had to try and help.

Although it did occur to him as he was headed over to the house, that this would show her parents he was serious about her.

When he arrived, Christina was waiting to let him in, sparing him the confusion about whether to knock or call her. She motioned toward the living room, and what Tom saw there nearly broke his heart.
Cosette was pretty much weeping into her mother's arms. She had curled up on the couch next to her, and Isabella had her arms wrapped around Cosette's shoulders, with Cosette's face pressed against her shoulder.

Isabella looked up at him, and her expression changed from one of comfort and concern to regret, and resignation. She sighed, patted Cosette's back and murmured, "Tom is here."

Cosette gave a little jerk and lifted her head. Her eyes had gone from the deep amethyst they usually were to a bright, almost ultra-violet. He'd seen her after she'd shed tears before, stoic and resolute, but he'd not actually seen her in the throes of agony and it struck something in him that he was not used to having roused. Sure, he was a highly empathetic person, but this was much worse. This felt like it was happening to him. Her flushed face made his own cheeks heat. He wanted desperately to wipe away the thick tears that made her skin shine, hold a tissue for her nose like a little kid. He started to take a step toward her but she flinched away and put her head back down on her mother's shoulder.

"Mommy," Cosette said, like a very little girl who didn't want to leave her mother's side. Petulant. Pleading.

Isabella kissed Cosette's temple and started to disengage, putting several inches between them on the couch. Tom pushed forward, coming to stop in front of them on the couch.

"What happened?" he asked. "I mean, I know you told Richard today, but..."

Cosette shook her head. "You were right. He didn't want me to leave." She wiped at her cheeks, and her mother handed her a tissue for her nose. "He said he was going to get a sub for the next year while I take a leave of absence." She closed her eyes, face twisting. "But I don't know how I can ever come back. I don't know how I can face everyone..."

Tom knelt down, reached for her hands, which clutched the dirty tissue. He slid his fingers around her wrists, giving a little tug. "But you don't have to face anyone alone, Cosette," Tom said. "And I know, when our child is born, your pride in that isn't going to allow anyone to look down on you. You're going to be a fantastic mother...you already are."

More tears slid down her cheeks. "I understand why some women would go hide in a convent when things like this happened to them."

"Yes, but you're going to have a hard time explaining a baby that just appears out of nowhere," her mother said. "And we're not going to lie to any child about where it came from."

"Sweetheart," Tom said softly, reaching up and brushing his fingers along her cheek, pushing away tendrils of her hair that clung to damp skin, "you know this is an emotional time. But you have to be patient. You're going to feel differently soon and things are going to seem clearer a bit farther down the road. Especially after it becomes known that we're together, that we're doing this together, and we're doing the right thing."

"What do you mean, after it becomes known?" Isabella asked.

"I was at a meeting with my publicists today and we were strategizing how to release the information that Cosette and I are together."

"Things are difficult enough, do you have to put her in the public eye right now?"

"If I don't, it's going to look like I'm ashamed of her, and I'm not," Tom said with a bit more force, but kept his tone respectful because this was his daughter's grandmother, after all. Isabella's eyes
softened a bit, however, considering him. "Cosette, I rarely ever make my relationships public. My PR people have banked heavily on my bachelor status. This isn't a small thing."

"People are still going to think I trapped you with an illegitimate child," Cosette grumbled.

"That's why we're not going to drag everything out all at once. We talked about the wrap party this Saturday, yes? And then my interviews next week?"

"You're an actor, Tom," Cosette said irritably. "People are just going to think you're reading from a script. It's all a set up. All of it!" She stood up, pushing him back a bit, and stormed off toward the kitchen. Her father appeared in the doorway, stopping her progress.

"Come here, young lady," he said, extending an arm to her. "Into my study. We're going to chat." He looked at Tom, who had risen to follow Cosette. "Back to your seat, young man." His tone was, surprisingly, not harsh, but it took a serious amount of effort on Tom's part to do as he was told. He hated being treated as if he was nothing but a sperm donor, with no official, recognized status in Cosette's life.

As they disappeared, Tom perched on the edge of the couch where Cosette had just vacated. He sighed, resting his elbows on his knees, his hands nervously rubbing against each other in frustration.

"Don't take it too personally," Isabella said, her voice a bit warmer. "She's got a stubborn streak in her a mile wide. Probably gets it from me. She's going to see things how she's going to see them until something shows her differently."

"I don't know what else to do," Tom said. "I don't know what else to say to her, how to show her this differently. She's just determined not to trust me."

"Well," Isabella sighed, "it would help a whole hell of a lot if it didn't feel like a big show to be put on to please other people."

Tom bit down on his temper. There was no way this woman could know -- she had no idea how protective he wanted to be. He would put guards around Cosette's house if she'd allow it, just to keep her and the baby safe. "I don't put my private life out there on display. You can read the articles they write about me, I don't answer questions about personal relationships, I don't air out my dirty laundry. I'm extremely careful with my privacy. To put Cosette out there is a big step. I'm trying to make sure everyone knows this is legitimate, not some act. But if I pretend to ignore the media, the press, they'll end up speculating on their own, and the rumors will be much worse than the truth. I'm trying to protect her, Isabella," he finally said, his voice pleading. "And I feel the only way I can do that is by not hiding her, or our child. I promise I'm not trying to make either of them a public spectacle -- that's why we're being so careful and meticulous about this." His hands clenched until they started to ache with the effort it took to stay under control.

"People are going to say what they're going to say no matter what we say or do," Isabella said. "You want to declare her the love of your life, fine. But after that, you tell everyone to butt out and mind their own business. This is what it is, and you're done talking about it. And then do what you're going to do. If you're honest, you don't have to prove anything. You can't care too much about what people say -- that's why her father and I both aren't crazy about Cosette being with an actor. Your livelihood depends on what people say. You walk a crazy line."

"I'm determined to walk it well," Tom said in an utterly no-nonsense tone. Whatever humility he used when others gave him compliments, it was nowhere in sight when it came to his desire to maintain this balance.
Isabella patted his arm. "Hang on, Thomas. You're right, she will feel differently later. After all this pregnancy craziness passes and she gets her sanity back, she'll proudly display her beautiful daughter and be right back on her path again. She'll figure out how to make people see the faith even through their failings, and most especially through hers."

"You know I'm not your boyfriend's biggest fan," her father sighed, "but you gotta stop pushing the poor bastard away. Sooner or later he ain't gonna bounce back."

Cosette lifted her head from where she'd pressed it against her father's chest. "So now you're pulling for him?" she asked.

"Well, as you're so fond of saying, this isn't entirely his fault."

She sniffled, reaching for more tissue on the edge of his desk. "Yes, I know. It's mine, it's all mine."

Her father scowled at her. "Okay, I'm going to ask you some questions. You've been to confession, yes?"

She nodded.

"Then what's the problem? You know you did wrong. You're doing the right things as the choices come along. Why are you continuing to beat yourself up over this? Because that's what it is. You're dragging it out like you've been condemned. You know better than anyone the healing power of absolution. So why can't you forgive yourself?"

She turned away, rolling the used tissue between her palms. Even though it was summer, it felt cold in the study. Her father always kept the AC high in this room because of all his books. Tom would love this room. Maybe someday her dad would show it to him.

"I'm afraid to," she said after a pause.

"Because?"

She turned back, feeling a horrible dread clutch her stomach. "Because if I do, I'm almost sure I'll do it again. Pushing Tom away is what keeps me from getting too comfortable. With all of this."

Her father shook his head. "So what, you think because you screwed up the beginning, you don't get to be happy? People in all kinds of situations do all kinds of stupid things, Cosette. You saying none of them should ever be happy?"

"No, of course not!" she objected.

"Just not you. Because you're so much better than them."

"NO!" she practically squealed.

"Then forgive yourself, Cozy," he said, stepping up to her. "You did something wrong. Forgive yourself. Everyone else has. Your mother and I. God himself. Even that boy out there, he forgives you over and over."

"So you want me to be happy with Tom?" Cosette asked, surprised.

Her father took in a heavy sigh. "I want you to be happy with the man you're in love with. And
you're in love with that man. Love makes you stupid. At least at first. It takes a while to learn to navigate it, use its power for good instead of evil. Yes, sleeping with him was stupid, but I know you, Cozy, and for you to do that...you must have been overwhelmed by something. Maybe it was just lust, we all get that. I just don't think you're that shallow. Sue me for thinking better of you than that, I'm your father, I'm allowed to be a bit blind when it comes to your flaws."

Cosette fell silent. She didn't usually talk about what she said in the confessional, but it was hard, facing what she'd done.

"Dad," she said softly, "remember when Christina got engaged?"

"At Christmas," her father replied.

"Did he ask for your blessing before he proposed?"

"Of course. Henry's like you, he takes the Faith seriously. Christina's lucky she found a guy like that, considering she's got a wild streak in her a mile wide." He chuckled. "Can I tell you a secret? I said a novena to St. Joseph that she would meet a good guy who'd keep her on the straight and narrow. She met him a week after I finished it."

Cosette straightened. This was new information. Usually her father told her things like this. They were in sync that way. "Why...why did you do that?"

Raymond shrugged, an unconscious gesture. "You remember her high school boyfriend. I was worried that she was going to announce one night that she was pregnant..." He looked at her for a moment, pained. "Sorry."

Cosette smirked. "S'okay."

"After that she bounced from boyfriend to boyfriend, nothing every got serious. I was worried about her. If you pray, why worry, as the old saying goes. So I did, and boom, there was Henry." He frowned at her. "What's this got to do with Henry?"

"Well, he's been with us for a while, you know, and I've gotten to know him. And, well," she squirmed, "at first I was kind of jealous. Not of Henry, but that she'd found a guy like that."

"Someone like you," Raymond supplied.

"Yeah. I mean, he's...still a virgin, you know? Guys don't admit things like that, but Henry's not afraid of that kind of thing. And I thought, why does Christina get that kind of guy and I...can't find anything?"

"You're picky, Cozy," Raymond teased her. "Too picky. Every boy who's ever asked you out, something's wrong with him. This one isn't over his previous girlfriend. That one cries too easily. This one called you a nickname you didn't like. That one can't make conversation to save his life."

She bridled. "That's just it, Dad," she replied, a note of frustration entering her voice. "I was never really interested in any of them, that's why it was easy to find an excuse. But bottom line, I just didn't like them that way. And when Henry came along, he was...he was perfect! And then when I got to know him, I found out he was boring!"

Raymond stared at her a moment. "Boring?" he echoed.

"Here's this guy, who would have been perfect for me, and he's now engaged to my sister, and I'm three years older, I've never managed a serious relationship anything close to what Christina has,
and...I wasn't jealous."

Her father stared at her a long moment, then shook his head as if to clear it. "Maybe I'm getting slow in my old age, but I'm not following your logic. Not being jealous is a bad thing?"

"Henry would have been perfect for me, you said it yourself, but Christina gets him. And that was fine, because...because..."

"He's boring," Raymond finished.

"But I started wondering why he was boring. I mean, I like him fine as a brother in law, but suddenly I started to wonder if maybe...if maybe I didn't actually want a guy like that. And then Tom came along."

"Oh," he said, starting to see.

"And I knew he was trouble but...but when I started making comparisons, I started to worry that all the things I liked about Tom were all the reasons he was so opposite of someone like Henry. And...I don't know, it's confusing and hard to explain at this point."

"Oh, it's only confusing now?" Raymond said with a raised eyebrow.

"Dad!"

"Sorry. But...you think that's why you got involved with him."

She steadied herself again. "I kinda got pissed."

"At who?"

It was hard to say. "Maybe...maybe at God. I mean, I felt like I'd been played some colossal joke. Like I could only have the good, moral, upright qualities if I was willing to accept any comer who came along because they're so few and far between, and what if he was going to be like Henry? What if they were all like Henry? And I hated that thought, absolutely hated it...I don't know if I'm making any sense."

"If I say it's women's logic are you going to accuse me of being sexist?"

Cosette paused. "Oh Dad...I don't know. It was so confusing, and I was so attracted to Tom, and I felt like...like playing with fire, I guess. I wanted to walk on the other side of the street, maybe? That's so cliché and stupid..."

"There's a reason clichés exist."

"I know. But it got out of hand. And when I...realized what I'd done. I just dropped him, kicked him to the curb. Like it was his fault. And it wasn't, it was mine. But now he's back and I still have the same feelings as before, and I'm worried. So I feel like I have to watch every single moment I'm with him, every little thing I do, everything he does...and I can't! It's like some kind of cloud slides over my eyes and..." She shakes her head. "I know we don't pick who we love, but we can decide what we do about it. And I always looked down on people who did awful things and allowed awful things because they said they were 'in love.' I'm scared that now, things are going to influence me the wrong way, compel me to...well. Go against myself again. Slowly, a steady pull away from everything I know is right. And no, he's not pressuring me to be physical. He really didn't the first time--"
"That you saw. Men like him are subtle. Sometimes you just gotta be sweet and patient and jump at
the first opportunity." At her look, he clarified. "I saw guys like him a hundred times during my
years on sets. Not all players are the gross womanizers you see in those stupid television shows.
Most of them just lay low and let the hormones do the work."

She shrugged. "That's what I thought he'd done, too. And maybe he did, but it didn't mean he didn't
love me. It was just the only way he knew how to act."

Raymond cleared his throat. "Oh sweetie. I know you want to give everyone the benefit of the
doubt but...that is not how a man in love treats the woman of his affections. He doesn't leap at her
first sign of weakness."

Cosette sniffled. "So you don't think he loves me, then?"

"The jury is still out on that. I think that he //thinks// he loves you. The true test remains to be seen.
And I stand by what I said before. I think he's going to hurt you. Of course, we always hurt the
ones we love. Look at me and your mother." He gave her a sheepish smile. "But he's been a stand-
up guy and I can't fault him for any of that. Much as I'd like."

"Regardless of that, I can't stop how I feel about him. I've tried to get over it but...something won't
let me."

"So you do love him?"

She was sure they'd already had this conversation. "I do. It makes no sense to me but I do."

"Then you gotta keep your head straight when it comes to him, sweetie, no matter how hard that is.
He could really, really hurt you. But if he's really the decent kind of man I've seen so far, he's going
to see this through, and he'll be there for you and your child, no matter what. You'll always have
that. And I know that that kind of chemistry doesn't go just one way. You think he's got a pull on
you, but you've got one on him, too, whatever it is. I hold out hope your influence will tame his
wild ways a bit, make him more suitable for you."

She shook her head. "You can't go into a relationship expecting someone to change."

"Change happens whether you expect it or not," Raymond said sagely, spreading his hands with a
shrug. "You've changed. What's to keep it from happening to him? Either way, you have to let this
go. Put it away. You did what you did but you're moving on. You can never change the past. You
can only live the present." He considered for a moment. "I prayed for Christina to get a guy who'd
keep her on the straight and narrow because I didn't think she could do it on her own. I knew you
could."

Cosette looked up at him, near tears. "Well, you were wrong, obviously."

Raymond shook his head. "I'm not wrong. One fall doesn't mean you've failed. I'm not going to
start with those tired quotes about success and failure. But a saint is someone who didn't give up.
That's all. You're not giving up, Cosette. You know to keep on pushing." He gave her a peck on the
forehead. "I believe in you, even if you don't, right now. Maybe that guy out there believes in you,
too?"

She sat down in the chair in front of his desk, wiped her nose and face, smoothed her hair. When
she felt presentable, she got up and went back out into the living room. It was empty -- Tom and
her mother had moved to the kitchen where he was using her tea kettle to boil some hot water for
tea. He looked up when she entered.
She strode right up to him and wrapped her arms around his chest. Tom immediately responded, wrapping his arms around her. She felt his long arms brace along her shoulders, pressing her against his chest. His huge hand spread over the crown of her dark hair.

"Hey," he murmured into her curls.

"Hey," she whispered back. "I'm sorry. I know you're not acting. Thank you. Thank you for staying with me."

"It was never in question," he assured her. "Are you still up for this?"

She nodded, her cheek rubbing against his chest. "I'll wear whatever you tell me to wear and smile for the cameras and we'll tell them to mind their own business when they get too nosy."

He chuckled. She felt his lips graze the part in her hair. "You'll be beautiful and charming and everyone will adore you."

She snorted. "Except for the fangirls who will want to kill me because they're not me." She felt him give a little shudder. "What?" she asked, looking up at him.

"We're going to have to get you a bodyguard," Tom said. "If there is any negative blowback, I don't want to risk someone going crazy. I won't risk you, Cosette, please don't argue with me," he said, his eyes darkening as she opened her mouth to object.

She stopped, lips snapping shut. "Only for a little while, until the baby is born," she said. "And only if there's anything threatening."

He gave a little nod. "We'll see."
Twenty Weeks Ago

Chapter Summary

Tom has an interview in which he reveals very important information to the world. In the meantime, he and Cosette get closer, and plans for her to come to London are made.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tom was used to this dance.

Interviewers, basically, were all the same these days. They all played the same chords on the same instrument. Even if they dressed that instrument up to make it look like something else, it wasn't. They all thought they were different, they all strove to distinguish themselves, but in the end, one after another, he found them to be mostly the same.

It was the hardest part of this job, he thought. The real work -- promotion. Sure, everyone thought that the most effort went in front of the cameras. But that stuff was the meat -- that was where he excelled. He prepared, yes, beat it into his head until it was second nature, then forgot it and just lived it. He stepped in and out of it like shoes, but when he was in it, that was when he soared.

Doing this? This was the real effort. Having to fight the boredom, the monotony, having to dodge the potential landmines he could step on, having to think things through before he said them, having to be so damned careful not to mislead, not to let them too far into his head, not to let it be too much about //him,// because they all wanted it to be about him, (that's who they pandered to) his fans, (who really cared about the film anyway?), the rest was just window-dressing.

This interviewer, a middle-aged woman he'd talked to a few times before, was a bit of an exception. Tom found Janet to be somewhat in sync with him, knowing what he would say and what he wouldn't, so she didn't bother to lob any curve balls his way. But she was subtle, and would needle little things from him with the precision of a surgeon. Sure, she kept it all to her speculation when she wrote the narrative of her interview, keeping the words from his mouth, not misrepresenting him, but definitely sprinkling on the mystery to drag out the interest as long as it would sustain itself. It kept him from looking like a narcissistic ass, made the fangirls drool, and actually elevated him to a relatively dignified status. Everyone won.

So he had rewarded her with this scoop. It wouldn't wait for the press edition. It would wind up on the internet faster than when he and Lizzie had gotten caught on the streets of London after a dinner together. Their own damn fault, to be sure. He was sure that the pics from last week had already made the rounds seven or eight times -- his staff told him that Tumblr was ready to detonate -- and by now even people who didn't honestly give a riff about his love life might be wondering what the fuss was about. Everyone loved a scandal. What was more scandalous than an out of wedlock child? Of course, even that was dull by today's social standards, but even so, it sold more than a few magazines.

Cosette was showing only a little bit, her style of dress capable of hiding much of her baby bump at this point. She was nearly half-way through the pregnancy but the growth was all going to come at
this point. It helped that the dress she wore made it obvious that she was not trying to hide her pregnancy. And double points that the pictures had come from actual paid photographers and not paps.

She hadn't fought him when he'd dragged her around the party to person after person, introducing her by her first name, letting them hug her and congratulate her, and it hadn't felt to him the least bit like an act when they were playing the happy couple. Her smile, the sparkle in her eyes, the remarks that would slide from her lips, lampooning him and flirting with him in the same sentence, all of it felt warm and real. By an hour in, he allowed himself to forget his worry about the backlash and just enjoyed being with her, holding her a little closer than maybe she would have allowed in other circumstances, whispering little things into her ear. Cosette was never one for listening to his compliments about how pretty she was, but if he chuckled at something she said, added some bit of gossip about how she'd called a particular situation, or even better, said something that made her laugh or even riled up a retort, he was rewarded with that flash of those violet eyes, and he could feel himself sliding in deeper, inch by sweet inch.

The fact that she was a catch wasn't lost on his co-stars and fellow crew. He caught more than a few appreciative glances in her direction through the night. He knew one co-star had directly eyed her up and down. It took no prompting for him to dote on her the entire night. It was no farce that would lead the internet to expound the next day about how "in love" he looked with her. And it certainly wasn't any effort to shoot daggers at one point when she'd been wiggled away from him to the dance floor by an overeager admirer who was promptly dismissed (although politely) when she was returned to him, a bit breathless but otherwise intact.

The best indication had been when he'd called his mother -- he had wanted to tell her face to face, but letting this big of a piece of news out into the media was too risky. Even though she maintained a media blackout -- you had to when your son had rumors and gossip flying about him -- this would penetrate. At first they thought that they should tell her together, but Cosette pointed out that it might be uncomfortable for his mother to have an honest reaction if Cosette was there. If she reacted badly, it might take some convincing from Tom, and that would just be plain awkward for all of them.

His mother had thought Cosette looked "darling" when he showed her a picture. And then when he said that they were having a baby, she had gone nearly white. Her thoughts had naturally been protective of Tom, but once Tom started to explain the situation, she gradually relaxed.

"We're going to have a much longer conversation about this when you come here," she had told him firmly. "But for now, if you're happy, I'm happy for you."

"Okay, Tom," Janet said as they settled down for coffee. "You know I have to ask. My job is at stake if I don't ask. Do you want me to give the usual 'I don't want to talk about my personal life' run around?"

Tom chuckled. It was not his usual polite chuckle that he gave to every interviewer when they asked a question that he found irritating but didn't want to show it. This was why he liked Janet. "Actually," he said with a flirtatious grin, "I did have a few things to say about it."

"Oh? Well, color me mesmerized."

"I'd rather not give you the young lady's name," Tom said demurely, "because, yes, of course, I want to keep as much privacy as possible. But...yes. This is the real thing. We're completely in love with each other." He paused, considering. "I said in another interview somewhere a long time ago that when I had something to write home about, I hoped I could. I sort of feel like, now finally, I've got that. The real deal. It's strange how it can happen when you're not looking for it. I know I've
also said in the past that God laughs at your plans, and he is completely laughing now." They shared a brief chuckle, but Janet knew something else was coming. "We are expecting our first child."

It was a good thing that Janet wasn't holding her recorder or else she surely would have dropped it. "A child?" she managed. "Are you engaged, planning on a wedding before the baby gets here, or---?"

Tom just chuckled his signature chuckle and dazzled her with a smile. "Well, we've been together for a while now. We don't have any plans yet except to just get her through the rest of the pregnancy. Admittedly, things are a bit insane, between my other obligations and trying give her the most care and attention possible, and I don't want any stressors on her, I just want to support her as much as possible and be there for her during her pregnancy, which is stressful enough."

"Well, I hope you're at least having time to enjoy the idea of becoming a dad," Janet said warmly.

"Oh dear Lord," Tom laughed. "You know, the idea of becoming a father was always in the back of my head -- I mean, it's been this ideal, this thing that I wanted someday but I had no idea when or how. And now that it's happened? It's one of those things in life that you had no idea how much you really wanted until you got it. I am utterly ecstatic. And completely overwhelmed! I mean, this little life is going to entirely depend on us, and is going to be shaped by the things we do and say and experience with her--"

"Her?" Janet jumped on that. "It's a girl?"

Tom just nodded demurely -- he hadn't quite meant that bit to slip. "I usually try not to let myself get scared by challenges but this one is a bit daunting. It's a huge responsibility. I've said that before about film roles, but this one, tiny human being is going to be just...the biggest responsibility of my life. If that doesn't make a man quake in his cowboy boots I don't know what does."

"Ooh, are you admitting that you're scared?"

"What sane man wouldn't be? But it's only made me more determined. I've thrown my entire soul at projects before, but this is going to be so much more than that. I absolutely cannot wait."

"So are you already planning on schools and career opportunities for your little girl?" Janet teased.

Tom shook his head. "I want her to have the best of everything, that's true, but growing up in the limelight isn't quite part of it. Her mother has enough to deal with, without people chasing her down the street trying to get a picture of her baby bump."

"So you want the usual 'please respect our privacy during this time' rigmarole?"

"I'm sure you can tidy it up, but yes." He graced her with a smile. "Come on, Janet, you know how heavily I guard my private life -- I've pretty much just given you a golden goose."

"Well, not telling us her name is going to seriously irritate some fans," Janet countered.

"But I don't want people showing up at her house or stalking her or God forbid--"

"Just a first name?"

Tom sighed dramatically. "Cosette," he said. "She doesn't work in the industry, she shouldn't have
to put up with all the drama of exposure."

"She knew that was coming when she agreed to date you," Janet said.

"The wrap party was the first time we appeared in public together."

"Actually, that's not true, although you might not know it. Some pictures have popped up from about a month back. You and her shopping in a local mall. Maternity clothes. They didn't come out until after the party a few days ago, the fans who took them were probably afraid to start anything, but the pictures coming out of you two probably made it easier for them to break silence."

Shit. He should have known people would recognize them. At least they had waited. But he took this information in stride, with a shoulder shrug. "People think what they want, say what they want. I can't control that. But I won't have her harassed at all, Janet. So please, can you be discreet as well?"

"I'm not quite sure if my idea of discreet will work, but I'll do my best, Tom," Janet said, and they exchanged a hug (Tom always hugged everybody) before she left.

Well, the narrative was coming along nicely, he had to say. At least those people had waited. Now they helped things rather than hurt them. Now all he had to do was sit back, wait and see how the rest of the media -- and his fanbase -- were going to react.

In the meantime, he thought as he shuffled through his breast pocket for the tickets, he had a life to live and a potential daughter-in-law to introduce to his mother.

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Cosette looked up at Tom. "All together?" she asked.

"I don't see why not," Tom said. "I have to go back to London, why not just take you and Christina with me? We need to get this trip in before you get too far along. You're at the beginning of your third trimester as it is, we'll probably need the doctor's approval for the flight--"

"I already got it," Cosette said, looking down at the tickets again. "First class. This is really expensive, Tom."

He gave her a super-sweet smile. "Only the best for you, darling."

Cosette resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She never took Tom for a sentimentalist, but he was in a bit of a haze. Apparently things were going well with his campaign to bring out his pregnant girlfriend -- the interview, the pictures, the usual blow-back from suicidal pre-pubescent girls who insisted he belonged to them, and this Cosette-whoever-she-was-character had trapped him with an unplanned pregnancy.

"Besides, it's a twelve hour flight. You'll be grateful for the comfortable seats," Tom said. He kissed her cheek, slow and soft. "And my babies need to be comfortable on their way to meet their grandmother...and mother-in-law."

Tom seemed to have a much closer relationship with his mother than his father, Cosette thought. She opened her mouth to say something about the "mother-in-law" crack but Tom's phone went off and interrupted them. He pulled it out, and from his scowl, Cosette figured it was a worthy distraction. "Bad news?" she asked.

"Not really...but the news has hit the fan, so to speak." He looked up, banished the lines between
his eyes with a brilliant smile. "Nothing to worry about. Standard stuff. Nothing alarming."

She turned away, toward the fridge in her kitchen, intent on drinking as much ginger-ale as her stomach could handle--lately she'd been craving it, along with the Baja Mountain Dew from Taco Bell, and anything with steak. And cheese. And potatoes. "You're protesting too much, to badly paraphrase a Shakespeare quote." Damn, she should have made him stop at Taco Bell on his way here. She grabbed the bottle of Canada Dry and snapped open the plastic top. "When should I expect my bodyguard to arrive?"

"Since we're headed to London next week, it will start right after you return," Tom said, pushing the refrigerator door shut. "In the meantime my own security will keep doing double duty, and if you get anything threatening, email, notes, a tweet, text, whatever, I don't care how miniscule, if it gives you a single moment of pause, you let me know instantly. Do you understand?"

There it was again. That dominating, controlling tone. But she knew he was just being protective. He was a celebrity, she was pregnant, they had reason to be a bit paranoid. "Yes, Tom, I promise."

He approached her, and his hands drifted down to her midsection. While she wasn't comfortable so much with him touching her below the shoulders, this was his child, after all, and she didn't feel right swatting him away when he went to touch her extending belly. "How's my little Beatrice today? Upsetting her mummy's tummy?" He eyed the Canada Dry.

"No, just craving soda," Cosette said, having to suppress the urge to melt into the gentle motion of Tom's fingers on either side of her belly. A part of her was furious for giving in to this charade, and another just desperately wanted it to last as long as possible. The last, and biggest part, was just plain terrified of what it meant that she was growing more and more comfortable with Tom's doting on her and taking care of her and making decisions for her -- like when she was going to London -- every day. It wasn't like she had other things to do. Summer was dragging on and she was not facing the end of it like she normally did. The thought of not going back to work depressed her a little more every day and she just wanted to be distracted from it.

Tom was a brilliant distraction.

"Hungry at all?" he asked.

She nodded. "I was thinking of Taco Bell."

His face contorted into a horrible mask of revulsion. "Taco Bell?" he echoed. "Why on earth--"

She cut him off with a glare. "I'm craving a steak burrito."

"But surely we can do better than Taco Bell, darling," he pleaded.

"Chipotle does a good steak burrito, but I really want Taco Bell," she pouted.

"How I can possibly resist those beautiful eyes," he sighed. This time she couldn't help herself. She rolled those "beautiful eyes."

"Shut up and get me a burrito. And some quesadillas. And a couple of crunchy tacos."

In the end they decided to go together. In spite of herself she wanted to stay in Tom's company. The car seemed a safe place. She even held his hand as he drove to the Taco Bell she always went to when she craved it. Idly she played with his fingers as they chatted about mundane things.

"How are you keeping busy?" Tom asked her. "It's getting close to the new school year..."
"I've been plotting how to decorate the baby's room," she said, tracing between his knuckles. Her brain kept remembering the things those fingers could do. How they felt when...

No. She viciously shook it off. These second trimester hormones had played havoc with her resolve but she'd stayed distracted. Maybe being around Tom too much was a mistake. Maybe going to London with him was a mistake too.

And it didn't help that he kept wearing those little white v-neck T-shirts that showed off his long, lean arms and the slenderness of his neck, the bit of chest calling to her to place her lips upon it.

No. Again, NO!

"What were you thinking?" Tom asked, and for a moment Cosette stared at him, wondering if he'd followed her thoughts. At her look, he clarified, "For the baby's room?"

"Oh, um...purple and blue, maybe indigo," she said. "Kind of a lacy border around the middle of the room. I was going to get the room cleaned out of all the stuff in it. We haven't even bought a crib yet, but I haven't found the right one I like, and..."

"You're not going to clean it out yourself," Tom said. "I don't want you to do too much strenuous activity. It's not good on your body."

She took a moment to catch herself. Tom was just concerned, and yes, he was bossy, but it was the kind of bossy that was watching out for her. As if he were her husband. So she counted to five in her head before she bit out a snide reply, and said, "Yes, I know I can't do any heavy lifting. I was going to ask Henry if I could pay him and his brothers to do it."

"Pay him?"

"Well I'd offer at least. He'll probably do it for free but it is heavy lifting. Plus there's stuff I have to box up before we move it...I CAN do that," she added with a touch of force. Tom nodded.

"You didn't think to ask me?" he said.

She sighed, but kept her tone sweet and demure. She'd practiced it. It was easier to deal with Tom if you let him think he was getting his way. "When would you fit it in? I've hardly seen you for more than twenty minutes at a time this past week. And you're going to Australia after my visit, you have a two month shoot coming up...you've been great, sweetie," she said reassuringly, "but I didn't want to impose on your busy schedule."

"Mmmm. There was something else...you have the washer and dryer in the basement, right? I don't want you carrying laundry up and down the stairs anymore either."

"Even if I make two or three trips, in small loads?" she said, her voice carefully neutral.

"Very small loads. You want to walk up and down those stairs all those times?"

"I need the exercise, Tom. And I don't go fast. I promise I'm careful."

He eyed her. "You mean you already did it?"

She nodded. "Yesterday. And I made three trips and went very slow and everything was fine. My dad was already on me for it."

He sighed. "Well at least you listen to somebody."
She tightened her hold on his fingers. "I listen to you, Tom. I'm going to London with you, when you said, and I've cooperated on all this coming-out stuff."

He nodded. "Yes, that's true." They arrived at the restaurant, ordered her food, and Tom ordered a few things for himself. Unable to wait, Cosette tore into her cheese quesadilla, letting go of Tom's hand in the process, as they drove back home.

"Hold up a sec," he said teasingly. "No starting without me."

"Want a bite?" she offered one of the cheese triangles.

"Driving, love."

She reached over, dangled the corner close to his lips. With an impish look at her, he accepted a bite from her hand. She continued until the piece was gone.

"Maybe I should just keep driving," he said when he finished the slice. "Make you feed me my entire meal."

"That would get messy with a burrito," she laughed. "So I guess I'll get to use that International calling plan you upgraded my phone with so I can get a hotel for the week--"

"Hotel?" Tom echoed.

"Yes, Tom," Cosette said firmly. "We need a hotel."

"You could stay at my house, I have room," Tom argued, but at least he tried to make it sound like he was offering. "And your sister is going to be there, she can chaperone. It would be fine!"

"Hotel," Cosette repeated. "Sorry, sweetie, but you put me in a bigger spotlight and I'm not giving people any more fodder than they already have. They know we did the deed, else I wouldn't have this wocket in my pocket."

"Exactly, so what does it matter?"

"Because it does," she said, calmly and with finality.

He sighed. He seemed to know what lines not to cross, and she was grateful. "Let me deal with it," he said. "I'll get a hotel set up."

"Uh huh. You'll get it set up. Along with the other millions of things you do every day," she deadpanned. "And then you'll forget and it'll be 'oops, guess you'll just have to stay with me tonight, oh, no, you're already spent one night, just say here.' No Tom, I'll call."

"I said I'll call," he insisted as they pulled back into her driveway. "I'll do it right now. I have people who do these things, you know. It won't take more than a few minutes." After they got inside, he was true to his word.

8 8 8

He was having the dream again.

It was so vivid and clear, sometimes it was easy to forget he was dreaming.

He stood in the middle of an open cabin -- no walls, just support holding up the roof, keeping the sun from beating down too hard. Outside the ocean was so serenely beautiful, it glittered like
sapphires and aquamarines. But it was not quite as beautiful as the woman emerging from it -- Cosette came through the frothy waves as they pounded against the beach, gloriously naked, her hair hanging around her shoulders but seemingly untouched by the cold water.

Tom stepped to the edge of the cabin as she approached, the sun making her pale skin glow like alabaster. Everything about her was exaggerated -- her hair coal black, shimmering with purple highlights, those amethyst eyes, ruby lips -- but as Tom reached out for her, hand extending, something glimmered on his finger.

A band of gold -- or at least he thought it was gold, the way the sun hit it lit the metal to the point where he couldn't quite tell. She smiled at him, reached to take his hand, and he pulled her toward him, wanting to absorb her. Her skin, although it seemed cool, was warm where it touched him, and her breath was sweet, as well as the smell of her. Her hair brushed against him as she spun around, laughing, teasing him as she let her head fall back against his shoulder. Her other hand reached up to pull his face closer to hers for a kiss, and he caught the same glimmer on her hand -- only topped by a brilliant diamond.

In dreams, there are things you know. Tom knew she was his wife. And this thought made him ridiculously happy.

Then they were on a bed in the middle of the cabin, making love, and he could not get enough of her. It felt like their first time together, but more -- more loving, more tender, more sweet, and certainly less frantic, less guilty. Things felt...complete.

Tom would wake with the dream burning bright in his mind for the first hour of the day, but the details would fade. The only thing he could clearly recall was that in the dream, she wasn't pregnant. At least not at first. Sometimes when they lay together on that dream bed, her belly would swell under his hand, but not always.

This time he was roused from the dream so abruptly that he forgot he was having it. He was lying on his bed in his rented flat, with his script across his lap, his chin resting against his chest, as he had nodded off. The thing that had roused him -- his phone -- was shrilly filling the quiet room with its foul noise. He muttered a few curses under his breath and picked it up.

"Did I wake you, mate?" It was Luke.

"Yeah, but..." He checked the time. It was a little past ten. He'd come home from Cosette's a few hours ago, as she usually didn't like him hanging around her house past dark. "I shouldn't have been sleeping. I was working on the script."

"Still working on it? Thought you'd be all ready by now."

"Well, I've been a bit distracted." Yes, distracted. He hadn't fully realized HOW distracted until this moment. But being a father...it was a big deal. A worthy distraction. "But I've got a bit of time before we start, and rehearsals. It'll be fine."

"Yeah, I'm sure. Look, the reason I'm calling is to update you on a few things. The article dropped hard, man. And there's been mixed reactions. You're getting mucked about a bit on the fact that you're got an oopsie pregnancy and you're trying to cover it up. On the other hand, at least you're taking responsibility for it. People are saying 'Peter Pan has gotta grow up.'"

Tom grunted. He eyed the clock again. "You called me first thing, didn't you?" he said. "It's barely past six and you felt this was urgent enough to call me before you've even had your coffee?"
"Well, it's not so much that...this is what we expected, really. But there's a small faction of your more rabid fangirls, and while they're not a majority by any stretch of the imagination, they are being very loud, and they're calling Cosette every vicious thing in the book. So I'd tell you, mate, don't let her get online. Don't let her look around. Keep her from it until it blows over."

"Which will be when?" Tom asked, anger starting to rise through the skin of his neck and flush his cheeks. "She's going to have a baby. Wherever my name is, hers will be connected to it. This is a permanent thing, Luke. This is my family we're talking about."

"I know, mate. Look, I'm going to suggest something. I'm not sure you'll go for it. But it might shut up some of the louder ones."

"What's that?"

"Twitter."

Tom's stomach twisted. He had been burned on Twitter more times than he wanted to count. While he was quick to reassure anyone that he was just a man, like anyone else, the thin line between celebrity and admirer was even thinner on Twitter. Any crazy person could call him whatever he or she liked on it, and while he could scroll through the feed and ignore the negative, it was hard not to catch things here and there. And he was only human, after all.

"I'm not saying spend a lot of time on it. I'm saying a few well placed messages here and there. Like how we should all be celebrating new life, not tearing each other down, how those who truly deserve respect give it, how you're happier than you've ever been, whatever. You're good at coming up with something profound. It's going to be a bit before that written article comes out and we need something to stop the flow in the meantime. Or just thank people for their support and best wishes during this incredibly special time in your life. I don't care. But something. Unless you want us to do it."

"No, no," Tom said. "I can write my own tweets, thank you. All right, I'll think about it. Should I text them to you first before I post? Just to be safe?"

"Yeah, that'll work. All right, 'nite, mate."

"Night." Tom hung up and went back to his script. The anger had woken him up and he needed a distraction. He considered calling Cosette, but it was almost ten thirty and she'd been pretty sleepy -- she was probably in bed and he didn't want to risk waking her up.

It was one in the morning when his phone went off again. Somehow he'd gotten a second wind and was still sitting in his bed when her name came across the screen, along with the picture he'd taken of her during those months when they'd been not-dating, before that one fantastic night. She was in her classroom at the end of one of her long days, and she was reluctant to let him take the picture, until he'd told her she was just as beautiful at the end of the day, a bit rumpled, as she was first thing in the morning when she was fresh as a daisy.

"Hello?" he said, suddenly concerned. Why would she be calling him this late? Had something happened...?

"I'm fine, Tom," were her first words. She chuckled. "Did I wake you? I'm so sorry if I woke you."

"No, I was up, actually. Working on my script. What's going on?"

She giggled. "I had to call you and tell you. I can feel the baby moving."
Any chance had for any sleep that night evaporated. The excitement flooded through him. "Moving? Seriously?"

"I've felt little things on and off over the last few weeks, but it's all felt like gas and I couldn't pinpoint much. But tonight I can feel a little tapping. I think it's a foot kicking. Or a hand, maybe. I don't know. But it's distinct. I got up to go to the bathroom and when I laid back down I felt it." She giggled again. "I just couldn't wait to tell you. I didn't think you'd want me to wait---"

"No, no, I'm so glad you called!" He couldn't stop smiling. His cheeks ached with the smile. The doctor had told her that it might take a while before she was able to distinguish the baby's movements from her own body's, but once she did she'd be able to tell the difference much easier. "Is there anything you can feel from outside?"

"No, unfortunately," she pouted. "I was trying to figure out where you might feel it but it's not strong enough to feel through my belly yet. Sorry."

"It's okay," he sighed. "As long as you're feeling something." He suddenly felt horribly sad. What if it happened while he was filming? He'd have to wait until he returned to feel it too! He started to formulate a plan in the back of his head to take a break some time during the middle of the shoot to pay her a visit, so that way the time away wouldn't run too long.

Suddenly things started to stretch out before him. Days and weeks and months and years of development, of changing and growing, sleeping through the night, the first laugh, the first word, the first sentence, learning to crawl, to walk, to run, potty training, putting on her own clothes, brushing her hair, her teeth. The first day of school, learning to read and to write, learning her maths, which she'd be better at than him, if she had Cosette to help her. With Cosette, there would be the religious ceremonies, her christening, her first Communion. Her little white dress, all her little dresses, and then her developing self-image. Her first crush, her first date, her graduation. It would all happen so quickly, and where would he be? He'd be doing his job, what he loved to do more than anything or anyone else on the planet, and suddenly it didn't feel like it was the first priority in his life anymore, which felt wrong, contradictory. But the thought of losing any of those precious things...

"You there?" came her voice. Strong, soft. Patient.

"Yeah, sorry. I drifted off there a minute."

"Mmm. Yeah, I know. It gets more real every moment, doesn't it?"

He smiled into the phone, emitting a low, throaty chuckle. Then he grew serious. "Cosette," he said, "will you do me a favor?"

"Depends on the favor. But if I can I will."

Her sweet voice, lightly teasing, mockingly defiant. She'd been pliant to him to a great degree, in spite of her imposed limits. If it wasn't something that violated her morals, she would yield to him. She had been so generous, really. So many other women would have extorted him and even threatened him. Some wouldn't have carried his baby at all, treating it like an invader, to be flushed from their bodies like a parasite. But not her. He was hit with a great rush of feeling for her. Gratitude, warmth, but most of all, love. He had known men talking about falling deeper in love with their wives, their girlfriends. He understood it now.

"I don't want you to get caught up in any of the gossip that's going on," Tom said, and noted a mild tremor in his voice. He cleared his throat, willing it away. "Just...don't start googling things,
okay?"

There was a long pause. "Cosette?" he said.

"I'm afraid you're a bit too late," she said in a small voice.

"Oh, darling..."

She chuckled, but it had a dark edge to it. "I think 'whore' is the worst they're calling me. And
gold-digger. I expected it, though. And it's not most people, just some of your pissed-off fangirls. I
can't blame them, Tom. They're just jealous. They like their fantasy. And let's admit some facts
here, it's not like we didn't do anything wrong."

His stomach twisted again. He hated it when she talked about their relationship as if it were
something to be ashamed of, a mistake to be regretted. "You are not a whore, Cosette. And you're
not a gold digger. I don't want to ever hear you entertaining or defending those attitudes, do you
understand?"

She was sheepish when she replied, and he felt bad for his tone being so harsh, but he wanted to be
clear. "Yes, Tom. I know." She sighed. "You don't think any of them will do anything, do you?"

"No, but that doesn't mean you're not getting a security guard when I'm gone. In fact I'm going to
make sure there's one waiting for you the second you return from London. I should have already
had one in place by now--"

"Yes, Tom. Thank you for watching out for me."

The words were unexpected. He didn't know why but he'd expected a dry, sarcastic comment from
her about him being overprotective. And it was twice in a row he'd gotten a "yes, Tom." "You
feeling okay?" he asked.

She giggled again, much more softly this time. "Oh...feeling a little cruddy about the stuff I
shouldn't have looked at. Nobody likes to be picked apart or speculated over."

"Tell me about it."

"And it's getting harder to sleep. Harder to get comfortable. Now that I'm hyper aware of little
Beebee kicking around in her rented room. And I'm...lonely."

The last word was muttered so softly Tom hardly heard it -- but he did. "Lonely?"

She sighed. Clearly she was reluctant to extrapolate. "I'm just thinking...about you going away for a
few months. I've gotten spoiled, Tom. You're been taking care of me, watching out for me...I'm
going to miss you. Silly thing is, I'm already missing you."

"I'm right here," he whispered, smooth as chocolate silk, through the phone.

"Yeah."

He had made her a promise. Nothing would happen. But he could control himself. What was
wrong with a little comfort? Slowly, hesitantly, he said, "Do you want me to come over?"

"At one in the morning? Don't be silly." But there was a note of something in her voice. That
reluctance. That doubt.

"We were at your house a few weeks ago and nothing happened. And neither of us can sleep. And
you're right, time is precious. And I really want to see you, now that I know you can feel our little mermaid swimming around in there. I made you a promise that nothing would happen. Nothing is going to happen."

His wish -- if he was being completely honest with himself -- was that he could at least cuddle with her on the bed. Put his hand over her belly and wait and see if he could feel anything, no matter how small. Hold her close, smell the shampoo she used in her hair, the almond body butter, and her own, tangy, spicy smell underneath that. But he highly doubted, even if she did let him come over, that he would accomplish any of that.

"I wish I could say yes," she said, and there was that steel in her voice, that firm confidence that had first drawn him to her, the one that was her own person sticking her own creed of beliefs no matter what anyone else said. "But no, Tom. Thank you, though."

It was his turn to sigh.

"Well," he said, softly. "We still have video chat. Which I expect you to learn how to use."

"I will. I promise.""

"And maybe watch Twitter. Luke is trying to get me to tweet something."

"Tweet what?"

"Something about us. Something to diffuse some of the hate. But I honestly have no idea what. Anything I think of sounds tacky."

"Tacky?"

"I mean, it's not promotion for a film. That's what I usually use it for. I used to be a lot more comfortable with it but...well. Social media is one of those double edged swords."

"You're brilliant. You'll think of something. Okay, I'm getting a little sleepy now. I'm going to go back to bed."

He didn't want her to go. Maybe what he said next was a bit inconsiderate, but it was almost as if he couldn't help himself. "Well, at least you can sleep in in the morning."

It worked. "Yeah." Her tone was definitely duller. He instantly felt like an ass.

"Just trying to look on the bright side," he said. "And next week you'll be on a plane to London with me and your sister. I hope this isn't going to interfere with her wedding plans too much."

"Oh, didn't I tell you? She and Henry postponed it until the end of January. So that I'll be out of the maternity clothes and...well, hopefully recovered."

"You're due at the beginning of December. That's two months later. Of course you'll be recovered."

She gave a dark little laugh. "Do you know what happens to women after they give birth, Tom?"

"Um..." He'd been reading "What To Expect" on his kindle, but maybe it was the late hour, his brain wasn't registering it.

"There's this thing called lochia. It's postpartum bleeding. It lasts something like four to six weeks. The first two are the worst, like the heaviest period I'll ever have in my life multiplied by three or something. And she didn't want to risk me bleeding all over my bridesmaid's dress."
"FOUR TO SIX WEEKS?" Tom said when the shock had passed. "My g....I mean, periods are only a week, right?"

"Well, you gotta get everything out of there. All that stuff that was in there to support the baby has to come out. All those fetal membranes--"

"Okay, I don't..." He stopped himself. She had to endure it. The least he could do was listen to it.

"It changes color, too. Starts really red, and then over time turns more whitish. You can look it up if you want. L-O-C-H-I-A."

"Now I know why women get push presents," Tom murmured.

Her laugh was much lighter this time. "No, you don't have to buy me a push present, you're more than generous with the child support -- "

"Which you've hardly touched!"

"And anyway, Christina is talking about having a baby shower for me in October. Quite frankly I want everyone to donate to a crisis pregnancy center instead of buying me gifts, except I know people want to get cute little baby things. Maybe I'll donate them to the crisis pregnancy center...especially after Beebee grows out of them."

"Let me know when the shower is. I may have some friends who want to come. And the gifts will be worth it."

"I'm not inviting your rich friends so they can bring me expensive gifts! I'm fine with anyone you want coming, but maybe we should have them donate to a crisis pregnancy center or something. That'd sit well with some of those Hollywood liberals." He could hear her evil grin as she said it.

"Can I be there?" Tom asked.

"Where, at the baby shower? I don't see why not. But you might be bored. They play all kinds of silly games."

"I don't care. I want to be there. And you might feel awkward around my 'rich Hollywood liberal friends' if I'm not there."

"What, afraid I'll say something that will embarrass you?"

"No, of course...well, maybe a tiny bit."

She sighed. He expected to hear a smile in her voice when she spoke next, but there wasn't. "Well. Hopefully they'll be good sports and play the little party games my sister comes up with."

"She's excited about this, isn't she?"

"Yep. She loves the idea of being the 'fun aunt.' And wants the practice for when she and Henry start having kids. Speaking of sisters, do yours know?"

"I called them after Mom. They would have killed me if I hadn't told them myself." It was far too late at night to get into that, he decided. Besides, neither his mother nor his sisters had exactly taken the news well. Worries about Tom being allowed to be a father, about distance, about Cosette's character, about money, about how it would all appear to the public, and most of all, about the child herself, being raised by two people who weren't "together." It had taken some
convincing that they had it under control, especially that Cosette was trustworthy -- she'd seem too good to be true, his mother had thought, and of course his mother was skeptical, considering most of the people with whom he usually associated.

"And your dad?"

"I, uh...had my mother talk to him. I'm going to see him soon after we get there -- I'll talk to him first."

"Is he going to be upset?"

"More because we're not getting married. Which is totally hypocritical of him considering he and Mom had three kids when they got divorced. Apparently it's okay to not be together after the kids are born, but not before."

She had to have heard that bitterness in his voice. Even he was surprised by it.

"If you want me to come with you when you go to talk to him," she said softly, "let me know."

He fell silent for a long moment, considering. And then he realized it was almost two in the morning. She wasn't just speaking softly, she was getting sleepy. This was not a conversation for the middle of the night. "I'll keep that in mind," he said. "Thank you."

"Any time. Okay, I'm seriously going back to sleep now. G'night Tom."

"G'night, Cosette."

8 8 8

It was three days before they were going to leave when Tom showed up at Cosette's house, his entire body seeming to vibrate with purpose.

She let him in, feeling a certain amount of trepidation. After their middle-of-the-night conversation he decided he didn't want Henry and his brothers doing what he felt should be his responsibility, so he'd been over every day for hours on end, mostly moving things out of one of the spare bedrooms in preparation for her turning it into the nursery. They'd been to the store at least three times, choosing paint, getting equipment, setting everything up to make the job as simple as possible. He had even gotten someone in to steam the carpet once the room was empty. As for the actual painting of the room, it was decided that it wasn't too strenuous for her to do it, as she wouldn't be lifting anything heavier than the paint brush or paint roller, and Christina had reassured him that she would be helping, so Cosette would definitely not need to lift any of the heavy paint cans -- although they had gotten smaller cups to dip into the larger cans to scoop paint out.

Truthfully, Cosette was beyond grateful. Everything lately was feeling overwhelming. The thought of flying to London, meeting Tom's family, dealing with the press, seeing the nasty things written about her even by only a few people -- she found her normally independent nature being compromised in favor of just letting Tom deal with everything. Half the time she daydreamed about just crawling into his lap and letting him coddle her however he wanted.

When he had offered to come over that night, the resistance to the idea had cost her. It wasn't so much sex -- although she knew how easily it could become that. The week before they "bumped uglies," as the fans so colorfully called the act, she had given in one by one to those urges to be closer to him, crossing the boundaries one at a time -- first letting the kissing become more passionate, letting her hands wander, then his, and in the midst of this exploration, his lap had become a familiar haven. But in moments like this, weak ones, she only wanted to feel him, feel his
arms around her, feel his lap underneath her, his chest against hers, the sound of his voice soft and close, the vibrations it made passing through her, his fingers stroking her hair, her skin.

Most of all, giving her the feeling that //she wasn't alone.// Maybe it would help her sleep. She was getting those strange adrenaline jumping wake-ups in the middle of the night, and she couldn't figure out why. She hadn't said anything to Tom, as they weren't terribly frequent, but they were coming at least once a week. It hadn't happened to her since she was a teenager, since before she went to live with her grandmother. If they continued, she knew she'd have to say something and she didn't look forward to the blowback.

"How are you?" Tom asked as he entered. It was his standard question. He wanted a check-in.

"Fine," she said. "I'll admit, a bit tired."

"You seem down, lately," he said. They were standing close, in her kitchen. She wanted to put a few feet of space between them but she just didn't have the strength at the moment.

She nodded. "There's a lot going on, Tom," she said with a dry chuckle. "And..." She stalled. She didn't want to sound paranoid. "I'm just worried about when everyone at work is going to find out what's going on. I mean, I don't know how connected to gossip any of them are. Most of them don't do much outside of Facebook. And it's getting close to the new school year, so they'll be back, talking to each other." She thought of Shelly. Shelly would find out first. Maybe she wouldn't say anything to the others, but she would know. Cosette always checked her phone with anxiety, waiting for a call or a text. She didn't know what she would say. "And then there's the parents. They'll be particularly harsh."

He looked troubled. "Most of the response has been positive...or at least neutral," he said, "but no, I don't like the thought any more than you do. Although I think my reasons might be a little different."

She watched him carefully. "Different how?"

He shrugged. "I don't like the thought of anyone saying anything bad about you," he stated plainly. "Not a single one of them seem to understand your moral integrity." She must have worn her thoughts on her face because he went on. "One lapse in judgment hasn't destroyed your character. I can personally attest to that."

He reached out, gently laid his hand on the bump that was becoming more prominent daily. A tingle ran through her; she wanted to fold herself into him, press that bump against his lean abdomen as she wrapped her arms around his slender waist.

"I've given this a lot of thought," he said, meeting her eyes. "I really have to insist, Cosette, that you and Christina stay with me while you're in London."

Instantly the objection rose up in her, and his eyes fluttered shut wearily as the sigh left him. "Just hear me out, please, I have good reasons."

She closed her mouth, and it was an effort not to cross her arms.

"I live in a gated community," Tom said. "Security is excellent. And right now safety is the most important thing on my mind. If anyone gets any crazy ideas, I know for sure that nothing will happen if you're in my house. I am going to go utterly crazy with worry if I have to think about what could go wrong in a hotel. Do you know how many times fans have found my hotel and hung around outside? Truthfully they've mostly been benign but don't think security hasn't had to catch
one or two of the more...brazen ones. And now with things being as they are, the situation being as delicate as it is, and you being in your condition, I cannot take any kind of risk. And I think your parents would agree with me."

"Have you asked them?"

His cheeks colored a bit. "No, I wanted to talk to you, first."

All she could see in her mind's eye were her parents' expressions if she told them they were staying at Tom's. Her mother would be more subtle but her father would just about explode. At first, he'd order her not to like she was a little girl, then contain himself, say she was an adult and could do what she wanted, but it was wrong, it was a mistake.

Tom was getting much better, over the months, reading her facial cues. "Cosette, paps get into hotels all the time. They've never, ever gotten into my neighborhood. And don't think they haven't tried. London paps are a bit more of a ruthless breed than your American ones."

She squirmed. It did make more than a certain amount of sense...

Seeing his opening, he went on. "Plus, you're traveling a long way from home, in a foreign country. I want you as close to me as possible, so that I can take care of you. I mean, isn't that my responsibility? You're carrying my child, don't I have just as much responsibility for it as you do? And I know that so far, everything has been stellar on the health front, but on the very outside chance that something happens, you being in a hotel will make it worse, not better. You being at my house means I'll be able to act instantly."

"Christina will be with me," Cosette argued, but it sounded weak to her own ears.

"Christina isn't Beatrice's father," Tom countered. "And I hate to pull this card, I honestly do, but...I want my child in my house. I want you there, I want our family together. I know we aren't married, and we've put the cart before the horse, but there's no getting around that anymore. And we are a united front, Cosette. Don't hate me for saying this but as you've been so concerned about how everyone is going to see us, how is it going to look if you come to London and //don't// stay with me? You might see it from your perspective but let's be honest, 99% of the world won't. They'll think something is wrong, and that will start rumors. We don't want rumors to start and undermine everything we've been trying to do."

"What kind of rumors?"

"I don't want to speculate."

"Humor me," she said, voice a bit sharper.

He shrugged. "That I'm keeping you at a distance, that I'm just using you as an incubator, or that you're using me for my money, that we're not really a couple but are in a convenient arrangement...it will go mad after that, Cosette, all kinds of crazy labels...is it worth it?"

Cosette sighed. This was the problem she'd dreaded -- everyone already knew they'd done the deed. Everything felt backwards. Nobody was going to blink an eye at her staying at his house since it was already too late -- closing the stable door after the horse has already run out, so to speak.

But she would know.

Again, he was reading her face perfectly.
"Nothing is going to happen, Cosette. Christina will be there, and I've given you my word. Have I given you any reason to doubt me?"

"Nothing will happen //then,//" she said, and her voice was soft, driven only by what was left of her will to get the words out. "But it doesn't happen all at once. Earlier this week you wanted to come to my house in the middle of the night and just...cuddle."

He shook his head. "That was wrong. I know why you said no. It was a moment of weakness--"

"But Tom," and her tone turned nearly pleading at this point, "don't you see that's how it happens? I didn't just all of a sudden fall into bed with you. You probably don't remember but I do. It started with a wearing down of my resistance. Touching each other in more intimate places, cuddling, passionate kissing, taking down the barriers one by one until there was nothing left to barrel through. No resistance. This is another barrier, don't you see? We make an excuse to take it down and then we find out it works fine and we do it again and again until..."

She trailed off into silence.

His voice was pained when he spoke. "I love you, Cosette. I don't want to force you. But my conscience insists I take the best care of you that I possibly can."

She nodded. "Your points are all valid. Some of them are even right. I can't think of any reason to say no other than the fact that...my conscience says it isn't right."

Another long silence as they both thought. It was an impossible stand-off.

"You're worried about how it will look?" Tom ventured. "When you and I know that nothing is happening? People are already thinking that, Cosette. They're going to think whatever they're going to think anyway. But you and I will both know the truth. And outside of that, does anyone else matter?"

Yes, she wanted to say. Everyone matters. But he was right. Everyone already thought whatever they did. How was staying with him, in a separate room, with her sister there, going to make it worse?

NO, that little voice insisted. No.

But relationships are about compromise, the louder voices said. And he had been so good about being respectful about so much. Couldn't she give him this? He wasn't being unreasonable. He wasn't asking that much, was he?

So she caved.

"All right, Tom," she sighed.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up -- One week (and seven chapters) in London!
Chapter Summary

Every time Tom comes to the Tom Bradley International Terminal in Los Angeles, he gets photographed. And this time it's with Cosette. But once arrived in London, Tom has a surprise for his lady love.

Cosette had been on the transatlantic flight to London from the Tom Brady terminal at LAX once before, but she hadn't received the kind of treatment that Tom got.

A phone call to the airport brought extra security and an escort. Their luggage was piled high on top of the baggage carts Cosette always saw but never used, figuring she could drag her own roller bag easily enough. But with a protruding stomach getting rounder by the day, it wasn't so easy to carry anything. She could manage her purse and a small shoulder bag with her iPad and a book, and that was it. She waddled next to Tom, her hand in his, with Christina and Henry behind them -- he had brought them, and come inside to see his fiancée off on her trip, of course. A security guard brought up the rear, and two people from the airline pushed in their luggage carts. It was a bit of a parade in her opinion, but it was worth it the second the first pap shouted to Tom.

"Tom!" came a voice that was unfamiliar, yet acted like it was familiar, "is this your fiancée? Cosette, what do you think about having Loki's baby?"

They had talked about this in the car. Henry had driven them, leaving Tom and Cosette in the backseat, and his instructions were very clear.

"No matter what happens, just keep smiling and don't speak. Even if I say something, just don't engage them."

"Won't that make it worse?" Cosette had asked. "Not engaging them just makes them more desperate."

"That's why you leave it to me to say anything. But they'll try to get a reaction from you. Usually they're pretty nice to me when I keep it calm and light. But I don't know what they'll say to you and if they piss me off it's going to take a lot not to show it, and it won't help if you say anything."

"What if they piss ME off? Do you think they'll insult me?" She was liking this less and less.

"I don't know. But it's best to just not react."

"I'm not an actor, Tom. If I get pissed, I'm going to show it."

"What if one of your students pisses you off? Don't you hide it then?"

"No, because that just lets them think they can do what they did again. I'll try to hold my tongue but I can't guarantee not getting mad."

"Just try not to say anything, then." His words were a bit harsh, but his tone had actually been very warm. He rubbed the back of her hand, sliding his fingers along her wrist. "It'll be okay, it's just a few minutes. They don't let them come up past the guardrail to the check-in desk. I might talk to
Luke about getting you some media training when we come back. Learn how to deal with these things from a better teacher than me."

Cosette looked at the pap. A skinny man, on the younger side of middle-aged, a bit scruffy looking. She wanted, desperately wanted, to snap that she wasn't having Loki's baby because TOM WASN'T LOKI, but bit down on the tip of her tongue.

Tom shifted and slid his arm around her shoulder, pulling her closer. "Hey mate," he said, his voice genteel, "be cool, all right?"

"How far along are you?" the pap continued, undaunted.

Tom shook his head at the pap; it was a slow swing, not harsh, but his glare spoke volumes. The pap seemed to get the message, and that undaunted attitude finally cracked.

How was it possible that Tom could do things like that, and only did people listen and respond, but nobody got mad at him? The pap, to her surprise, slowed down at the approaching guardrail. "Ok, thanks, guys! Safe flight!"

"Thanks man," Tom said with just enough friendliness in his dismissive tone that Cosette knew everything would be fine. This, too, was part of the unveiling of her place at Tom's side. Seeing her going to London with him would set the tongues wagging, off to meet her overseas in-laws, except she and Tom were not engaged. Not even close.

But you couldn't correct them. That was how they got you. Tom had warned her about that, too.

She let out her breath when they stopped. Tom had her and Christina's passports in hand along with his and dealt with the desk personnel. They chatted politely while Henry and Christina said their private goodbyes. She watched Tom interact with the staff, how he was treated like their favorite nephew. Every single courtesy they could afford him, they did. Tom had already gotten them all first class tickets, so they were going to wait in the first class lounge for their flight, but was there anything else they could assist him with? Did he wish to visit the duty free shop? Of course they would escort him through security. Just let them know if there was anything else they could assist him with, thank you so much Mr. Hiddleston!

Cosette and Christina were exchanging smirks by the time they were moving again.

"Should I be jealous, I wonder?" Cosette mused playfully.

"Definitely," Christina deadpanned. "They're much sweeter to him than you are."

"I can hear you," Tom said from in front, but he was smiling when he looked at them over his shoulder. "Christina, you've got a huge shoulder bag, what did you bring?"

"Magazines for the baby shower, a few on bridesmaids dresses because I still can't decide on the one I like best, and some Sudoku for when I get bored. And I want to visit the duty free shop because I want to buy some tax-free alcohol for the flight."

"There's a full beverage service," Tom said.

"They never have the right brand of tequila!"

"You are not doing tequila shots on the plane!" Cosette admonished her.

Christina sighed. "I didn't want a big bottle. And tequila puts me to sleep. It's a long flight, Cozy,"
she pleaded.

"A small bottle, then," Cosette said. "And I'd love some tax-free Godiva chocolate."

Tom chuckled. "Fine, we'll visit the duty free shop. I'll even get your tequila for you, Christina, just don't let Cosette have any."

"Too bad she's pregnant, you'd really get to see something if I gave her tequila," Christina laughed.

"Shut up," Cosette muttered.

"Oh, now I'm curious." They'd reached the security check-point, had to hand over the passports and tickets, and did the routine to get through the metal detectors, and it wasn't until Cosette had her box of Godiva Truffles and Christina had her small bottle El Gran Jubileo Blanco Tequila, and only thirty-five dollars, thank you very much, that Tom remembered to ask again. Much to Cosette's chagrin.

"She actually gets more sober," Christina said. "The more tequila she has the more sober she gets, at least it seems. And then she gets up in the morning and it's like she's raving drunk. Weirdest thing I've ever seen, someone's tequila hangover making them act more drunk than when they're drinking."

"What kind of drunk is she?" Tom asked, looking at Cosette as he said it.

"She loves EVERYONE, usually. But tequila drunk she is a bit...more acidic. It's like the truth just start falling out of her mouth and--"

"And how is that any different from how I usually am?" Cosette snapped, tired of being discussed as if she weren't there.

"Oh, you know perfectly well there are things you'd say under tequila you'd never say otherwise," Christina returned evenly.

"Now I am very curious," Tom mused. "I have to test this theory someday."

Her only reply was a snort.

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Tom settled into his seat on the plane, and finally felt the stiffness in his shoulders start to release. As he watched the two sisters pour over the magazines and discuss baby showers and bridesmaids dresses, he felt himself actually able to relax.

The British Airways Transatlantic flight was definitely a luxurious one. The new design allowed for each passenger to have his or her own pod -- a seat that stretched into a bed, a private television, and little drawers for them to place personal items for the duration of the flight, considering it was twelve hours. Tom had arranged for one of the two-person pods for Cosette and Christina -- even though each bed was still isolated, she wasn't thrilled at being that close to him in her sleep, and he respected her boundaries -- and he had one for himself just across the aisle. He knew they would all be up and about during the flight, switching places as they went -- he'd already talked to Christina about that and she was a rather helpful ally, he found.

Christina had pointed out that Tom's house had two wings -- he'd drawn them a little sketch when her father had been skeptical about the sleeping arrangements at his house -- and that the enclosed porch/hallway between them that also acted as a foyer for the front door separated the wings. She
and Cosette would stay in the bedrooms on the far side of the kitchen, whereas his master bed and bath was all the way on the other side. Locked doors would also be of great benefit, she'd pointed out. And it would save them money -- although her father was quick to offer to pay for the hotel if money was an issue.

In the end, Raymond had shrugged and said the girls could do as they chose. He trusted them to make the right decision. Cosette still hadn't looked quite comfortable with her choice but she was going to go along with it because, after all, Tom had the right to shelter and protect his child. And Isabella...well, her face was like stone, but she said nothing. Still, they had hugged and kissed the girls goodbye with reminders to call and warnings to be safe.

And Tom felt like he had won a major victory.

After going through the magazines and talking idly, Cosette and Christina watched a movie and Christina dozed off, having had a few shots of tequila during the film. Cosette stayed up a bit longer, reading her book until she too, dozed off. Tom got up to cover her with the blanket and adjust her sleeping mask over her eyes, before he also fell asleep.

That was the problem with planes. You couldn't really fall into a deep sleep. The most he could manage was maybe three hours. When he woke, Christina had already gotten up and Cosette was watching television again. She gave him a little smile and wave as he got up and stretched.

"Do you mind?" he asked, pointing at the seat Christina had evacuated.

"Yeah, she has a tendency to take forever in the bathroom," Cosette quipped.

"What did you two decide on for a dress?" Tom asked, gently removing Christina's stuff from where it lay scattered on her seat and placing it in the cubby nearby.

"Christina is a huge fan of pink," Cosette said. She quickly found the magazine she was looking for and showed him a page. The dress was a soft, light pink, and smooth, no decorations except on the shoulders, which seemed to have some kind of sparkly material on them. It seemed a very tailored, tightly fitted dress around the bodice but a flouncy, almost ballgown like skirt.

"You will look stunningly lovely in that," he said. "Although I think you'd look better in lilac."

She smiled. "Well, I brought my long purple cardigan, since you told me the weather in England is usually pretty mild compared to our hot Los Angelian summers. Although it won't get too nasty in LA until August. And speaking of clothes," she said with a bit of a worried frown, "you said we'd be guests of Ralph Lauren at Wimbledon? Does that mean they're going to have us wear his clothes?"

Tom nodded. "Last year they lent me a pretty sharp suit. I imagine they'll do it again this year."

"Do they do maternity wear?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I did some internet research just to see and I didn't find anything. So I was just wondering...do they know they're dressing a pregnant woman?"

"Yes, I mentioned it," Tom assured her. "I'm sure it'll work out, Cosette. These people know their business."

"Christina seems to think they'll put me in a shift dress. I'm just worried that it won't fit because of
"They'll tailor it for you, babe, don't worry about it," Tom tried again.

"We're only there a week, Tom."

"I'll call them when we land, okay? Make sure. Although they usually fit me a few days in advance just to be sure, I'm sure they're planning to do the same thing for you."

She nodded. "Okay. If you say so." Christina came down the aisle, saw the two of them talking.

"I hope you don't mind," Tom said apologetically from where he was sitting in her seat.

"No problem, just pass me my bag," Christina asked, reaching out. Tom passed the bag and she plunked down in his vacated seat. "Were you showing him the dress?" she asked.

"Yeah, pretty in pink," Cosette said. "Even her wedding dress is a pale pink, paler than this but definitely pink."

"Women only wear white wedding dresses because Queen Victoria started it," Christina said. "Not out of any kind of virginity thing."

Tom arched an eyebrow at this, his gaze falling on Cosette. He was curious if Cosette's mindset was something her younger sister shared, but knew it wasn't any of his business. Cosette must have read his face because she was giving him a bit of a squinty-eye.

"If they have, she's never told me," Cosette said to him very softly, only so he could hear.

"So have you eaten any of your chocolate?" he asked, changing the subject.

She gave a little startled noise, said, "Oh, I forgot!" and pulled the box out. She unwrapped it with gusto, eager to get to the orbs of sweet chocolate goodness containing various fillings. Tom was able to wiggle some bites away from her by looking pathetic, and he even got her to put a few directly into his mouth, but restrained himself from doing anything he knew would be too lascivious, such as licking the pads of her fingers, as much as he wanted to. Although it was difficult, when she would pop the half of a truffle he'd bitten from right into her mouth. He suddenly understood her need to be protected from herself.

They landed, eventually, exhausted and sore and stiff, and while it was in the middle of the night in Los Angeles, it was early morning in London, and the sunrise greeted them during the drive home.

Tom would up with both ladies leaning on him in the back of the rented car, arms around both their shoulders to keep them upright, but when he let them into his house, they seemed to perk up.

It was a beautiful house, he had to admit. He'd been there almost five years and it still struck him when he would walk into the main room, how high and bright it was. His own bedroom was off the main room, toward the front of the house, while theirs were on the other side, against the walled garden.

As tired as he was, he got their luggage to their rooms, showed them the basics, and got them settled in. The house was stocked with necessary supplies, thanks to his assistant who took care of things when he was away. He made them a bit of breakfast before both of them were so tired they were nearly dozing into their eggs.

"You two should get a good nap in," Tom said as he cleared his table. "We're going out tonight, to see some of the sights. You'll be jet-lagged so you'll have a hard time sleeping tonight, so it'll be
good for you, use up some of your energy."

Christina needed no further prompting. After she rinsed off her plate she headed up the stairs and into her designated bedroom. Cosette approached Tom at the sink and gave him a thank-you hug from behind. She felt warm and limp against him, and Tom had to turn around and get a little distance between them, putting his hands on her shoulders and urging her to go to bed with a tiny little push in the right direction. She kissed his scruffy cheek and headed into her room with a little wink. Tom heard the click as she locked the door behind her.

As he finished up with the business of settling back into his house, he felt himself too elated to think about a morning nap. Cosette was here, in his home. Something about that felt so...//right/>. Like he'd been waiting to slide this particular puzzle piece into place and now something was complete.

He told himself to hold onto that thought as he went to call his father.

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The London Eye was something Cosette couldn't help but find exhilarating and terrifying. She wasn't the biggest fan of heights, but the cars were large and moved slowly, so she reminded herself to just be calm and breathe. The pods weren't going to tip or break off.

The capsules were egg-shaped and were on sliding runners that allowed them to turn freely as the big center wheel spun, so that they would stay upright at all times. They were solid on the bottom but windowed on all sides and even the top except where the runners wrapped around the center, allowing for their movement. Tom had somehow arranged -- the way only a celebrity can -- for their pod to be private, and only he, Cosette, Christina and Tom's personal security Olly entered.

It had been an amazing day. Even in the haze of sleep deprivation she'd been able to admire the sights of London from the back of the car as they headed to Tom's house from Heathrow. With his long arm around her, she was comfortable and felt secure, felt taken care of, felt...loved. Tom always worked to make everything as smooth and effortless for her as he possibly could, and she felt ridiculously grateful. She was also grateful Christina was there, or else she'd be tempted to thank Tom with kisses -- and that was how everything had started last time.

He cooked for them, had everything ready at the house for his guests, everything clean and comfortable, so when she was done with breakfast -- or dinner, her jet-lagged brain couldn't keep track -- she just collapsed into the bed as if it was hers.

A big, fluffy down-filled comforter covered her as she sunk into the bed, thinking idly as she drifted off to sleep about future days being spent here with a little bundle in her arms. Would Tom set up a nursery for visits? She tried to make a mental note to bring up the subject, but the next thing she knew she was surfacing from a heavy sleep to the sound of someone knocking on her door.

She picked up her phone and saw that the current time was after two p.m. Jolting further awake, she got up, used the loo, brushed her hair and teeth, and then got dressed. Not that she hadn't been dressed before, but clothes worn on an airplane and then slept in, no matter how comfortable, needed to be changed.

She came out into the kitchen to find Tom and Christina there, both of them having been conversing rather lively on some subject that abruptly ended when she entered the room.

"Good morning, glory," Tom said cheerfully from the stove. "Hungry again?"
Her stomach informed all in the room that yes, she was very hungry.

Tom pecked her cheek and gently moved her to the table in the breakfast nook, where Christina was sitting, and brought her a coffee, with the cream and sugar already in, as she liked it. Then he set a plate of pasta in front of her, and a glass of ginger ale, and she tucked in.

Apparently Tom had been warned, or knew from experience, how grumpy she could be after just waking up.

That was when Christina had informed her that they were going to get a private car on the London Eye that night.

Cosette gripped Tom's arm much tighter as the capsule rose. To Tom, this was probably old news; he stood by the outer glass wall, between her and the vision of the world getting farther away, as if shielding her, and didn't seem much interested in the view. His eyes were instead on her face, watching her reaction.

It was just past sunset, and the twilight was fading into night, and the lights of the city were coming alive. Everything glittered like distant Christmas tree lights, “fairy lights” as the British probably called them. As she got used to the slow, gentle rise of the pod, she started to relax, and slowly, Tom edged her closer to the window, so she could look out farther.

Olly was somewhere in the background, unobtrusive. Christina wandered toward the other end of the pod, her cellular phone in hand. She had called Henry earlier and talked to him, having told him earlier that she wanted to call him that night from the pod and share it with him, so they were having their private conversation on that end.

Tom's arm was around her waist now, holding her against his hip. They were reaching the peak, and hadn't spoken much. The Thames ran before them, Big Ben and Parliament across the famous river, and Cosette smiled, thinking of how Tom had humored them after their late lunch, after letting her get a few extra hours of sleep, playing tourist guide and taking them to the international attraction.

"Did you have a nice time today?" he asked, his other hand wrapping around her, settling against her bump.

She nodded. "Thank you. For everything. Your house is...pretty impressive."

He gazed down at her. Even with the view outside, she found it hard to look away from him. How she could still find him so attractive, even after everything...the pull of his brilliant eyes, the softness of his smile, the combination of fine English nose and high, razor-sharp cheekbones...every time she looked at him echoed back to that first time.

It couldn't //just// be physical attraction, could it? Even staring at a sparkling diamond eventually lost its dazzle, but Tom didn't. It had to be more. She knew she loved him but she wasn't sure what to make of that love half the time. She didn't understand it, and mostly she didn't trust it. But here, with him, it felt natural. It felt simple, and easy. She relaxed against him, as the capsule hit the peak of its rise, and slowly edged its way over to make the descent.

"I wanted to give you something," Tom said, his voice a warm rumble.

"More presents?" she chuckled. "You know you don't have to."

He grew thoughtful, looked away as if contemplating something. His eyes grazed over the view outside and then returned to her. "When I said I wanted to marry you, I meant it."
She should have stiffened. But somehow, in this moment, she felt herself open to listening to him. He sounded like he had something particular on his mind.

"I know you won't let me propose. I'm not going to, I know you'd say no. But even if...even if you hadn't gotten pregnant, I would have...I don't know. Tried again, maybe. Given you some time and then...tried to talk to you. I know you're not happy about what we did, and I have to admit I understand that a lot better now than I did before. But none of it has changed how I felt. Just because this has happened--" he briefly rubbed her belly, "that doesn't mean it isn't real, what's between us."

"I know that," she whispered. She felt she should say more, but nothing came to her.

"If I could propose to you, I would," he went on. "Even if our engagement lasted the next five years, I'd wait. I'd wait until you were sure you could commit to me and trust in my commitment to you." His voice was soft, melodic. "But being with you has taught me the virtue of patience."

She had to smile. "Me too," she replied.

They shared a little chuckle. Then he grew serious again. "I do have something I wanted to give you."

He let go of her and briefly walked over to Olly, then came back bearing what was obviously a jewelry box, covered with dark blue velvet. He placed it into her hands, and pulled open the lid, revealing it to her.

At first, all Cosette saw was the amethyst heart pendant at the center, surrounded by much smaller glittering white stones that might have been diamonds -- she was always awful telling stuff like that. When her eyes were able to take in the rest, she saw the pendant was attached to a double row of pearls, bound with gold and set with smaller, round amethysts between the double row.

She must have been silent too long, because Tom looked mildly concerned. "Do you like it?"

"Help me put it on?" was her answer as she looked up at him.

His smile was blinding even in dim light as he removed the necklace from the box and placed it around her neck. They could see their reflection in the curved glass against the night sky, and she reached up, her fingers caressing the jewels delicately as she admired it.

"It made me think of your eyes when I saw it," he whispered.

She gave him a smile in the reflection. "I love it," she said.

"I'd like to think of it as pre-engagement present," he said, hesitant. She felt herself slowly begin to tense at the thought, and to break that train of thought, she said;

"Not a pre-push present?"

They shared another chuckle. Then Tom kissed the side of her head, and she leaned back into him.

"I'm so happy you're here, Cosette," he whispered.

Outside, the view of London rose as they descended, things growing bigger as they came to the end of their ride.
Chapter Summary

Shoe is on the other foot -- now Cosette gets to meet Tom's family.

"Don't you have anything in purple? Light purple, lilac, lavender, whatever?"
Cosette was looking at him with amusement, but Ellen, the stylist, was frowning.
"We'd have to get one specially made, and it's a bit last minute."
"Tom, this is fine," Cosette said. The sheath dress was a very pale gray, and it almost fit her, just a little bit tight around the bulge around her lower abdomen. They were going to tailor it -- it was currently the largest size they had and a bit of material would have to be added, but someone was assigned to the rush job and they assured the couple it would be done in time. On top of the sheath dress, a cardigan sweater and a matching hat would be provided, considering London's mild weather, but also the fact they'd be in the sun.
"It goes very well with Ms. Mitchells' jewelry," Ellen reassured him. Cosette unconsciously touched the large amethyst gem, having worn it at Tom's request for the fitting. "And with this darker gray suit for you, you two will be very well matched."
"You can get a purple tie if you want, Tom."
Tom shook his head. "I'm not wearing a tie to Wimbledon."
She arched an eyebrow. "You're wearing a waistcoat but not a tie?"
Tom was satisfied to see Ellen giving Cosette the same look as he was.
"It's different," he explained.
"You will both look very sharp," Ellen said. She had a very faint French accent, and Tom was tempted to speak a little French with her, just to show off a bit for Cosette. He was still considering it when Cosette changed out of the dress and came back into the main room, back in her deep purple cardigan.
"Can she just wear that over the dress?" Tom asked, liking how the slightly shiny material of her cardigan accented the purple of the necklace.
It was his turn to be on the receiving end of an incredulous look from both women.
"It won't match," Ellen said politely.
"You want me to wear something off the rack over a tailored designer dress?" Cosette asked him softly.
"Yeah, forget it," Tom sighed.
Cosette smirked at him but said nothing.
After the fitting, they had lunch at a nearby restaurant. Christina had been invited to join them but after the very late night she was desperate to get a bit more sleep before the big dinner, and was sleeping in as late as possible. Plus Tom had assured her there were plenty of neighborhood places for her to grab a bite to eat and left some petty cash from the house fund which he kept around for her to do just that.

Before Cosette had gotten up the other morning, he had the opportunity speak privately with Christina. He told her that he made arrangements for her to hang out with his sister Emma and some of Emma's friends a day or so after the family dinner, so that he and Cosette could have a proper date at a very nice restaurant. It wasn't supposed to be a public event, he assured her. It was just a date, a time for them to talk and regroup after meeting the family, and check in with each other. Christina had been game for the idea -- she knew her role as chaperone was going to put her at the mercy of their schedule, and was eager to have a little fun -- but told Tom that her father had pretty much ordered her to make sure she was with Cosette by 10 p.m.

What exactly made that hour so dangerous, Tom wasn't sure, but he certainly didn't want to make things any worse with Raymond, so he had agreed.

Cosette asked him questions about the menu, asking what certain food items were, what he recommended that she might like. She was unable to decide between two dishes, so Tom ordered them both for her. It was the first time she'd ever asked him to order for her, and it surprised and pleased him at the same time.

"You're always so nice to me," Cosette said as they waited for their food.

Tom waited for her to continue -- the slight frown on her face indicated she had more to say.

"Is that a problem?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I just...sometimes, I feel like I don't really know you."

Well that escalated quickly, he thought. "We've talked about so many different things--"

"No, that's not what I mean," she said. "I know your likes and dislikes and your passions and opinions on lots of subjects. I even have a vague idea about what makes you tick. But I don't...//know// you. How you'll react to certain things. What sets you off. I don't know all your sides, your moods and how to deal with you when...when things go wrong. I don't know...." she shrugged, aimless. "I know what you've let me see," she finally finished.

He leaned forward on his arms, hands folded in front of him. "Do I always seem like I'm on my guard?" he asked.

She shrugged one shoulder. "I've seen you be vulnerable sometimes, that's true, but...well, maybe it's my fault. Maybe because we haven't really...settled...into this relationship, because so many things are up in the air, I feel we're still stuck on the 'showing our best side' mode."

"You want to see my not so great side?"

She chuckled. "I feel like you've seen mine often enough."

He frowned a bit, shook his head but was still smiling. "If I have, I haven't judged it."

Her face fell a bit. Tom scrolled through what he'd just said. But before he could counter, she said, softly, "Maybe that's it. Maybe you're afraid I'll judge you. I mean, let's face it, I've done it enough."
"That isn't what I meant," Tom said. "And you've seen a lot more of me than I usually let show."

She shook her head. "I just get the feeling sometimes that it's not easy to be close to you."

"Do you think it isn't easy to be close to me?" he asked, mildly alarmed.

"I don't think I am...that close to you," she admitted. "I mean, all of this--" she indicated with a wave of her hand. "You've pampered me, coddled me, taken care of me. You've bossed me around a bit, yeah, but I've always known it's just because you're protective and I'm fine with that. But I feel like..." she drifted, searching. "It's only one side of you. Like your fans get that celebrity side of you, where you're charming and graceful and make them all swoon. And I get this side that's sweet and protective and not a little bit controlling, but not in a manipulative or selfish way. But if you and I are going to do this for real, you have to show me more than that."

A silence fell between them as they both thought about what she just said. Then, she gave a uncomfortable little laugh and started talking again.

"I want to tell you to relax, and even in my head it sounds ridiculous to tell you that, because I know I'm the reason you can't. I've been...afraid of this. Afraid of us, of saying yes, let's do this, even though I know I agreed we were going to try. But I don't think you believe me, and I know why. That's my fault." He opened his mouth to object but she made a gesture at him with her hand, "No, let me finish.

"We're together, Tom. I don't know, maybe being here, being in your home, meeting your family tonight, it's finally hit me. This is us. We're a couple. And I'm...I've been keeping you dangling, haven't I? Well, if I have, I'm sorry. I'm not going to do that anymore. We're together and I'm not going to bolt at the first sign of a problem. So we have to get past this stage of trying to impress each other -- or at least you trying to impress me. I'm here, I'm in."

Tom considered her words. It took him a bit to really process them, but she was patient, munching on her appetizers when they came, and let him just think.

"Part of me wants to hear what you're saying as 'stop being so nice to me,'" Tom said with a chuckle. "But..."

She shook her head. "You've spoiled me, that much is true, and I'd be dishonest to say I didn't like it. But even you can't keep up this pace for the rest of your life."

"Maybe not this pace, but I'm always up for a challenge," he replied. Then, he went on, "I think the whole thought of us having a child has made the focus a bit fuzzy. I know you tried to get me to see it, but...you know, I don't know if we've ever talked about our past relationships before."

"Superficially, when we were dating before...well, before this," she said with a little pat on her belly.

"Have you been in a relationship before? I mean, anything beyond a few dates?"

She thought for a moment, then shook her head. "It never got past that stage of trying to reel each other in. And I will confess, usually I was the one who needed reeling. I've never been as harsh on anyone as I've been on you," she admitted, a blush accompanying her words.

He gave a little shrug. "It's not like I haven't deserved it."

She looked down at her hands, examining her nails, still in that dark purple nail polish she seemed to favor. "That day that I told Richard that I was having a child, that I was leaving the school," she
said, slowly meeting his eyes. "You remember."

He nodded.

"When my dad dragged me into his study, he told me to stop pushing you away, because eventually you weren't going to bounce back."

Tom's eyebrows nearly went into his hairline. That Raymond had said that about him was utterly astonishing. "I thought your father hated me."

She gave that one-shoulder shrug again. "Dad's a realist. He doesn't hate you so much as he doesn't trust you. And he's even more protective of me than you are, understandably. He still thinks you're going to hurt me. So I've been holding back, because I'm just waiting for the boom to drop. But..." she let out a long sigh. "I'm not going to do that anymore." She gave a little half smile. "Or at least I'm going to try really hard not to do it."

Tom gave her a bashful look. "Would you like me to point out to you when I think you're doing it?"

She scrunched an eyebrow. "As long as you promise not to be pissed when you do it. And not totally take advantage of it."

He snort-chuckled. "Right there. You want to trust me but something won't let you."

"Do you trust me?" she returned.

She had him there. He'd wanted her trust, but how much had he honestly given it? "It's not an easy thing for me. It's never been."

"I've figured that," she said. "I wanted at first to chalk it up to me being so prickly, but after a while I saw it was just the way you were. I'm not that different, Tom. My reasons are different but trust is still hard. Especially when, and I'm not saying this to push you away, but I have to be honest if we're going to do this, when that trust was misused so early."

"Okay," he said, his tone calm. "So, also in the spirit of talking about this without fighting, do you blame me for what happened? I mean, have you forgiven me?"

"I don't blame you as much as I blame myself," she answered. "Sometimes I blame myself entirely, for a long time I did, but you knew how I was, and if you'd truly respected that, you wouldn't have let it happen. I blamed myself more because of course you're going to think it was okay if I suddenly give you the green light. Then I kept thinking, wouldn't it have struck you as weird, for me to just turn a 180 like that? Wouldn't you have made sure it was okay? Of course, I could have stopped it at any time, so again, on me. But that's what did it, Tom. That is the thing that won't, or wouldn't, let me trust you. Even when you promised me it wouldn't happen again."

Tom thought for a long moment. She used the word "suddenly," but was it really so sudden? That entire week before, Cosette had been upping the ante. Letting him stay with her later and later. Kissing him longer, letting herself explore, inviting him to touch her more intimately. The conversations they'd had in which he realized how innocent she was, sexually, and some of the questions she'd asked him with her cheeks a bright, hot pink. He suspected she was working herself up and he'd never said anything, never questioned her. He'd been too excited about the prospect, too drawn in by what he had seen as her new openness to him.

And then that awful morning when he knew how badly he had fucked up -- literally. What changed your mind?" he asked.
"I'm not completely sure. It didn't help when you wanted to come to my house that night we were talking so late."

"The night you felt Beebee move," Tom said.

She nodded. "I think it was...this sounds kind of strange, I know...how you handled getting me to stay at your house. You didn't push it at first. You held back, and then when you honestly felt you just couldn't anymore, that you had real, valid reasons for your concern, that's when you presented your case. And the fact that you were willing to face my parents over it. Definitely the efforts you've gone through to make sure I don't feel like I'm in any...danger, for lack of a better word. Plus you've kept a certain amount of distance between us. I felt it that first morning when I hugged you. When you pushed me to go to bed. I felt a change, I think. I don't know, am I imagining things?"

He shook his head. "No, you were spot on. You are spot on. I'll admit it's still a struggle, but...I've never bothered with the struggle before."

She was looking at him, and something in her face...something warm, something he had longed to see for such a time, it was there. It was blossoming. He felt a strange tingle in his chest, something finally begin to unclench.

She extended her hand to him across the table. He suddenly had a flash of her sitting in that restaurant, telling him she was carrying his child, and how all he'd wanted was to hold her hands.

He took it, palm to palm.

"I love you, Tom," she said, her fingers pressing against the skin of the back of his hand. "And I'm here, I'm in this with you. But you have to let me in."

"I will try," he said, echoing her earlier words.

"Would you like me to point out to you when I don't think you're doing it?" she teased.

"As long as you don't do it when you're pissed, or take advantage of it," he returned.

They both laughed. At that moment, their food arrived.

8 8 8

Cosette was so nervous, Tom turned to her when they were getting out of the car and asked if she was feeling all right. "You're almost completely white," he said.

She didn't want to tell him. She just smiled at him and said, "Might still be a little jet-lagged. And, well, come on, this is a big deal."

He nodded, but smiled. "It's going to be great. They'll love you."

She didn't think so.

The shoe was on the other foot, to use the old idiom. And she knew how harsh her own parents had been to Tom. These people didn't know her at all. They knew she was not a celebrity, and that their precious son was, and she had gotten "knocked up" by him. And she wasn't going to marry him, at least not yet. He was supporting her, and what was he getting for it? Other than her declaration earlier that day, jack squat. For all she knew, they saw her as totally taking advantage of Tom's money and position. Maybe they even thought she'd done this on purpose.
She was trembling slightly when Tom let them into the house. He had a key, but she trailed behind, utterly self-conscious about going into a stranger's home without express invitation. Christina gave her a little nudge.

"Come on, sweetie, you got this," her sister murmured.

Diana Hiddleston was plump, sweet, and very British. She kissed her son on both cheeks, and when she was introduced to Cosette, she gave her a huge smile and a warm hug.

"Have you been having a nice trip?" the older woman asked. "Weather agreeing with you?"

Cosette nodded, trying to make herself relax. She had almost expected the woman to be cold to her and the welcoming attitude was a tremendous relief -- except in the next minute Cosette reminded herself that these people were British and rather high-class, and would never mistreat a guest, no matter how much they looked down on her.

"Tea for you ladies?" Diana asked after Christina had been introduced.

"Tea sounds perfect," Christina said. "I think you need to make my sister's extra hot, get some color back into her cheeks."

"She's not usually this pale," Tom said to his mother.

"Oh dear, are you feeling well, darling? Tom, make her comfortable. She's in a delicate state. The kettle is nearly boiling by now."

"Do you need help?" Tom asked, even as he started to shepherd Cosette to the couch.

"Yes, please, can I help?" Christina offered.

"Oh no darling, please sit down," Diana admonished. "My daughter is out in back and she'll return in a few seconds to help."

Tom's knuckles grazed Cosette's cheek as he attempted to gauge the temperature of her skin. "You're dry, too," he said. "Your skin feels papery. Did you drink enough water today? I don't think you drank enough at lunch. It's not good to get dehydrated in your state."

Diana was back in the room within five minutes with her daughter in tow, who was carrying the tea service. She set it down on the little table in front of the couch and was introduced as Emma by her brother. Cosette shook her hand with an extra squeeze. Then Tom bounced up to move a few chairs closer to the little table for his mother and sister, and all five of them sat around in a circle, getting comfy. When he returned to Cosette's side she grasped his hand, and he gave her a reassuring wink.

The conversation revolved around Cosette. Where she grew up. What she did for a living. That she was a Catholic schoolteacher seemed to work somewhat in her favor, and there was no hint of disapproval from either Emma or Diana. But Cosette also didn't entirely trust that -- suppression for the sake of appearances seemed to be a British creed. But the more she talked, the more she was able to relax -- talking was what she did for a living, and she was good at expressing herself.

And all the while Tom quietly plied her with cup after cup of tea. Every time she'd finish one, he'd reward her with a chocolate biscuit. And then make her drink another cup to wash it down.

"I think it was dehydration," Tom declared. "The color is finally back in your cheeks."

"Tom, don't crowd the poor girl," Diana chastised him. "Is he always like that?" she asked Cosette.
"Since we found out about Beatrice," Cosette answered.

Diana shook her head. "Such a nag. Let the girl breathe, Thomas! Although I know, first pregnancies are always so full of surprises, but after that it gets much easier."

Now Cosette's cheeks were definitely bright red. Beside her, Tom just smirked.

"Does he always hover around his girlfriends, or is it just the baby?" Cosette asked.

"I haven't seen him like this before," Emma said with a little frown at her brother. "But honestly he doesn't bring too many of his girlfriends home. The last one was that pretty blonde, Lizzie, the actress?"

Tom's face darkened a bit. They had talked a bit more about their relationships and lunch, and Tom had talked about her more than once during their early days, in light conversation.

"This is a bit more permanent," Tom said.

Cosette deftly switched the subject, asking about the time Diana spent as a stage manager. This set them off in several directions. They wound up talking about all manner of things, and she and Emma and Christina bantered, exchanging sister stories, all of them trying to get to know each other in the limited time they had.

And all the while in the back of her head, Cosette kept comparing how the Hiddlestons were treating her to how her parents had treated Tom. She tried to tell herself it was different. That her parents were protecting her because she was in a vulnerable position, and Tom, in their eyes, was a predator. But it was perfectly legitimate for these people to think the same of her -- were they just more open-minded? Less quick to judge? Tom being an actor had worked against him with her dad and his history, but her being a teacher, coming from a stable family, what did that mean? She was from L.A. -- there were all kinds of stereotypes for that. She didn't come across as shallow and materialistic, but Tom had never come across as sleazy or superficial, either.

Cosette decided she needed to talk to Diana, alone, in a sincere heart to heart. But she didn't know how to accomplish that.

At around six, James Hiddleston, Tom's father, arrived at the house. He was much older than Diana, and the resemblance between him and his son was striking. While there were distinct differences, the two men had very strong shared qualities -- the width of their shoulders, the shape of their hands, and the high cheekbones that almost looked drawn onto their faces. And Cosette was rather charmed by the Scottish brogue, which she'd heard Tom imitate more than once.

James' arrival actually made Cosette relax, and not because the man was particularly nice to her. He was, in fact, rather distant, and this made her feel more comfortable. Here was someone, at last, who wasn't pretending everything was just fine. James gave her a rather skeptical eye, examining her closely, and she put on her best teacher mode, carefully maintaining her words and actions, not being fake but definitely acting in a more formal manner.

Tom's mannerisms seemed to share a similar shift when his father arrived. The two greeted each other with a brief embrace, a slap on the back in a manly way. Their conversation was cordial, slipping into more familiar territory as they played the getting-to-know-you game with Cosette again.

Finally, Cosette needed a break. Being a natural introvert, she needed a quick battery recharge, and plus it had been hours since she'd used the bathroom (although her teacher-trained bladder was
used to that kind of treatment) and she had drunk an awful lot of tea.

Tom showed her where the bathroom was, taking the moment to slip away with her. When she came back out a few minutes later, she found him pacing the hallway, checking his reflection in the decorative mirror hung on the wall, and generally keeping himself occupied as he was obviously waiting for her.

"You're still here?" she asked, her tone gently teasing. "I'm not going to get lost on the way back to the sitting room."

He chuckled. "It's not that. I just...I wanted to see how you were holding up. You've been fantastic but the vibe I'm getting from you is like an open house at your school, putting on the charming show for everyone. And since my dad showed up--"

"I like your dad, actually," she said.

"Really? I think he's been kind of critical--"

She snorted. "He reminds me a bit of my dad. Just not as loud."

Tom considered this. "Well, he was pretty annoyed with me when I told him about our situation. And then he wanted to know..." he shook his head, stopping himself. "Just, more about you."

"He wanted to know who this girl was that wasn't chomping at the bit to marry his respectable son?"

"He didn't say it like that."

She smirked. "Doesn't matter. It's a fair point. Did you explain it to him?"

"As best I could."

"Maybe I should explain it to him."

"No!" Tom said.

"What, you're afraid he'll be rude to me?" She was smiling widely now, she couldn't help it. "Come on, turnabout is fair play. I'd almost find it refreshing. Your mother and sister are adorable, and Christina and Emma are getting on like a house on fire, but your British gentility is starting to wear a little thin."

Tom stepped a bit closer to her, his hand sliding around her against her back, pulling her in. "I just don't want you mistreated in any way."

"You're so sweet," she sighed. "But you can't protect me. And besides, I'm a teacher. Getting mistreated is part of the job. I can handle pissed off parents, I can handle your dad." She reached up, stroked his cheek and jaw. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For letting you be mistreated. You haven't deserved it."

He blinked, looked down, shifted a bit, uncomfortable. "Yes, I have," he said, very softly.

She frowned. "No."
"Yes," he met her eyes again. "I should never have put you in this position. Getting you this way...it hasn't been honest. I've been so lucky...no, I've been blessed. If I knew then what I know now, I'd have done things so differently."

She opened her mouth to answer him, but she suddenly felt a little jolt down low in her gut. She gave a little jerk.

"That was strong!" she said, almost to herself.

"What?" Tom asked, eagerly. "Did Bea move again?"

"Yeah, that one felt strong enough--" she moved her hand around, trying to find it. It had to be a foot, an impulse kick. "Come on, sweetie, do it again--"

Another kick. Right around her own belly button. Cosette pressed, but Bea went still again.

"There?" Tom asked, his fingers covering hers.

"Yeah," she said, moving her hand to let his fingers press in her place. "Maybe for Daddy..."

They waited. Thirty seconds ticked past. But nothing. Both of them eventually let out the breaths they'd been holding.

"You two all right?" came Emma's voice, as she had just stepped into the hallway.

Both looked up at her. Cosette gave a little blush, squeezed Tom's hand over her belly. "Sorry," she said. "We felt some movement."

Emma's face lit up. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," Tom said, "but it's stopped."

"Oh, too bad," the younger woman pouted. "But don't worry, it'll happen. Cosette, does she move a lot?"

"Sometimes, mostly in the morning when I'm first waking up. Sometimes it helps get me out of bed," Cosette added with a chuckle as they followed Emma back into the sitting room. Her hand and Tom's had somehow not quite disengaged themselves and she wound up pulling him behind her.

"There you are, dears," Diana said as they returned. "We're getting ready to sit down. Your father went out for a quick smoke in the garden."

"I thought he gave it up," Tom said.

"That lasted a month," Emma replied.

"Actually, I could use a little bit of air," Cosette said, exchanging a glance with Tom.

"Out in the garden with the cigarette smoke?" Tom mused.

"I'll stand upwind," she said, giving his hand a squeeze as she let go.

"Should I--" Tom started, but she cut him off with a look. Whatever else he tried to say or do was lost as she went out the patio doors into the garden, where James Hiddleston was standing, smoking a cigarette.
"Oh, hello, Cosette," he greeted her. "You sure you should be out here with me, spreading my cancer around?"

"Not at all, sir," she replied. "Your smoke is going that way."

"No need to be so formal. You can call me James, or Jim, if you prefer. Diana was always a lot more for appearances than I was. Tom seems to have gotten that from her."

She graced him with the smile she gave a parent she was trying to win over. "No one in my family is much for appearances -- because we strove to be exactly what we looked like. We've always been pretty straightforward. This...situation has been a lot more difficult for them."

He eyed her. "Yeah, Thomas mentioned that."

"I can only tell you that this whole thing is very much out of character for me," Cosette said, coming straight to the point. "Getting into a situation like this, it's been quite a scandal because it's so...opposite of who I am, what I believe. And I don't think that getting married is the solution."

James turned to her, snubbing out his cigarette on a nearby ashtray that Diana had obviously placed there for the odd visit. "You do come straight to it, don't you?"

She gave a little shake of her head. "I felt you deserved it. Tom was most reticent for you to find out about this. Obviously your good opinion is very important and not easily won."

The older man was quiet for nearly a minute. "I've never heard my son talk about any woman he's been with like he's talked about you," he finally said. "And it's not that he's never talked about any of them. Don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that's good or bad. But very different."

"Well, none of them have fallen pregnant with his child before," she said. "Unless there's something he hasn't told me."

"Nah, Tom's always been really careful. And the fact that this even happened was alarming in itself. I knew the kind of man my son would get taken for in his thespian world. And to a certain extent I haven't been wrong. Forgive my crudeness, but men have a tendency to take what's offered. And if the offers are excessive, they respond excessively."

She translated what he said to mean: he's going to have women throwing themselves at him, and he's going to sleep around. She already knew that.

"I always felt," she said, "that if all the woman of the world would collectively close their legs and absolutely refuse to open them, men would find themselves behaving very differently."

James chuckled. "You ain't wrong, lassie." He paused. "So what's your excuse?"

"Being a much more miserable sinner than I thought."

"I like your honesty." He didn't smile when he said it. "So if you're from such a Catholic family, why don't you marry him?"

"Because that isn't what marriage is," she replied simply. "It's not a band-aid."

"Do you love him?"

"I do. But I'm not ready to be his wife. And, forgive me, he is not ready to be anyone's husband. I don't want to do a disservice to him and go too fast and have it explode in our faces ten years down
the line. If we made it that far."

James nodded. "And you gotta be sure of him, too, right?"

"Very much so. I'm terribly old fashioned and when I say I'm not getting divorced, you can believe that's honest, too."

"Well, I wish you the best in that." There was something so sad, so wistful in the way he said it, that Cosette suddenly felt her heart going out to him. "Shall we go back inside? They're waiting for us before they serve."

She nodded, moving to the step.

"Help an old man out?" he said, offering her his arm. She helped up him the step, and he held the door open for her.

8 8 8

The trip was an overnight one -- Tom lived a particular distance from his mother, and while it wasn't terribly far, it was far enough that if they stayed late, it would be easier to just stay over. Diana had set up the guest bedroom for the sisters to share, and Tom would take his old room, always ready for him whenever he came to visit. It would also make the next night much easier for Emma and Christina to go out with Emma's friends.

"We haven't shared a bed since we were little," Cosette commented. Tom overheard her from the hallway and paused in the doorway. The girls were getting the bed pulled down. It was a moderate full width, not a queen or king, and it would be tight.

"Are you both going to fit in there?" Tom asked.

Christina rolled her eyes. "I'll probably get kicked onto the floor at some point. That was when I called it quits before and demanded we each get our own room."

"How old were we?" Cosette mused.

"I was nine. You were twelve." The answer came with utmost assuredness.

"That's kind of old to still be sharing a bed," Tom said.

"I had night terrors," Cosette said. She gave a little look as if she couldn't quite believe she'd let that slip out. "Sleeping with Christina helped."

"Until she became a tosser."

Tom snorted and Cosette gave her sister a look.

"You realize that's British slang for 'asshole,'" Cosette said.

Christina shrugged, gave a teasing smile. "Oh well!"

Cosette tossed a pillow at her. "Just for that I'm using the bathroom first." She grabbed up her overnight bag and stepped into the hallway.

"You had night terrors?" Tom asked, walking close behind her. She stopped and turned.

"Yeah. Things weren't great at home." She fidgeted. "I told you about my parents, right? We didn't
have a lot of money, that's why Christina and I had to share a bed. I wound up sleeping on the floor on an air mattress we kept for company in the spare room until my dad cracked and got a cheap bed."

"But night terrors?"

She nodded. "Since I was five. They went away when I moved in with my grandmother. I was eighteen."

"What were they about? Do you remember them? What caused them?"

Cosette turned thoughtful. "I don't remember them much. More just flashes, but I would make horrible noises in my sleep and wake up from the adrenaline and then have trouble going back to sleep." She glanced around to make sure they weren't being overheard. "I think it was because my parents were fighting. A lot."

Tom was a bit gobsmacked. He knew that Cosette had not lived with her parents after she turned eighteen, that she'd been close to her grandmother, and that her parents had had a difficult history, leading to marital and then family counseling, healing a lot of wounds over time, but he'd never gotten the gruesome details.

"And that gave you night terrors?"

Cosette nodded. "I'd hear them shouting at each other sometimes, it would wake me up from a dead sleep. I was three when Christina was born; Mom went into labor in the middle of the night, and they had to leave for the hospital -- they'd called Gram and she came over to stay with me but I was asleep and didn't know. I woke up in the middle of the night and couldn't find my parents anywhere, and I went to the living room to see out the window if the car was in the driveway. There wasn't anything there. I thought I'd been abandoned. I started screaming and I woke up my grandmother who had gone to sleep on the couch, and she tried to comfort me, explain to me what happened. For fifteen horrible minutes I thought that I had been abandoned. I think that's what started the whole thing with me and Gram being so tight. I saw her as a rescuer."

Tom inched closer and closer to her as she told the story. He could vividly imagine it, a three-year-old Cosette wandering her house in her purple nightgown, maybe dragging a blankie behind her, wondering where her parents were. Screaming in terror at realizing she was left alone. By the time she finished her story he had his arms around her.

"That's awful."

"I had a bit of an abandonment complex after that," she said, her fingers playing with the buttons of his shirt. "For a while, I wouldn't even go into another room by myself, I was afraid of being alone. I got over that part in a few years but then when I turned five that's when the night terrors started. It wouldn't happen all the time, but regularly enough to be a problem, especially for school, because I would be so exhausted I'd fall asleep at nap time and not wake up for the rest of the day. First grade was absolute hell for me when nap time went away. Then when Christina was old enough to sleep in a bed, they just put her in with me, and it helped, because whenever I would get scared, I'd just roll over and see someone was there, and fall back asleep. But when I turned twelve I started tossing and turning a lot in my sleep, sometimes getting restless, and I was big enough to shove her out. So that's when I decided to just move into my own room, whether my parents liked it or not. They got with the program eventually. Especially when the air mattress popped and I almost had to move back in with Christina because the floor was killing my back. That's when she joined in on the crusade."
They exchanged a smile, but Tom rubbed her shoulders in a comforting way. "That explains a few things about you. An abandonment complex," he said.

She gave a little toss of her head. "Yeah. We all deal with things differently. Consciously or subconsciously. It has to come out."

Tom looked thoughtful. "I don't want anything like that to happen to our daughter," he said.

"Who does?" Cosette returned. "Nobody plans for those things. But my parents were...they were difficult people and when they were younger they didn't think things through. At least my mother didn't. She wasn't always what you see now. She used to be a lot more like Christina, only a lot more flighty and reckless. And really rather selfish. She's grown up a lot. Not many daughters get to see that happen to their mothers."

Tom was pretty sure that wasn't a good thing. It explained why Cosette was reluctant to let him get close to her, with her perception of him as someone unreliable. He hoped he had demolished that impression, but there was no way to know for sure. And some things were just ingrained too deeply. "It's strange to think of your parents being so...careless. Considering how protective they are of you now."

"That's why they're protective. Because they were careless when I was younger."

"We can't be careless."

"No, we can't."

They exchanged a meaningful look before Cosette disappeared into the bathroom.

Tom lay in bed that night, not quite able to settle into a deep sleep. His brain kept going to his daughter -- what kinds of mistakes were he and Cosette going to make that were going to scar the little girl for life? It was impossible to tell -- parents always seemed so shocked when their children wound up with these emotional or psychological scars from something they said or did that they didn't even seem to know they had said or done.

His parents had done it to him. The fighting between his mother and father had been awful. It was difficult enough adapting to boarding school at the age of seven, when he was only starting to become aware of the big world around him, but then having the underlying order of that world be ripped apart by divorce...developing a thick skin had been necessary to his continued existence. Putting on a brave facing, acting in general, had become second nature to him. It never ceased to amaze him how his more devoted fanbase insisted on calling him perfect, referring to him as a "unicorn prince," and then having the more rational fans point out that there was no such thing as either unicorns or princes. But for some, for him to be his imperfect self seemed to be an unforgivable crime. At least, the self he saw when he looked in the mirror. That shield he'd developed, the man with the easy smile and laugh, the one who charmed everyone, who remembered everyone's name, who honestly strove to treat everyone with dignity and respect -- he wasn't a full facade but he most definitely was not him on the most primal level. Not the him he thought of himself as. It was why he never liked to think about the Hiddlestoners. The way they saw him felt like a funhouse mirror. Distorted, but with that shining prince image just enough to be recognizable. It made him uncomfortable to be focused on like that.

Was Cosette right? Was he only showing her that side? Was he trying to be that person, to shield her from the ugliness that he knew existed inside himself? The shallowness, the one who wanted to sleep with whatever attractive woman was willing, who wanted to hide in other people's lives so that he didn't have to figure out his own? The one who knew, secretly, that he had double standards
but refused to admit it? It wasn't all bad, he knew it, but it wasn't the most gentlemanly image and
certainly not one that encouraged a large amount of trust.

Because if they did get married, if they did last...she would see it eventually. Better for her to know
now. That thought terrified him, though. She had already seen through his bravado once and
judged him very harshly, and he'd strove to show her a better side. But she had to accept both sides.
She had to accept all of him as he was.

Love was acceptance, after all.

Tom finally made himself go to sleep through a series of exercises he'd learned on one of his jobs,
and woke up a bit late, to the smell of freshly brewing coffee.
Chapter Summary

Tom and Cosette get a bit closer.

Chapter Notes

Short chapter this week. Very short, compared to others.

Fortunately, Cosette had managed not to kick Christina from the bed. But when she woke up at around seven, she was not able to get comfortable again in the limited space, and made herself get up.

Not wanting to walk around in her pajamas and robe, she got dressed in some comfortable clothes and made her way into the kitchen, where she found Diana, brewing some coffee. The two women sat down at the little table in the kitchen with their steaming cups, Cosette's with lots of cream and sugar, Diana's practically black, and had a little chat.

"Did you sleep all right, dear?" Diana asked.

Cosette politely nodded. "It's just getting harder, the bigger I get, to find a comfortable position."

"I'm so sorry, you must have been squished in that little bed--"

"No, it was fine, Tom got us extra pillows so I was as comfortable as I was going to get. And Christina was a pretty good sport, letting me have as much room as she could, for her niece. She put up with a pillow between us against her back so I could support my belly here."

"You and your sister seem very close."

"She's probably my best friend. Most of my friends from school have gotten married and had kids so we don't see each other as regularly. She's getting married herself in January."

"Oh, to a nice young man, I hope?"

"Yes, Henry is great. I adore him."

Diana opened her mouth to say something, but then seemed to reconsider it.

"It's okay, you know," Cosette said. "Go ahead and ask me. You want to know why Tom and I aren't getting married."

"No, I wouldn't pry," Diana said quickly. "You are adults and make your own decisions."

Cosette considered her. Yes, James was right, Diana was much more on appearances than James was.
"I don't know exactly what Tom has told you," Cosette said. "I have very distinct beliefs about marriage. And about sex before marriage, which makes this whole situation a bit more difficult. I would love to present myself to you as a moral, upright person, but this doesn't seem to be in tune with my actions."

"Not necessarily," Diana said. "You strike me as a very decent, caring person. You've treated Tom well. I would have not liked to see certain other women he's been with be in your position. They would have extorted him and manipulated him. From what I can see, you've done neither. And we are all grateful."

"This child is his. He's a father. I believe in a father's rights when it comes to his child. I would never deny Tom the right to be a father, and I want you to know that I will do my best to make sure you get to see your granddaughter, even if we're in two different countries. In fact, I want to exchange personal information with you, if that would be all right. With Emma too. So that you don't have to depend on Tom, at any point, to know what's going on with Beatrice."

Diana nodded, smiled, looked extremely grateful, and then her expression shifted to one of...concern. "I will pry this one time, and ask you, since you seem to be the kind of person who doesn't flinch from an honest question -- do you see a future for you and my son?"

The question surprised her, but didn't offend. "I am keeping my mind open," she said. "And I am trying. We are together, getting to know each other. But relationships aren't predictable."

"Certainly not," Diana sighed. "I just...with the way things are. And the way Tom talks about you. We're just concerned that because of certain past mistakes, the validity of genuine feelings are being called into question."

What had Tom told his mother about their relationship? But Cosette maintained the smile, stayed calm. "Tom has told me he loves me. And I love him. But I will confess, I'm unsure. The fact that I..." Oh great, now she was telling Tom's mother about their sex life. Wonderful. "The way he and I have been putting it, we put the cart before the horse, you follow me?"

Diana smiled in a way that showed she was not some naive old British woman who thought the stork brought babies. "Yes, dear, I follow you."

"Well, that sort of thing should not have happened. I was...I mean, he was my first, and I'm in my thirties, if that gives you a notion of my character."

Diana nodded, the wheels spinning.

"So of course I thought it was just a huge mistake and bad judgment and cut ties to prevent any more mistakes from happening. But God had other plans. And I'm not with Tom just because I'm carrying his child. He's made me see that we mean more than that to each other. But I'm not making any promises. We have to do things right this time, even with this...addition to the situation. This extra factor, if you will. And that means accepting the possibility that it might not happen. But even if it goes that way," she added quickly, "that will change nothing between you and me, Diana. I will still maintain contact. And Tom will always be Beatrice's father, period. I give you my word."

The older woman smiled at her, reached across the table for her hands, and Cosette gave them. "I don't want to give in to the stereotype of a pregnant woman being at the mercy of her hormones, but having had three children, I know there's a reason stereotypes exist. It's because they're mostly true." Both chuckled. "But I want you to remember something. Just because something starts off on the wrong foot, doesn't mean it's all wrong and needs to be chucked into the bin. You keeping
an open mind is all we can ask for. But something you need to know about Tom...he puts on a brave face, but he's a lot more delicate than he acts. He hides a lot of things, but he feels them. Very deeply. It will take you more time than with any other kind of person to get through to that, but it is there, I promise. Please, be patient. And I mean more patient that you've ever been with the worst child you've ever taught."

Cosette nodded. "I can do that."

"I like you, Cosette," Diana said. "I'm probably inflating your ego in saying this, but in spite of the situation, I am so happy that Tom brought you home instead of...well. Let's just say he has a wide range of tastes. I usually never know what he sees in a woman, it's always something different, but I can see what he sees in you."

Cosette blushed. "You're too sweet."

"Do you cook as well, dear?" Diana teased. "Are you a full package?"

"I do pretty well in the kitchen. Would you like me to make breakfast? Pass a test?"

Both laughed. "We can do it together. Tom is a softie for a good English breakfast."

8 8 8

Tom had sent the girls out to the shops a little after lunch. His work was building up a bit and he had phone calls he needed to make before filming started next week and his schedule became consumed by Loki.

He had asked Emma and Christina to help Cosette find a dress. Their plans for the evening were still unknown to her -- he wanted to surprise her with a fancy outing, then back to his house by no later than ten, as Christina had instructed. But in order to keep it a surprise, they hadn't told Cosette to pack a fancy dress, so it was necessary to buy one. Tom had given Emma the cash for it -- Five hundred dollars for a good brand name. He doubted Cosette would use it all. And he had even more doubt with the two girls ganging up on her that Cosette would be able to resist. He was not disappointed.

When she returned, she had a garment back with her and a very grumpy look on her face. The bag said Tiffany Rose.

"So why did I buy this dress?" Cosette asked, trying desperately to maintain a calm smile.

"We're going out tonight," Tom said. "I made reservations. Just you and me, for the evening. We'll be back at my house by 10, don't worry," he reassured her.

Cosette's face morphed from confusion, to surprise, and then into a smile that made Tom's heart do acrobatics. God she was beautiful.

"I hope my dress is good enough," she said.

Shortly after four, while Emma, Christina and Diana were sharing tea, Cosette emerged from the bedroom in lilac colored lace with a lilac satin bow high across her belly. The lace over her shoulders was sheer, the bodice down with a solid lilac layer underneath the lace, and the skirt skimmed the top of her knees in a scalloped trim, mirroring the three-quarter sleeves on her arms. The necklace Tom had given her was a magnificent crowning touch, and her dark hair hung in loose curls, partly aided by Christina's hot iron, around her shoulders.
"I don't know who's more stunning, you or me," Cosette said as she looked Tom over in his double-breasted grey suit, with its faint white criss-cross line pattern, a blue shirt and a dark tie, with shiny black paten leather shoes. Tom fussed with his cufflinks in nervous anticipation, hardly able to believe how gorgeous she was.

"That's an easy contest," he said, his eyes unable to leave her.

Diana pecked them both on the cheek on the way out the door, and Tom held the door for Cosette as she slipped into the back seat of the car he'd hired. They waved goodbye and then they were alone.

Tom reached for her hand as the car made its way into downtown London. "All right, before we get this evening off the ground," he said, "there's a few rules I want to lay down."

"Oh?" She arched one of those fine dark eyebrows at him. Tom felt a twitch deep in his groin. This whole abstinence thing was not going to be easy. He had flashes of their night together and it took a shake of his head to make them go away.

"I know that Beatrice is a favorite topic of discussion between us," he said, "but we're not parents tonight. We're just a couple on a date. A romantic date," he added with a wink. "It's about us, Tom and Cosette, not Mommy and Daddy."

She giggled. "Even if Bea decides to start moving?"

"Only if you're sure I can feel it," he said. "Or there's a problem, of course."

"Of course," she echoed with a flutter of her eyelashes.

Tom slid his arm around her -- his hand traced a line down her spine, lightly, through the fabric of her dress. She shifted away, her cheeks flushing, and Tom pulled back. He'd made a promise. No sense tempting fate.

"Just relax, darling," he whispered. "You can trust me. I want us to be together, to really talk to each other tonight."

"Did you have any other plans besides dinner?"

He gave her a little, mischievous grin. "It's a surprise."

His "surprise" had three acts. After a long dinner during which they talked themselves practically hoarse and he held her hand for so long he later could still feel her fingers wedged between his own, they made an appearance at an art gallery. There were a few photographs taken but it wasn't about that, Tom assured her. They wandered around, talked about the art -- Cosette was surprisingly knowledgeable, another thing he didn't know about her. She'd taught art more than a few times during her tenure as a teacher, and had visited more than her fair share of museums on various trip she'd taken over the years. Her favorite spot when she'd gone to Europe was the Louvre, she said. Tom made a mental note to take her to France just for that reason, the next time she was on his side of the pond.

Finally, for the third act, he took her to a very old and rather exclusive club that featured one of Tom's favorite activities of all time -- dancing. It was a strange mix of the old and the young, with an orchestra that played most of the formal dancing melodies, mostly for slow dancing and the occasional structured dance, and then a DJ would step in for a few of the faster sets, where usually only the young busted out their moves.
Cosette had seen Tom dance at that fateful school fundraiser, where she had told him to stop pursing her. She'd seen it again at his cast party, when he was in full showoff-for-my-girl mode. But Tom was much more dialed down that night, only really going nuts on the dance floor once, and that was more to impress Cosette and make her laugh than anything else. Mostly the two of them glided over the dance floor together, and he just enjoyed holding her close to him, the softness of her belly pressing into him, the feel of her arm along his, her hand in his, his leg wedged between hers (as far as it could go in her condition, anyway), and for the life of him he couldn't have told you what they talked about in those two hours, but bits of it would come back to him, and he would smile as if lost in a favorite daydream.

When they stepped outside, though, they were suddenly attacked by a giant wall of flashing lights. The paps had found them.

Later, Tom found out that they'd been spotted at the restaurant, although he had been careful to make sure they were away from the windows, that the restaurant wasn't a pap haunt, and that the staff was quiet. But apparently one of the fans had gotten a snap of them and posted it on their Instagram, and someone else had picked it up, and the word traveled like an electric signal over the wire. By the gallery, the paps had started to cluster, and finally, by the time they left the club, they had created a frenzied flock.

Cosette jerked on his arm, blinded by the flickering lights and the sudden calling of their names. Tom slid his arm firmly around her waist to keep her on balance, and she practically folded into him, startled.

"It's all right, Cosette," he whispered into her hair. He smiled at the paps, determined that this time, he wasn't going to get caught in an awkward situation. "Stay very close."

She obeyed. She clutched his hand as he led her toward their waiting car. Like last time, the paps poured over it, getting picture after picture of them getting inside, getting seated, and then driving off. Tom made sure Cosette was in the back seat and comfortably seated before he turned and went around to the other side, not looking directly at the flashes as he went.

Cosette couldn't help it. She looked flustered. Tom patted her knee and said, "Just don't look directly at the flashes." He brushed his lips against her cheek and whispered against her ear, "And smile."

She instantly obeyed. It was a genuine smile, he realized, but a bit embarrassed as she turned it onto him. "Sorry," she whispered back.

He grinned down at her. Later on, the pictures would be rather adorable, Tom taking care of his lady, looking far happier than he had the last time he'd gotten pap-attacked with Lizzie, and deft comparisons would be made. But when they drove off and Cosette was able to blink her vision clear, all she could say was, "Wow."

"I'm sorry," Tom said. "I didn't plan for that. I thought I'd been discreet enough in our planning to keep us under the radar."

"So that wasn't part of the grand unveiling?" she asked, her tone light but something underneath it.

"No, that's for tomorrow at Wimbledon," he said.

"Not sure my eyes can take another swarming," she quipped.

"It won't be like that. They're a lot nicer and besides, it'll be daylight." He paused. "I hope that
didn’t ruin the night."

"No, not at all," she said warmly, tucking her arm into his and snuggling in his side. She lay her cheek on his shoulder, her big violet eyes gazing up at him. "Thank you, Tom. It was a fantastic night. It's been a fantastic week. Everything's been wonderful."

Her soft voice made his chest pinch with emotion. He twisted his head and kissed her forehead, long and soft. He wished he could kiss her lips, but he didn't want to push. He needed her trust, desperately.

Christina had brought all of their stuff back with her to Tom's house, and Emma was still hanging out when Tom and Cosette arrived home. Emma had driven them in Tom's car and was going to take the rented car back to her place. The two women were hanging out on the sectional couch that was sunk into the back part of the big main room, where the wall of books resided and the big screen TV was best viewed. They were sharing a bottle of wine when Tom and Cosette arrived.

"Did you have a nice time?" Christina asked her sister.

Cosette smiled in reply with a nod, but Tom caught an odd look on her face.

Had he done something wrong? He couldn't help but wonder as he got his sister into the car he'd just vacated and sent her home. When he went back to the front door, Cosette was waiting for him.

"You all right?" Tom asked. "Something on your mind?"

"Yes, actually," she said, fidgeting with her sleeves. "In this absolutely perfect evening you planned, you forgot something very important."

Both of Tom's eyebrows arched. "What was that?"

With a demure look, she replied, "The goodnight kiss."

He was going to melt into his shiny black leather shoes, the way she tilted her head up, lips inviting, violet eyes sparkling.

For a very brief moment, he felt a slight sense of trepidation. The last time he'd kissed her had been BEFORE. And those kisses, while they'd started off innocent, had gradually gotten more and more intense, until that last night when....

No. He dismissed the feeling. This time he was invested. She was invested. This was not going to lead to another disaster. And he really, really, really did want to kiss her.

He pressed his hands to either side of her face and bent down, gently letting his lips touch hers. It was amazing how powerful a simple brush across the lips could be, a chaste kiss with no tongues, no heavy panting or pawing. Just her lips against his, a slight pull against her--

And then she gasped.

Startled, Tom released his hold on her. Not sure what had happened, he could only stare at her, sweeping with his eyes, trying to read her.

"The baby," she said, pulling one of his hands down to her abdomen. "That kick. I think you could feel it, Tom. Right...right there." She pressed his warm hand to her belly, over the lace, down low toward her hip. It took a second for him to wake up and help by pressing his fingers where she said. "Wait...see if she does it again..."
It took several seconds, but then, he felt the movement against his fingertips. It was like a jolt of electricity up through his limb.

"That's her?" he asked, incredulous.

She nodded, laughing. Her eyes sparkled and the porch light caught on the amethyst in her necklace, matching their glitter.

He was sure his mouth was split so wide in a grin he looked like a loon, but it didn't matter. He wrapped his other arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, feeling the baby kick against his fingers again. He kissed her temple, her cheek, her hair, several times each. She giggled into his neck.

When the moment had passed, leaving behind it a strange sort of afterglow, Tom leaned down, his nose touching Cosette's.

"I love you," he said with utter sincerity.

"I love you," she replied, although it was hardly above a whisper. She let him kiss her again.
The gentle tapping of the rain against her window lulled Cosette into a drowsy-half sleep in the cocoon she had made out of the many pillows and the soft down comforter in Tom's guest bedroom. Her belly, getting bigger by the day, was cushioned against a few pillows on one side, her hips and rear on the other. She had been jolted awake, the familiar rush of adrenaline leaving her mildly trembling, but this place, the warmth surround her, was doing its job in calming her down. She was warm and cozy under the thick blanket, but as she lay there, feeling Beatrice moving more than ever, shifting in her rented room but not kicking much this particular morning, she wondered if this rain was going to cause Wimbledon to be delayed.

Her stomach fluttered. Last night had been utterly extraordinary. Tom had gone through such trouble for her, finding a good restaurant so they wouldn't be bothered, choosing an art gallery, taking her dancing. None of it was about letting the world know that Tom was officially off the market. Not until those stupid paps caught them at the end, but Tom's reaction, smooth as it was, assured her that it wasn't part of the plan. And all of his family had been wonderful.

She felt herself beginning to really trust him. After all, he'd never lied to her. He told her the truth even when she wouldn't like it, even if it was difficult. That was not something to be discounted.

Her fingers itched to reach for her phone, but she stopped herself. Yesterday, while shopping, she'd gotten a text from Shelly. She didn't really want to read it. And there was a voicemail, from the church. Fr. John, most likely, having finally been informed that his eighth grade teacher was taking a year off. She wondered if Fr. John was even allowing Richard to hold her place for her. After all, the school had a responsibility to its students, and couldn't be compromised just to keep her in a job.

The dress had banished those thoughts. Lord, she adored that dress. It was easily the prettiest thing she'd ever owned, and she would only be able to wear it a few times.

Her mind went back to memories of last night. Soon, she was asleep again, dozing lightly until she heard someone moving around in the kitchen outside her door. She looked toward the glass patio doors that separated her room from Tom's walled garden, and saw that the rain had stopped and the sun was starting to come out.

Time to get up.

She went through her morning toilette and dressed in comfortable clothes, as she and Tom were going to the stylist before they left for Wimbledon. When she opened the bedroom door into the kitchen, Tom was sitting at the table, nursing his morning coffee and reading on his tablet. He looked up at her with a smile.
The sensation that flittered through her was something like an earthquake. His hair was tousled, his cheek was stubbly, he was in that v-neck blue t-shirt that accentuated every line of his chest and arms, and that neck that she remembered kissing, remembered the taste of it suddenly as if she had just...

No, she told herself. This was how it happened. This was how it happened before. That inching of her guard going down, giving in to the sensuality of this man, wanting so much to just fuse herself together with him, that siren call to pleasure that resonated in her bones on a primal level so deep it scared her.

It was too strong. It was good to desire the one you loved but this was...uncanny. Or at least too much for mortals to bear. While the saints assured that there was no temptation so strong that God would not give you the grace to overcome it, she was beginning to regret her decision to stay at his house -- was she setting herself up for failure?

But...if she beckoned to him, to join her in the bed that she had just vacated...she had a feeling he wouldn't do it. Not this time.

And that thought got her legs moving toward the coffee.

"How do you feel this morning?" His quick eyes had probably caught her falter. She gave him a breezy smile. "Did you sleep okay?"

"Yes, it was fine." Why had she told him about the night terrors? She hadn't quite meant to, but he'd gotten her off guard, and she was so comfortable, in his mother's house, that it had just slipped out.

"You sure?" he asked. "I thought I heard something coming from your room when I was in here earlier before I went for my run. It was brief and I didn't want to wake you if you'd gone back to sleep."

Shouts were a part of it. Was she shouting? God she hoped not. And kicking wasn't much of a possibility, not with the weight of her lower body holding her down on the bed.

"Don't know what it could have been," she said, fixing her coffee. She glanced through the kitchen window and saw the two loungers on the edge of the garden, both of them covered to keep from getting wet by the rain. It always rained in London, she'd heard. She looked at him over her shoulder, caught him eyeing her bum but quickly he raised his gaze to hers. "Can we go sit outside? I love the smell after the rain."

Tom walked out with her, pulling the covers off the loungers. She set their coffees down on the little table between them, and they made themselves comfortable. Tom's long arm dangled between them, behind the table, and Cosette found herself tracing her fingers over the vein that twisted just below the inside of his wrist.

"Careful there," he said, as head lolled toward her. "You're getting a little handsy for my taste."

She choked on a laugh, then started to pull back. His hand flipped over and caught her fingers, pulling them to his lips.

"So are you going to tell me the truth about the noise I heard this morning?" he said after a few minutes of silence. He was still holding her hand. He hadn't let it go.

She couldn't help but be mildly startled -- it was always disconcerting to have someone see through you so thoroughly. She turned toward him, giving a tug on the hand he clutched.
"My night terrors have been creeping back in," she said. "I first noticed it about a month ago. That night we talked on the phone? I got woken up by one and I couldn't fall back asleep. I was trying to calm myself down when Beatrice moved. Then I called you. It's only been about once a week but it's picking up a bit in frequency. I think I had one last night."

Tom stroked the back of her hand while she talked. "You didn't want to tell me." It wasn't accusatory -- just a statement of fact.

"You fret over me enough. It wasn't hurt anything."

"Do you remember your dreams at all?"

She started to shake her head, but then something flashed before her vision. A fragment. Her standing in the living room, staring into the dark, watching the lights on the VCR flash at her, their normally innocuous blue seeming sinister in the silence.

"It's that night, isn't it?" he said very softly. "The night your sister was born."

Inexplicably, Cosette's eyes filled with tears.

Tom squeezed her hand. "You're in a vulnerable place. You're afraid of being abandoned."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I really don't need to be psychoanalyzed, Tom. I could figure that out for myself." She started to sit up. He was so good with other people and so blind to himself!

Tom tugged harder at her hand, unwilling to let go. He sat up with her. "No, I get it. You're letting yourself trust and you're terrified." He seemed to be gathering himself for something. "I want to tell you something. I mentioned it when we were on the Eye, but...those two months you and I were apart, before we knew about Beatrice...they were absolutely miserable for me, Cosette."

She settled back against her chair, a bit stunned.

"I thought about you all the time. I imagined you everywhere, talked to you in my head. I couldn't get over you. I know you think I just saw you as a challenge but...what happened between us meant something profound to me. I don't want to argue with you again about sex and how we see it differently, but...that night for me was more than using you to...sate my lust, as you'd probably put it."

This wasn't brand new information. He'd tried to tell her this before, maybe he had, just in different ways.

He was sitting on the edge of his lounger, his feet in the space between them, his hands pressing hers between them, his elbows on his knees.

"I tried to get over it. You didn't answer any of my calls or texts and I didn't want to harass you, but...even without Beatrice, I wanted you back in my life. I don't know how I would have done it. When I was back in L.A. I wanted to drive down to your school, walk around that ice shop you loved, see if I could run into you, but I was sure you'd blow your stack over that." He paused. "It...bothers me, sometimes, to think that the only reason we're together is because of the baby. That that's the only reason you gave me another chance."

She looked down at her lap, her free hand fiddling with the hem of her shirt. "I'm not going to lie, Tom. That is the thing that brought us back together."

"If you hadn't gotten pregnant, if we had run into each other, do you think...?"
"I don't know. Aslan said that nobody's ever told what would have happened."

"I didn't know you were a Narnia fan," Tom said with a shaky grin.

She smiled at him. "I'm glad we're here, Tom. Whatever might have been, I'm glad we're here now. I'm happy to be here with you. I'm excited about today. I'm not crazy about being in the public eye, but this week...it's been so good." She paused, studying his face. "Isn't that what's important?"

"Yeah," he said, kissing her knuckles once again. "It is."

"You look like you stepped out of 'The Man From Uncle," Tom said.

Cosette looked down at herself. The gray dress underneath the black and white cardigan, with the white hat that had a wide black brim and grey scarf around the crown, made her look absolutely adorable. The crowning touch was the pair of thick black sunglasses which perched on her nose. The clouds had moved out fast leaving bright sunshine in their wake. It would get humid, Tom realized, and she'd shed that cardigan after a while, but it was good that she had it.

"I love that movie," Cosette said, slipping the sunglasses off her face.

"Really?" Tom was surprised. "Even with all the womanizing and the sexual references?"

"That's Henry Cavill. Don't get me wrong, he's hot, but at least he doesn't flash his naked ass. No, my favorite is Armie Hammer and Alicia Vickander. They are absolutely adorable together. Although Cavill does an amazing American accent, the way he delivers all his lines in that droll way."

Tom watched her slip on her black heels, admiring her legs. The dress skimmed her knees but it was enough...and her words, in spite of himself, sparked a tingle of jealousy.

"But my favorite Armie Hammer movie is definitely 'Mirror, Mirror,'" Cosette went on, oblivious. "I'm not a Snow White fan, but he is hilariously cute in that one. And Julia Roberts is just brilliant."

"He is happily married, you know," Tom said. He checked his reflection in the mirror by the front door.

"I know," Cosette replied with a huge smile as she came to stand beside him. "He and his wife are so adorable. I'm happy for them." She brushed some invisible lint from his suit.

Tom snaked his arm around her waist and pulled her a little closer. "What about us? Aren't we adorable?"

She smirked up at him with a shake of her head. "Everything is always about you," she teased, and stepped away to get her purse. "Chrissy!" she called down the hall into the big room. "We're leaving!"

Christina came bounding into the corridor. She had the camera app on her phone running, and she was obviously shooting a video. "You two are picture perfect!" she cried.

"See?" Tom said to Cosette, straightening his tie. "She thinks so."

"Cosette, you don't think you look good?" Christina asked, lowering the camera.

"Of course we do. Tom's just being sniffy over the fact that I was fangirling over Armie Hammer
"Sniffy?" Tom echoed.

"Get used to that, buddy," Christina said. "Cosette has a thing for celebrity couples. Being married seems to make a man more attractive, for some reason."

Tom eyed his girlfriend. The thought that Cosette would have a "thing" for married men didn't quite compute. But the car was waiting and they had to get moving.

Christina had been invited to go with them, but the thought of a tennis match bored her to tears. She wound up making her own plans with Emma to go shopping and see some of the sights. Plus she wanted to skype with Henry for a while, as she was beginning to pine for her fiancée.

It was the half-way point of their trip, Tom realized as they settled into the back of the car. At the end of the week he'd be in Australia and she would be returning to the States. He had already arranged to go to L.A. to be with her during his week break, which was a month away. Marvel was being very understanding -- he was an expectant father after all. He dreaded the thought to the things he'd miss -- feeling Beatrice's kicking getting stronger, watching Cosette's belly swell, and satiating whatever strange cravings she might develop. She'd need more clothes, she'd need a lot of things, and he felt that over-protective urge buck against the determined, ambitious actor side of him.

"So you have a thing for married actors, then?" Tom asked, his arm resting along the back of the seat, his hand inches away from her glossy black hair.

She laughed. "No, silly man. I just like it when a man shows he has the ability to settle down. Show some loyalty, some sticking power."

"So not just married, but married for a while?"

She nodded. "Maybe they're playboys anyway, I don't know. Maybe it's all just a show, whatever. But sometimes I get a vibe, and the vibe I get from them is that they're for real. That's what I like to see. I mean, you actors have your choice of whatever you want, you get more offers than you can possibly field in the bed partner department, but one of you decides he's above that. I like to see it. It's attractive."

"That's the problem, isn't it? Women with less scruples than you would find that a challenge. You think we have all these choices, Cosette, but there are a lot of women predators out there, too."

"I know. Girls who like to put notches on their belts, I know." She shrugged. "I pray for them. Both the married couples and the girls."

"It's hard to find someone you can commit to, you know," Tom said. "I mean, once you have a famous face, people try to use you just because of that. It's hard to tell who is sincere and who isn't." He took her hand. "What's why I'm very fortunate to have you, Cosette," he said, his tone warm.

She smiled and blushed. But Tom couldn't help the little worm of doubt that wiggled under his stomach. Cosette found that kind of loyalty attractive. And part of her problem with him was that she didn't honestly think he had the power to commit. He knew he'd fought and argued with her about it, but truthfully -- did he have it? Sometimes he couldn't help but wonder.

These questions were pushed aside, however, in favor of the excitement that was Wimbledon. It was no secret that Tom was a big tennis nerd, and Wimbledon was his Comic Con. He'd been
looking forward to this for months, and having Cosette here with him to enjoy it just made it that much better.

To his surprise, she'd put effort into learning the names of the players, and the rules of the game, although she'd never been to a tennis match before in her whole life. Once they found their seats, Tom got them food and beverages, took a few selfies with the odd fan who approached him politely, and returned to find her brushing up on her tennis lingo on her smartphone. She had removed the hat, glasses, and even the sweater, because even though they were in the shade, the air was warm. She had fluffed up her dark curls from where they'd wilted under the hat.

"Sorry if I took a while," Tom said, handing her a beverage.

"No, no problem, gave me some time to text with my mom, check in with her," she said. She sipped at her soft drink.

"How are they doing?" he asked, slipping his arm around the back of her seat.

"They're good. Mom can't wait for us to get back. She doesn't have much of a life outside my dad and my sister and I sort of keep her in touch with the rest of the world."

"No friends of her own?" Tom asked.

"Nope. I mean, there's my Aunt Louisa, not a blood aunt but Mom's best friend, they were friends in school, but she moved out of state. Every few years Mom twists Dad's arm to take them to Vegas and they meet up, have a little fun, but Mom's not really a wild child. She gets overwhelmed and tired easily. She was raised pretty strict and she's got a lot of...let's just call them discipline habits."

Tom frowned. This explained a few things. "So your grandmother Beatrice was your father's mother, right?"

"Yeah. She was really good to my mother, though. Tried to help her but...well, she always said a marriage was between two people and nobody else really knew what it was like inside it except a husband and a wife."

Tom processed this information. No friends, he pondered. "That must be lonely for your mother, though."

"It was really hard at the beginning," Cosette said, a flash of something crossing her face. "Sometimes I'm surprised they're still together, that she didn't leave him."

"I can't believe your father was that bad," Tom said.

"It was more neglect. And she'd be mad when he'd come home and they would just fight. It wasn't a happy start to a marriage." That shadow fell again.

Tom pulled her closer to him. His hand spread over the bared shoulder that was between them, and her skin was cool to his touch. She looked up at him, the amethyst in her eyes striking against the heart pendant resting in the hollow of her throat.

"Are you worried I'd neglect you?" he asked, very softly.

She flustered, glanced around. "This is hardly the place for this conversation, Tom."

"I wouldn't," he said, even softer, getting closer to her ear. "I won't."
Her lips were twisting into a rueful smile. "You could hardly help it," she answered him, looking away, her eyes drifting over the open court before them. "You have a career that keeps you running all over the world. Los Angeles, London, Australia, and I know you've been to a half dozen other places, maybe more."

He squeezed her shoulder. "Maybe," he said, "but I turned down an offer for this December because I didn't want to be away from you and Beatrice."

She jerked back to look up at him. "What offer?"

"It was a script by Danny Boyle. You might not have been paying attention but Bradley Cooper was set to star and it had all the marks of one of those movies that always gets an Oscar nod. Well, Cooper broke his leg in three places and won't be able to fulfill his contract."

"Is he going to be okay?" Cosette asked. "How did it happen?"

Tom almost scowled at her. That was Cosette -- here he was, dropping a bomb he had actually been planning for tomorrow, and showing her how committed he was to her and Beatrice, and she was worried about the health of someone she didn't even know.

"It was a motorcycle accident. He's going to be fine but he'll need surgery, and then physical therapy for a few months after the break heals, that's why he can't be ready by December. It's not an action movie but there's a particular litheness necessary for the character and he can't be limping around, it just won't work. So they were trying to get a replacement in at the last minute and I wound up on that list."

"And you turned it down?" Now she seemed to be getting it; her voice was thick with incredulity.

"The second they said December. And they're filming in Tokyo. There's no way I could be on the other side of the world when you're days away from giving birth to our child. I even told my mother I wouldn't be here for Christmas because of this." His fingers brushed the swell of her belly through the soft material of the dress.

When that call had come in, they'd thrown all the sweet parts at him first. The director, the cast, even offered him what they'd offered Cooper in terms of salary. The schedule was iron tight because of the permits required to film where they wanted to film, so they couldn't delay or else it would go massively over budget.

And then they'd told him it started in November, right after he finished with his Marvel commitments, and he had to pass, because it was going to run right through December and possibly into January. He couldn't risk it.

He turned them down.

"When did this happen?" she asked.

"This morning, before you got up," Tom said. That was why he was in the kitchen when she came out. He needed to see her, needed to remember why he was doing this. He had thought of telling her then, but she still seemed a little fuzzy at the beginning of the day and he'd wanted a good moment.

Now seemed to be it.

"Wow," she whispered.
Tom grasped her hand, which rested on her knee, and switched it to his own knee. "I've told you before Cosette," he said. "I'm very serious about you."

She gave a little nod, and a small, shy smile.

Whoever won and Wimbledon today, Tom thought, he'd already gotten his major victory.

8 8 8

It wasn't terribly late in the day when Tom and Cosette returned to his home. They'd already planned to meet up with Christina and Emma there, and Tom mentioned in the car that maybe they should all go out to dinner, but Christina did some special shopping for Cosette and had already started the prep by the time the couple came through the door.

"We're making dinner for you and Emma, Tom," Cosette told him as they entered the kitchen to find Christina working. "A little thank you for all you've done for us this week."

Tom shook his head, giving her that smile that always made her insides flutter. "You don't have to thank me."

"Hush, it's a nice home-cooked meal," Emma said. "That I don't have to make. And I told Jack to be here in a few hours. So we're all set."

"What are you making?" Tom asked.

"Grilled chicken in a special marinade," Cosette said. "Christina started the chicken in the marinade."

"Cosette's recipe!" Christina supplied.

"Baked sweet potatoes," Cosette went on. "Grilled corn on the cob with lime butter."

"Plum caprese salad," Christina added. "Because Cosette hates tomatoes, she always picks them out, so we put in plums so there's something else for her to eat in it."

"We could grill the plums before putting them in the salad," Cosette suggested.

"Oh, good idea!"

"Glad to see you're making use of my outdoor grill," Tom said. "I hardly get to use it."

Cosette had changed out of her dress and was slicing the plums when Tom's comment came back to her. He hardly got to use his grill. He wasn't home that much. He was always out, about, working, partying, whatever. And their earlier conversation before the game returned to her, when he promised he wouldn't neglect her.

He hadn't so far, but everything was new. Of course he was going to pay all this attention to her, sweep her off her feet. He was going to play into all her conceptions of romance, secure her, and then...

"Fuck!" she shouted, suddenly feeling a sharp pain in her thumb. A dark spot of crimson slid over the pad, and she immediately went to the sink and turned on the cold water.

"What happened?" Emma asked.

"Just...wasn't paying attention," Cosette muttered. "Do you know where your brother keeps the
"band aids?"

"A what? Oh, a plaster. I'll get you one," Emma assured her, and she slipped from the kitchen, passing Tom on the way.

"I was wondering where my darling's blue language had gone," Tom said as he came into the room. "What happened?"

"Nothing," Cosette sighed, wrapping her thumb in a paper towel. "No big deal." She picked up the two wedges of plum that she'd been cutting and checked them for blood. None, only the knife had gotten it. She tossed it into the sink. "Emma's getting me a plaster."

"Let me see," Tom said, fingers wrapping around her wrist.

She let out an exasperated sound. "It's fine, Tom! I can handle my own stupid cut." She gently but deftly pulled her wrist from his grip.

Tom backed up, hands going up, palms out. "Sorry. Just...was concerned."

"I know." She shook her head. "Sorry."

Emma returned with the plaster. Tom took it from her. "Can I put it on you? Come on, you only have one working hand."

She allowed it. She watched his fingers unwrap the bandage from its peeling and wrap it around her thumb.

"I'm always doing something to my fingers, so I always keep a ton of plasters on hand," Tom explained.

"He's horribly accident prone," Emma added. "I swear he has an entire chemist's worth of plasters in his bathroom. All sizes, shapes, colors."

With her free hand, Cosette reached up and traced her fingers over the vertical line on the left side of Tom's forehead. "Apparently not just your fingers," she said.

"Oh, that was from Coriolanus," Tom said.

"What, did Hadley get to close to you with his sword?" Cosette asked.

"No, it was the very last night," Tom said, throwing away the peelings from the bandage. "It was just such bad timing. I was leaving the dressing room and I dropped a piece of my costume which I was taking back to the wardrobe department, and I bent over to pick it up when one of the ADs came bursting in and it slammed me right in the head." He made a mocking gesture with the heel of his hand going into his forehead, his face a lampoon of pain.

"Good Lord!" Cosette exclaimed. "What was the hurry? People come bursting in on closed doors?"

"Oh, Tom never closed his door," Emma laughed. "I'm sure it was cracked open, the AD probably thought it was no big deal. Plus he has a tendency to walk around in a towel and I'm sure they all wanted a glimpse of one of the UK's sexiest men."

"Shut up," Tom grumbled at her, although he was smirking.

"Even when we were kids, who was the first one to strip out of all his clothes?" Emma pointed.
So for a good portion of the evening, while Cosette and Christina prepped the food, was spent with Emma sharing her brother's childhood eccentricities, to which he attempted to return the favor, but it lacked the same level of embarrassment because Tom was far more invested in what Cosette thought of him than Emma was in what anyone thought of her.

Of course, there was the battle of the grill. As if Tom thought she was going to burn herself. He failed to realize, as Christina assured him, that Cosette was the grill master. Even their own father stepped back when Cosette got hold of her metal tongs. Still, he stayed within view every second she was at the grill, and for his efforts was rewarded with seeing why even Raymond bowed down to her.

The meal was amazing. They sat at the table for almost two hours, devouring every single morsel. Earlier in the day Christina had baked blondies -- which were like brownies but looked more like chocolate chip cookie bars -- and they were for "pudding," as the Brits called them.

"Henry is a lucky man," Tom complimented her when he finished his second bar.

"Yeah, my plan is to make him fat so he's stuck with me," Christina replied. Cosette laughed out loud. Christina shook her head at her sister. "Don't know what you're gonna do, Cozy. I don't think Tom can get fat."

"He could get a pot belly if you tried hard enough," Emma said.

"I don't think the Hiddlestoners would care if he had a pot belly," Cosette said. She saw Tom flinch at the mention of the name of his most devoted fans. "What?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said. He reached for her hand, covering it with his own. "Cosette doesn't have anything to worry about, and neither do you, Christina."

Cosette watched Tom for a moment, and then turned her attention to her sister. "He's right, Chrissy. Henry is utterly devoted to you."

"Even if I make him do the dishes after I've cooked?" Christina said, starting to pick up the empty dishes.

"Fair's fair," Emma said, exchanging a look with her husband.

"Clean up as you go and you won't have that problem," Cosette added, helping Christina clear the table. However, Tom stopped her, taking the plates from her hands.

"Fair is fair," Tom said, pecking Cosette's cheek. "You cooked, we'll clean. Emma?"

"Why me?"

"You didn't cook!"

"I helped bake the blondies! I went shopping!"

"I'll help, Tom," her husband offered, shooting his wife an appeasing smile. "Like a good dinner guest."

"Oh hush," Emma said, but she kissed him anyway and the three women were shooed into the sitting area.

"Have you seen any of the pictures yet?" Christina asked her as they got comfy on the sectional
"You mean of me and Tom?" Cosette felt that wiggle of fear under her belly again.

"Oh, some of them are utterly adorable," Emma assured her. Christina pulled out her phone.

"I had you two on Google alert for the last two days, since your date last night, but there was also some stuff from the airport."

Cosette took Christina's phone, and scrolled through the images.

The first set were of Tom with his arm wrapped tightly around her as they were stepping away from the paps as they were coming out of the dance club.

The next was Tom with his arm around her as they were talking at Wimbledon. There were several of these -- almost sequential in nature. As the match progressed, Tom became more animated and into the game, but he would talk to her every now and again, and she also looked very interested in what was going on. It had been a rather exciting match, Cosette recalled, and she could tell by her facial expressions that she had appeared to enjoy it. There was one particular cute one of Tom turned to her, and they were grinning at each other, with his hand on her opposite knee -- where it had been most of the time -- and her hands casually wrapped around the arm that stretched across her. She struggled to remember which one that was -- she had made some random comment about a factoid she'd picked up from her internet research and Tom had been enormously pleased that she'd taken such interest. There were several of her and Tom entering Wimbledon, and a couple of them leaving, their hands intertwined.

The airport pictures were a bit more fuzzy, as none of them had slowed their pace for the photographer. But it was apparent that Tom was protective of her, from the look he shot the pap -- must have been when the man asked how far along she was, Cosette guessed.

More pictures from their date -- him getting her into the car, distinctly ignoring the photographers as he went around to the other side. One shot where the two of them happened to look out the window at the same time, Cosette's face very puzzled, and Tom's -- almost blank.

"This one is my favorite," Christina said, taking the phone and scrolling to one in particular. It was of them in their seats at Wimbledon -- and Tom was touching her belly. The look on his face was soft and tender, and Cosette was looking at him, her own expression extremely affectionate.

"See, having a dishwasher means clean-up isn't that big of a deal -- what are you looking at?"

Cosette looked up at the sound of Tom's voice. She turned the phone toward Tom, showed him the pics. He frowned down at them for a moment. "Where did those come from?"

"That's my phone, Tom," Christina said. "Google Alert. I'm sorry, I just wanted to see the pictures."

"No, it's fine..." His face darkened for a moment, but he shook it off. He came around and sat down next to Cosette on the couch. "Let's see."

8 8 8

"So what is up?"

Tom turned from where he'd been standing out in his backyard, hanging up the phone as he did so. He had a meeting in the morning and was going to end up leaving the ladies alone, but both
Christina and Cosette had picked out a few things to do while he was gone, and he'd arranged for his own bodyguard to go with them.

"Just making sure everything is in place for tomorrow," Tom reassured her.

Christina folded her arms and eyed him. Emma and her husband had gone home, and Cosette was having a long soak in the tub after her very busy day.

"I mean before. When Cozy was looking at the pics. You looked like you were going to get mad. So what's up? What's the problem?"

Tom sighed. "I wasn't mad, I was...concerned. I don't like it when Cosette looks at stuff online. Some people are loud and vicious, but they aren't the majority. I don't want her to see any of that."

"She's going to see it, Tom. It's part of the package when it comes to you," Christina said.

"Did you see it?"

"I don't look. I'm better at ignoring things. But Cosette is going to look. You can't stop her and neither can I. I'm not saying it's one of her better qualities but..."

Tom sighed again, more deeply this time. "I know. I just...she's very concerned about what people think."

Christina seemed to consider this for a moment. "Well...to be fair, it's not that she conforms to their opinion. I mean, seriously. Come on." She gave him a look. "Think about it."

"No, yeah, you're right." He had to chuckle.

"She just...I mean, as a teacher, she has to be aware of the parents' opinions of her. She knows she's not adored by all of them. She gets along with them. But she has to be aware of what's what so she knows who she can rely on and who she can't. And this is...all very new. To all of us. I can tell you, if it was me in those pictures I would totally ignore everything everyone said. I don't want to know what anyone thinks. Because then I would get all self conscious and start worrying about it."

"So Cosette doesn't? Worry about it, I mean?"

"She's human, Tom, of course she does," Christina answered. She seemed to consider her words for a long moment. "Look, I like you, okay? I've been pulling for you for a while, but... I have to admit that I'm kind of surprised."

"About what?"

"Cosette is my sister and I love her, but I'm surprised you took such an interest in a person who is so...not from your world. I mean, most of the celebrities I read about end up with co-stars or someone in the business. Someone, at least, who has savvy about being in the public eye. But you picked someone very...I don't want to call her normal, that's too small a word, and not really accurate. Maybe we should go with...counter-cultural."

"Are you saying I'm not normal? I'm just a man like anyone else, Christina," Tom said, his tone mildly defensive.

Christina shook her head. "I beg to differ. It takes a different kind of person who wants to do what you do, and succeeds. I mean, being famous is everyone's dream, few get it. And those who do...well, I always understood why Cosette had reservations. You've been wonderful to us, don't
"I didn't do this for fame," Tom said.

"It's inextricably linked together, Tom. Come on, you can't be an actor without an audience, you've said that yourself."

"True enough," Tom murmured.

"And you don't get to pick the audience, you know. They do what they want. They like you, you get to work, they don't, you don't. And of all the people in the world you pick..." she let out a slightly incredulous giggle. "You pick my sister, the queen of the straight and narrow. Her high school motto was 'the world can kiss my ass.'"

Tom couldn't help but smile. "We're all full of contradictions, aren't we?"

Christina nodded. "Yep. You know, it's strange, she does care what people think, but it's on a different level than the rest of us. She strives to be an example, and it just destroys her when people think she's just as brainwashed as the rest of the herd. When they find out she's not, they think all kinds of things about her that are just...wrong. That's she's a prude, a hypocrite, holier-than-thou.... And she's fine with not worrying about *that.* Like you said, contradictions! I just hope yours and hers don't contradict each other into a tangled mess." She held up something, a small white box. "I got this today when I was buying souvenirs, for Cosette, but I thought maybe you'd like to give it to her."

"What is it?" Tom frowned. She opened the box. Tom caught the glimmer of gold. "A ring?"

"It's the London skyline," Christina explained. Tom could see the workings; there was the eye, the tower and the bridge on one side, and a few other landmarks.

"But it's a ring," Tom said, feeling a mild panic start to rise. "I can't give her a ring. She'll... she won't take it from me."

"It's a harmless souvenir," Christina argued. "And it's too big for her ring finger anyway, it will fit either her index or middle finger."

"But it's still a ring," Tom stressed. "I already gave her that necklace, it's...it's too much, Christina. It's too symbolic."

"And what's wrong with that?" Christina challenged him. "What are you afraid of?"

"That she'll reject it," Tom admitted. "I'm not...I'm trying to take things at her pace. I'm not going to push. It's your present, you give it to her. And it's London. It will already make her think of this place, and me. That will be enough."

Christina sighed, put the top back on the box. "All right. If you're sure."

"I'm sure," Tom said, his heartbeat starting to level out. But he had to ask himself...was that really what he was afraid of?
Next up: trouble in paradise. (just giving fair warning, guys! You know what's coming!)
Cosette woke up for the second day in a row, her heartbeat accelerated from her latest night terror. And this time, she remembered part of it.

It wasn't her, wandering around the house, alone and afraid.

It was her daughter.

Cosette took several deep breaths and tried to calm herself. A few kicks from Beatrice reminded her that she was here, she wasn't alone, it was a dream. Beatrice was safe with her. Beatrice would always be safe with her.

The little girl was moving more and more. Not just kicks, but little flutterings that had to be movements of her hands, of her whole body. Sometimes Cosette would become so thirsty that she felt she could swallow an entire gallon of juice, and when she sated that craving, the flutterings would stop, as if Beatrice were sated, too.

Yesterday, the soothing sound of the rain and the comfort of the previous day's memories had lulled her back to sleep, but this morning something was off. Maybe it was herself. She'd been experiencing fluctuations in her hormones on and off, and most of this week she'd been blessed with warmth and good will toward all those around her.

Not today.

She raised up her hand, admiring the London skyline ring Christina had given her. It was her official London souvenir. It encircled the index finger of her right hand, and could easily be switched to her middle finger if she so desired. It was cute, but it made her feel slightly...odd.

It would forever make her think of this place. Of Tom. Of this week they spent together.

The beeping of her phone distracted her. She reached for it, and realized that there was an email from Shelly. She had checked her work email once, and wondered if there was anything else new in it. She had ignored Shelly's text, telling herself she would deal with it when she returned to the states -- the least she could do was read the email.

"Cosette;

I hope my email finds you well. I have to say that we're all rather concerned about you. It's become rather known that you and Tom are having a baby together. I know it's none of my business but considering our previous conversation, I'm rather confused. But I won't pass any judgments or
make any speculations until I heard exactly what happened from you, if you choose to tell me. It is
totally your business who you do what with, but, I'm very sorry, I just know you and I can't help
but wonder what's going on. Whatever it is, you should know you have my support, and I'm sure
there are others who feel the same. I hope you'll trust me enough to let me know how you're doing
and what's going on. Doubling my prayers for you, regardless.

S."

That wiggling worm was now a small snake. Cosette lay back down on her pillow with a plop and
a groan. She shouldn't have read the email, not in the mood she was in, but the same mood would
have made it impossible not to, and it would have nagged at her until she did.

She'd hoped she would at least have until the school year started before she had to deal with giving
explanations. But no, word had gotten out. It wouldn't have taken much research for them to find
her -- Tom had given them her first name, and it wasn't like there were too many Cosettes in the
city. Just search all the ones in the LA area, and if they knew anything about where Tom was
filming, they might even be able to narrow their search locally. It wasn't like she didn't have a
Facebook account like all the other people her age. Plus her email was on the website for the
school...

Cosette's eyes drifted down. Shelly's email had been on top but there were many more emails than
there should have been in her box. And none of them were addresses she recognized.

Somehow these people had gotten her email account and had decided to send her messages. What
could they possibly have to say to her? Probably a bunch of hate. After all, she was dating their
internet boyfriend.

Whatever drove Cosette to look, she couldn't tell you. It was just a compulsion. Most of them were
brainless, immature slams, probably written by deranged people. But one of them, whose address
showed up repeatedly, had links attached. She scanned the links with her computer software, no
viruses detected, so she clicked.

//Who the fuck does this woman think she is? You forget a condom one time and suddenly you're
the princess of London?//

The caption was attached to a picture of her in the purple lace dress, and a shot that wasn't quite so
complimentary, with her looking flustered, and Tom looking distinctly annoyed, and the light was
hitting her necklace, making it stand out much more than it should have.

//I'll bet she's blackmailing Tom. Threatening to have an abortion if he doesn't play along. That is
not a happy man.//

More of the same came from the other links, more awful things about how there was no baby, that
she was pulling a "Sophie Hunter" on Tom, that it was all a set up. But then there was an article
written by some website she hadn't heard of, but it looked like an actual journalist had written the
article.

//Tom Hiddleston Caught With An Oopsie Baby?: Things in the Hiddleston camp have been pretty
active lately, what with T-Hiddy finally coming out of the relationship closet and declaring that
yes, he has an official girlfriend, and yes, they are going to have a baby together. One can hear the
hearts breaking all around Tumblr. But somebody forgot to do his math. Who is this Cosette?
Where did she come from? The last we heard was Elizabeth Olsen was paying Tom visits in
Hawaii, with photographic evidence posted by the director of Tom's latest movie, hastily removed
under mysterious circumstances. And these pictures just make it look more suspicious.//
Pictures of the paps catching them outside the dance club followed the chunk of text. And beside them, pictures of the time Tom and Lizzie had gotten caught by a pap swarm. Tom had the same odd expression on his face.

//Is this a cut and paste? Lizzie didn't want to bear the Hiddlebaby, so this young lady is a hasty substitute? Tom's already taken her to Wimbledon.//

Pictures appeared of them sitting in the stands at Wimbledon, and these were not the happy, cute pictures Christina had showed them. Cosette looked bored, Tom looked annoyed. It was a slow moment in the game, Cosette recalled. A call had been made that Tom didn't agree with and Cosette had drifted off, impatient with the slow progress, not fully understanding what was going on.

//Jane Arthy, anyone? Seems like Hiddleston is revisiting all the golden oldies so he can rewrite history. The last time this happened, Benedict Cumberbatch got married to the woman carrying his child, even though none of us even knew they were together. Are there wedding bells in the future? Who the hell knows?//

Cosette felt her stomach shift. Her mouth started to get dry, and she swallowed several times to try and clear it. But it got worse. Below, there was a thread for comments on the article. And it was even worse than before.

//Jane Arthy was a FWB. Lizzie Olsen was a FWB. And this Cosette is a FWB that poor Tom is now stuck with. You had one job, Cosette -- Birth Control.//

Cosette scowled at those three letters. FWB? What did that mean? So she Googled the expression, and found Friend With Benefits. A fuckbuddy.

Then she Googled Jane Arthy and Elizabeth Olsen. She knew Tom had dated them, but why did these people think that the relationship he'd had with them wasn't legitimate?

That was when the rabbit hole opened and swallowed her.

A knock came at her door. She glanced at the clock. Somewhere, she'd lost two hours of her life.

"Cosette?" It was Christina. Cosette got up from the bed and unlocked her door, opened it and yanked Christina into the room. Her sister got one look at her and asked, "What happened?"

Cosette couldn't speak, there was no moisture in her throat at all. She just showed Christina her phone. While Christina read, Cosette went to the bathroom and sipped a glass of water. And then she threw up.

"You can't listen to this stuff," Christina told her when she came back out. "Tom was worried you'd read stuff like this. Where did you find it?"

"It was in my work email," Cosette rasped, her throat sore. "They got hold of it through the school site."

"Then they know who you are," Christina said.

"It was a matter of time," Cosette said.

The two stared at each other.

"This doesn't change anything," Christina declared. "You know these women were parts of Tom's
past, but they're in the past. He's with you."

"Because he knocked me up," Cosette sighed, sitting down on her bed. "That's how all of this became a thing, didn't it?"

"You told me he said he would have chased after you even if you hadn't become pregnant," Christina said. The two had had a bit of a quiet talk last night, after everyone went to bed, and Cosette couldn't quite settle down to go to sleep, no matter how long she soaked in the tub. They'd shared quite a few secrets, and while Cosette hadn't given her all the details, Christina got the gist of how things were going.

"This doesn't change anything between you and Tom," Christina said with a bit of force.

"But it makes sense, doesn't it? I mean, I hadn't even seen any of those pictures with Tom and Lizzie or Jane before. I knew he dated them, what happened with them, but...I just didn't see it."

"So what, he can never take another date to Wimbledon because of that one time?" Christina said. "He's going to get papped with any girl he's with, it doesn't matter if it's Lizzie or you. That's his stoic face, I've seen it before. They invaded his privacy both times, of course he was annoyed. That doesn't affect how he feels about you."

Cosette shrugged. "The timing doesn't help. He met me right after he broke up with Lizzie. And plus, all that friends with benefits stuff? I mean, I know Tom is sexually loose but...that's just a new low."

"Look," Christina said, sitting down beside Cosette on the bed, "You can't hold his past against him. He has a future with you. You can't be jealous or upset about what he did before he even met you."

"That isn't it, Christina," Cosette sighed.

"Then what is it?"

"I...I don't know. I can't think. I just...I need to get some distance. I'm all upset and I don't know if it's legitimate or if it's because of the baby." Her head ached from staring at all that text. All that hate, all that vitriol...it had all run together for her after a while. Why hadn't she stopped? She'd told herself to stop several times, but somehow, she just kept going, absorbing it, until her stomach couldn't take any more.

Gently, Christina started rubbing her shoulder and arm. "Well, we leave in a few days. That'll get us some distance. And we have some places to visit today, maybe that'll help get your mind off things. Don't ruin the rest of the trip, Cozy," she added softly.

She shot her sister a glare. "Oh, no, don't ruin a fun time with actual real life," she mocked.

"I don't mean it like that!" Christina said. "I just mean...you're going to be apart for the next month. Don't leave things on a sour note, okay? Trust me, it isn't the way you want to leave things when you're going to be apart for a while."

Cosette rubbed her temples. "Yeah. Yeah, you're right. Is Tom still here?"

"No, he had to leave for his meeting. He said Robert would pick us up at eleven. It's ten thirty, want to get dressed so we can get ready?"
"Okay. I'm sorry, Chrissy." Cosette grasped her hand and squeezed. "I'll try and calm down.
Just...let's just relax and have some fun being tourists."

The two girls exchanged a smile, and then a hug.

8 8 8

(Tom) //Where are you?//

(Cosette) //Coffee shop around the corner from your neighborhood. The Coaster?\n
Tom found the place quickly and was surprised to see the two women sipping at their drinks so early in the day. It was only three o'clock -- he expected to find them still running about one of the many museums he'd seen on the list of places they wanted to go.

"So what have you two done so far?" Tom asked as he joined them. He slid into the booth beside Cosette, sliding his arm along the top where she sat. He expected her to move into him, but she didn't. Instead she stayed where she was sitting, forward, elbows on the table, sipping her iced drink, whatever it was.

"We spent a few hours at the Victoria and Albert museum," Christina said. "And then saw the dinosaur exhibit at the Natural History museum."

"Oh, cool! I'm sorry I missed that." Tom let his hand fall forward, spreading his fingers along Cosette's back. He felt tense muscles underneath his hand, and gently began to massage, rubbing up and down.

"You haven't seen it?" Cosette asked, glancing at him over her shoulder.

"I've seen it, but it's been a long, long time," Tom chuckled. His tea arrived. He was usually a coffee drinker but tea just seemed the order of the day right now.

"We figured we have time for one more museum, either the British Museum or the National Gallery," Christina continued, tapping away on her phone. "One of them is going to have to wait until tomorrow."

"What time were we meeting your friends tonight?" Christina asked Tom, turning toward him a bit. This causes her back to shift away from him and he wound up resting his hand on her lower spine.

"Not until after eight. Plus I figured we'd eat before we got there." He slid forward, his arm sliding around her and his hand on her opposite hip. "So what will it be? A ride through the history of mankind, or famous works of art?"

"Cosette is a sucker for an art museum," Christina said.

"No, we can go to the British Museum today, save the art for tomorrow."

"Tom, you get to break the draw," Christina said. "Obviously we're trying too hard to be nice to each other."

"Mmm, never ask a man to take a side against his girlfriend," he teased. "National Gallery it is, then. That's fine because there's a fantastic Italian place not too far away from it." He bent down and kissed Cosette's shoulder through her clothes. "Unless you have a taste for something else?"

She finally looked at him. Tom had had the uneasy feeling that she wasn't quite meeting his gaze,
and the feel of her under his hand contained more tension than he expected -- considering she'd been walking around all afternoon, she should have been a bit more limp and exhausted.

"Italian sounds great," she said with a little smile.

"Good. Off to Trafalgar Square with us, then!"

"After tea, of course," Christina said, sipping hers. Tom had to snort a bit at her mock British accent.

"Of course," he agreed.

After their drinks and snacks, Tom hailed a cab for them and they headed into Central London. Trafalgar Square was built around the area formerly known as Charing Cross, and Tom had been born not far from here, in the city of Westminster. The public square was always bustling with people, and none of them paid Tom much mind, except for the odd tourist who caught a few seconds of him with his girlfriend on their cellular phone.

He liked days like this. Days when he could be normal. Days when he was just enjoying the world. Even though he'd lived here all his life, it seemed there was never enough time to appreciate the place. It was one thing to be in different places of the world, but it was quite another to actually get to see and savor them.

It took a few minutes to actually get into the museum, as there were so many places to see in the square. They wound up strolling around and Christina took a ton of pictures. It was Friday, so the museum had extended hours until eight o'clock, and they weren't in a hurry to get inside. However, once in, Tom realized he had underestimated Cosette's love of art.

It was amazing what one could learn about a person from seeing the things they liked. Cosette spent a particularly long amount of time staring at Van Gough's work, although she seemed to have just as much appreciation for Botticelli. They were there for over three hours, and a least one of them had to be due to the Stations of the Cross by Bassano.

By the time they hit the Dutch Flowers exhibition, Cosette had exhausted herself and needed to sit. Tom sat with her and purchased something to drink for her to stay hydrated while Christina enjoyed the exhibition.

"Are you all right?" Tom asked her as she sipped at her carbonated drink.

"Fine, just tired," Cosette said.

Tom reached down and carefully lifted up Cosette's foot by the ankle. He placed it on his thigh and gingerly removed her shoe -- a Van printed with a galaxy imposed over a black background. Then, just like before, he started to massage her foot and lower leg.

"Not just being tired, Cosette," Tom said as he worked. "You've been distant today."

"I'm just tired, Tom," she insisted. "It's been a busy couple of days, between your mother's, and our date, and Wimbledon, and sightseeing. It's just all caught up with me."

"Have you been sleeping all right?" Of course he already knew the answer to that. She'd had a night terror the other night, and she said they'd been picking up in frequency. "Did you have another bad dream last night?"

She looked away. She didn't want to tell him, and the urge to make her tell him conflicted with the
knowledge that if he did push too hard she might tell him but it would mean they would fight and he didn't want to sour a single moment of this week with a fight.

"Why don't you want to tell me?" he asked, squeezing her calf.

Her eyes met his, and there was something in them...he couldn't identify it. He would almost think it was fear, but it was more than that. Fear and sorrow. Dread. Like she was anticipating a heavy blow.

"That was a lot more boring than I thought it would be," Christina said as she came up, and then stopped. Tom glanced up at her, just as she realized what she interrupted. "But I can go see the other one -- the Painter's Paintings one if you..."

"No, actually, I'm starving," Cosette said, removing her foot from Tom's lap. "Didn't you say there was a great Italian place nearby? I could eat a vat of pasta."

Tom picked up her shoe. "You need your slipper first, Cinderella."

Cosette allowed Tom to put her shoe back on -- in public, it was much harder for her to get her shoes on. Tom had witnessed her do it once or twice at his house and had been torn between his amusement at her trying to manage around her extended belly and trying to get her to let him do it for her. She'd taken to leaving her shoes out and open so she could just slip her foot into them. But he had untied the lace when he removed it and there was no way she'd get it tied out here.

He tolerated her not answering him on the way to the restaurant, up until they ordered, when the tension started to get to be too much for him. He was fortunate, however, that Christina seemed to have a plan of her own.

"You have to tell him," one sister declared to the other. "You promised you would. And we're in public so nobody is going to make a scene."

That look was back in Cosette's eyes, Tom saw, and he couldn't take it anymore.

"What is going on?" he demanded, his voice low but dangerous.

Cosette drew a breath, and then confessed. "There has been a lot of stuff sent to my work email, Tom. Stuff from fans, and links for articles, about us."

It took a moment to process. "Your work email? How did they get it?"

"It's on the school website," Cosette explained. "If they found out my name they could easily find where I worked."

Tom looked from one sister to another. Christina had the decency to look abashed, and herself rather miffed with Cosette.

"When did you find this out?" Tom asked, straining against his patience.

"This morning," Cosette replied mildly. "I saw a notification that I had an email from...from Shelly, you remember her?" Her eyes flickered with something--anger?--for a moment and then returned to their timidity. "And that's when I saw the other stuff."

//Here we go.// he thought. "And did you open any of it?"

"Yes."
"And what did you see?"

No answer.

Christina decided to rescue her sister. "She showed me. It wasn't very nice but it wasn't like anyone dropped any big dark secrets. It was just...unpleasant. The whole thing."

Tom flicked his eyes at her but they quickly went back to Cosette. "I told you I didn't want you looking at that stuff."

When her eyes met his again, they blazed, turning bright purple with suppressed rage. "The last I checked, you weren't the boss of me," she said, biting the words out.

He instantly shifted into over-concerned boyfriend mode. "It's just going to upset you for no good reason, Cosette!" he insisted.

She folded her arms, her eyes flashing. "Sticks and stones, Tom," she said.

"So you're going to say that you're not at all upset by anything you saw?" he pressed. "That's why you've been distant and petulant all day?"

"I have *not* been petulant," Cosette growled.

"You haven't exactly been warm," Tom shot back.

"Now, hang on a second," Christina said, glancing around her. "We're getting a bit loud. Normally I'd never get in the middle of a fight--"

Cosette let out a huff.

"--but I told Cosette the same thing earlier today. None of that stuff makes any difference, it's just a bunch of people spouting a bunch of nasty things and it doesn't affect you two at all. And maybe, Tom, you need to realize that while for the sake of your survival you have to tune it out when people say bad things about you, you also have to realize that the rest of us haven't thickened our skin to it yet and sometimes the curiosity is too much."

Tom stared down at his hands on the table, both of them clenched into fists. He turned them so that his palms were flat on the table, letting his fingers uncurl and relax. When he spoke again, his voice was much calmer.

"The fact that they can get to you through your work email is a security issue," he said. "First thing in the morning, we need to call Richard and let him know. Your email needs to be changed or deactivated. Not because I'm being controlling," he added quickly when Cosette opened her mouth, hands thumping down on the table in objection, "but because it's about your safety. You can't give these people a way in, Cosette." He leaned forward and gently placed his hand over hers, his fingers stroking the back of her hand soothingly, like he had the other morning. "I won't tolerate you being harassed, and that's not me trying to be bossy. No man would tolerate his girlfriend being hassled like that."

"He's right," Christina said after a pause. "If he wasn't throwing a fit it would be a sure sign he didn't give a shit. You want that instead?"

Cosette stared at her sister for a long moment, and then turned her eyes back to Tom. "Fine. They can change my email and remove it from the site. Since I'm not working this coming year the parents don't need to have it. But when I go back to work, I'm not going to have someone rifling
through my email, screening what I get to see."

"It's not your personal email, Cozy," Christina pointed out. "It's work. You think Tom goes through his work email?"

"Plus someone goes through my regular mail, just to keep things safe," Tom said. "And why do you think I keep two phones? One is for work, one is personal."

"No one goes through your work phone," Cosette pointed out.

"Because I keep both private, only work connections know it."

"And the wrong person never gets either of your numbers?" Christina asked.

"It happens. I block numbers when it happens. And same thing for emails. You learn not to look."

He tightened his grip on Cosette's hand. "You're still new at this and I don't want to put any extra stress on you. I'm not trying to control you, I'm trying to take away some of the strain."

Cosette stared at him for a long minute, then closed her eyes and sighed. "Yeah, I know. I'm sorry."

"You don't have a reason to be sorry," Tom assured her. "But I'd like to be there when you call Richard in the morning."

Her eyes hardened again. "I can handle it, Tom."

"I know. I just want to be there. I'll let you handle it but I want to back you up."

Just then, their food arrived, effectively ending the conversation.

Chapter End Notes

next up...the lightning.
It sucked to sit in a pub and not be able to have a drink. "I'd give my right arm right now for a pint of Angry Orchard," Cosette grunted.

Christina sipped at her white wine. "We can get you some red wine, or white if you prefer. Something sweet. One glass won't hurt."

Cosette shook her head. It wasn't what she wanted. She wanted some cider, but more than that she wanted the nice buzz that the cider would bring. Getting buzzed wouldn't happen with a glass of white wine.

"Not worth it," Cosette sighed. She glanced around. Tom's friends had gathered in a rather small pub, which had the advantage of being off the main road and not attracting a lot of traffic. These were people he'd known from Eaton, Cambridge, his Rada days, friends he had collected throughout his life. There were over a dozen people here, and Cosette got the distinct feeling that this had all been arranged for her benefit.

Tom had played host from minute one, even though they had not been the first to arrive by far. He introduced her and Christina to everyone, ordered a round for all in their party, and then found Cosette a comfortable place to sit. Christina was more of a butterfly, making new friends and generally being the life of the party, which was typical of her sister. The youngest Mitchells had always been much more of an extrovert. Cosette could do it when required of her, but she hadn't been lying to Tom before -- she was starting to become exhausted.

The pub had a billiard table and the girls were invited to play. Christina tried to get Cosette to join but Cosette could not stand another hour on her feet, so she stayed put. Her thoughts would not leave her alone. In spite of Tom's best efforts to be reassuring about all those nasty things she'd read, they were stuck in her brain on repeat.

She wanted to ask him more about Jane and Lizzie. Those were the two names that seemed to come up the most in the worst of the gossip. She knew that he'd had feelings for both women. He
had broken up with Jane, but Lizzie had broken up with him. He'd told her that it had happened right before Christmas, right before he'd ended up filming outside of her school.

Had she been a rebound? The question never occurred to her before, because she'd put up such a fight. Rebounds aren't relationships that involve such intense pursuit, but surely it had had to have taken his mind off his broken heart.

Was his heart broken? She'd never pried that hard into the relationship, not wanting to pick it apart like an autopsy. Jane, he'd spoken of less frequently. She knew he'd liked her, but it just hadn't worked between them, according to him. Why? She'd asked but he shrugged it off, saying sometimes things just didn't work out. With Lizzie, things were far more complicated. He didn't like talking about Lizzie. Sometimes she worried he was still harboring feelings for this woman, but Lizzie had made it clear she just wanted to be friends, and Tom was the king of "get over it and move on." It was what he'd tried to do with Cosette, and failed at miserably -- had that been why? He'd already suffered a heavy blow with Lizzie, but her rejection had just been too much? His heart couldn't bounce back?

One of the things she'd learned about men in her limited experiences (and both Christina and her mother had agreed with this bit of information) was that if a man bad mouthed all of his ex-girlfriends, then the problem was with him. Tom had never bad mouthed any of his exes, but he had never been clear about what went wrong, either.

Too many questions and too few answers for her to recall. For all of Tom's romantic overtures, she realized that he actually was rather bad at talking about himself on a deep, personal level.

Cosette couldn't help herself. Without anything solid, she just kept cycling through the things she did know, looking for something she missed. And bits and pieces of the rumors and backbiting she'd read were starting to fill in the gaps, which was unfair, as those things had no proof of credibility. Things were getting tangled in her head and the confusion was starting to breed something much worse.

The blank spots were bad enough, but something else niggled at her: the whole Friends with Benefits situation. Being compared to a man's exes was par for the course, but when the exes weren't even credited as being legitimate girlfriends in the first place? Sure, Tom slept around. Sure, Tom slept with both Lizzie and Jane. But she'd given him the benefit of believing that Tom had imagined himself having some feelings for both women that could have been something like love.

Friends with Benefits. It sounded so...shallow. Empty. Just a warm body to fuck when you needed to fuck, but somebody you got along with so there weren't any emotional complications or confusion. A prostitute you didn't have to pay.

Why would those things be said about Tom?

Her conscience smote her. She was allowing the man's reputation in her eyes to be tarnished by this loose talk. There was only one goal those people had had when they sent her those links -- to upset her and cause discord between her and Tom. And it was working. He had treated her well, shown himself to have honorable intentions, had respected her boundaries. He gave no indication of using her, hadn't deceived or misled her in any way. Sure, he hadn't said much, but what he'd said had been honest.

So why did she keep having the same damn argument with herself?

Why couldn't she just...trust him?
"You feeling okay, babe?"

She looked up. Matthew was one of Tom's oldest friends from Eaton. He had the same posh accent as Tom, and while he was a bit broader, shorter, and darker than Tom, there was almost a brotherly resemblance between them. Their mannerisms were similar, and it made sense, as they'd practically grown up together. Tom had even referred to Matthew as his best friend, but regretted that the two rarely had time to hang out anymore.

It wasn't solely because of Tom's hectic career. Matthew was married, and a well-to-do barrister. This had been explained to her as different from a lawyer or a solicitor, but she'd found the whole business confusing. He specialized in family law and divorce, and worked for a very high profile firm, and advocated many cases before judges. He was even considering applying for appointment as a judge, but it was, in his words, "not fit conversation for a pub," and had changed the subject to more every-day matters.

He was a perfectly nice man, and it seemed that every man in the area had a habit of calling women "babe," unlike the myth of "luv" or "darling." Tom seemed to call everyone darling, but he had refrained from calling her "babe."

She smiled at him. "I'm fine. Being a bit over halfway through your pregnancy always puts a monkey wrench on nights out."

"Ah," he said, settling in at her table. "My wife had a rough time with our first." He glanced over at the lovely blonde Cosette had been introduced to earlier. Margaret was her name and she seemed perfectly nice, but she eyed Cosette up and down in a way that made her distinctly uncomfortable. "Threw up almost every single day. Had those Braxton-Hicks contractions so often, we couldn't even have sex from her second trimester because every time it seemed to set it off."

Cosette smirked, amused. "I was warned about them, usually they only come in the third trimester."

"Ah, well, pregnancies are like fingerprints, no two are ever alike," Matthew joked. "Our second child, she would forget she was pregnant, things were so different. Don't worry, the first is usually worst," he laughed, "as Tom and I always like to say."

Cosette suddenly felt her heartbeat accelerate. A memory came rushing back on her, from a series of memories she'd tried desperately to repress -- Tom saying that exact phrase, smiling down her from so close above. *The first is usually worst,* he'd said. From //that night/>. When she suddenly got awkward and tense as they moved into the main event. It didn't hurt but it was tight and strange and she suddenly became more self-conscious than she'd ever been in her life, and she suddenly understood the pure common-sense side of only ever doing this with a man who had made a lifetime commitment to you, who was so in love with you that he'd be willing to forgive you anything and never hold that embarrassment against you. How he'd coaxed and prompted her, relaxed her with his smile and gentle words, how they had chuckled at themselves, how mortified she'd been, how tender and sweet and utterly reassuring and encouraging he'd been, disintegrating her self-consciousness to the point where she didn't think anything could possibly have been better than this.

It had just added to the shame later. Made it burn that much more.

"You all right, there?" Matthew asked. "Your cheeks are bright red."

Cosette looked down at her hand, which looked much paler than she remembered it, and lifted it to her face. When she pressed it to her cheek, she felt her own skin so cold on her fingers, so hot on
her cheek. She had tried so very, very hard to *not* think about that night, to push away any memory of it, to not give into the temptation to relive it, that it's sudden onslaught being so sharp and clear was beyond disconcerting.

"One thing I like about America is that you believe in ice," Matthew said, straining to assist her in the discomfort for the moment. "I'll see if they've got any out back, get you something cold to drink."

Cosette thanked him, and picked up her glass of water. It had a few floating cubes of ice in it because she'd asked specifically for it, knowing the European penchant for warm drinks. She pulled out one cube and rubbed it on her cheeks, feeling it melt rapidly against her hot skin. She had been warned about the negative affects of stress by her OBGYN, and been given some breathing exercises to do if the stress became too much, so she started inhaling deeply through her nose and gently blowing out through her mouth.

Her eyes went to Tom. It didn't help that the man looked particularly stunning that day. His preference for V-necked T-shirts in shades of white, blue and gray worked to his benefit, always showing off the mild lines of his chest to his best advantage. Today it was a blue one with a speckled texture, and his deep blue jacket over it that was too bright to be navy but too dark to be royal. And his smile was in full bloom as he moved from person to person, taking time to talk to them, and using that listening face that she had to look away from when it was directed at her or else she couldn't think straight.

A woman had joined the party, and when Tom and she met in the line of friends, the mood suddenly shifted. Tom's relaxed stance suddenly went a bit rigid, and Cosette could see it was a bit of an effort for him to greet this new woman with the same friendliness he'd shown everyone else.

The others all seemed to know her and be comfortable with her, and while the group was talking, Tom glanced over at Cosette. There was something self-conscious in that look, and Cosette felt the edges of her vision begin to darken.

Matthew returned. He had a glass full of ice water. "Made them use all the ice they had, but here you go. Should help. Pregnant women always gotta stay hydrated."

"Who is she?" Cosette asked.

Matthew looked in the direction Cosette indicated with the nudge of her chin. His easygoing expression shifted just as much as Tom's stance had. "Sue?" he said, struggling to stay casual. "She's...she's an old mate. We all knew each other at Cambridge."

"Is that all they were? Friends?" Cosette asked Matthew, knowing that if anybody would know, it was an old Eaton buddy. She could probably get all the stories of Tom that she wanted from this guy if she showed a little more breast. Men like that always lived to razz each other. Of course, if this Sue was a dark secret, she might not have any luck. Men like that also knew how to keep each other's confidences.

Matthew had that same look of discomfort again. "Well...friends, yeah..."

"It just seems like they went out. The way Tom's acting. It's like she's an ex."

"Not exactly an ex, but..." He looked around, as if gauging where Tom was, if he was going to overhear it. "It wasn't serious, she's not like that," Matthew went on in a voice that was supposed to be reassuring. "They just had a thing for a bit."
"A 'thing'?' Cosette pressed. "You mean they slept together?"

Matthew chuckled. It was quaint way to put it. "Yeah, I mean, it was more than the hanky panky, you know?"

British slang. But she didn't need a translation for it.

"But it wasn't serious? So they tried to get together but it didn't work out?" she continued. Something was off here. She could feel it.

"Well, just because you're on the job doesn't mean it's gotta be all serious, you know? Just, like, I dunno how you Americans would put it. But it was years ago."

"On the job?"

"Having sex." He had the decency to look mildly abashed at having to spell it out.

"Mate, you need to belt up," Tom said, suddenly at his friend's shoulder. The look on his face was...well, it wasn't happy. He turned his eyes to Cosette. "What has this wanker been feeding you?"

"Yeah, don't mind me, I'm just pissed," Matthew said, but it was pretty clear that he wasn't that drunk.

"He was telling me about the former arrangement you had with Sue," Cosette said, suddenly wanting to fling her new found information into Tom's face. The anger had stalled into shock and she was in a moment of indecision. How horrified should she be? It was sinking quickly into her gut, the implications of Tom's history. All her earlier worries and fears had not just returned, they'd brought reinforcements.

"What arrangement?" Tom said, glaring daggers at Matthew.

"That you were bonking. Shagging. What other British words can I use? Fucking, but that's not British--"

"What, that? That was years ago!" He turned on his friend. "You must be pretty legless to start slagging me like that," Tom said, clearly angry. Matthew stood up, hands out.

"Mate, she asked! She knew something was up, what, am I supposed to lie?"

"Tell the whole truth, at least!" Tom barked. "It was a decade ago, Cosette. I mean, ancient history."

"So ancient that you all tensed up when she came into the pub," Cosette pointed out.

Christina had approached at this point, and while she had been smiling, the smile quickly faded at seeing the looks Tom and Cosette were exchanging. "What happened?"

"I'm suddenly not feeling well," Cosette said, standing. "I'm done for the night." It wasn't as much of a struggle to keep her voice level as she thought. She was suddenly so tired...and she knew her pale skin and flushed cheeks would work in her favor, as she didn't want to make a scene.

"Oh," Christina said. "Do you want me to go with you?"

"I don't want to end your evening early," Cosette said, but as sisters are sisters, Christina knew Cosette did want her to and didn't want to be the bad guy and make her, or make Christina feel bad
by turning her down when she asked.

"No, it's fine, I'll go with you. We can get a cab."

"I'm going with you," Tom said.

"No you aren't," Cosette said in a completely normal voice. "These are your friends, that you hardly see." She felt, just for show, that she should pat him reassuringly, maybe even smile as she said it. "You should stay." Nope, those words were too tight and clipped. She needed to get out of there before the emotional wheel inside her stopped its spinning and landed on "volcano." Without looking, she grabbed her coat and headed for the door.

Tom followed them outside. He was hot on Cosette's heels, she could feel him like a heavy wind on her back. "I'm going with you, Cosette. It's late at night, you're in an unfamiliar city and you're five months pregnant. For fucks sake at least let me have the peace of mind of knowing you go back to the house all right."

Christina knew the storm was brewing. She ran on ahead to hail a cab. Cosette tried closing her eyes and counting to ten, an attempt to calm down. God how she wished she'd gotten a hotel!

"Why are you so pissed at me?" Tom hissed. His voice was much closer; somehow he'd gotten right behind her and was bent down, speaking almost directly into her ear. "What the fuck did I do?" He'd obviously had a few beers, Cosette knew he could swear as bad as her but it was rare for him to do so in front of her.

She wanted to shove him away, but knew if she started getting excited it would snowball. Why were those words he'd said still circling her brain? *The first is always worst.* Why had that come to her while talking to Matthew? Why did it feel connected to why she was suddenly so horribly upset?

"First is worst," she said, not looking at him. She'd meant to mutter the words to herself but they came out loud enough for him to hear.

"What?"

"First is worst. How many firsts have you had, Tom?" She looked up at him, eyes starting to burn. "Were you Sue's first, too? Did you soothe her too, talk her through it, teach her how to fuck you like you like it?"

Tom scowled; his mouth fell open and his eyes flew wide. "How *dare* you say something like that to me?"

Honestly, Cosette didn't know where those words came from. Something inside her had started to growl and roar and it would not go back into its cage.

She wasn't special. She was just the last in line. A long line.

"Cab's here!" Christina called. Cosette turned and walked, and realized that Tom was still following her. She stopped at the door and would have told him again to go back into the pub, but Tom's face killed the words in her throat.

"Don't say anything," he said to her, his voice glacial. "Get in that cab and don't say another word."

Christina got into the front seat at Tom's gesture, and he got into the cab after Cosette.
Nobody said a word the entire way. Cosette stared out the window for the first half, unable to look at Tom, but she felt his glare burning into the back of her head and had to turn and meet that gaze, out of some masochistic curiosity.

She had never seen him like this. It should have terrified her. Anyone with a mild sense of self-preservation would have been apologizing, babbling like an idiot to try and put out the fire, but no. She couldn't. And for some reason, she didn't feel like she was wrong. She didn't feel the need to apologize. She didn't care if he was pissed. He had no idea what was brewing inside of her. It even frightened her!

Tom paid the driver and led the way into the house. He punched the code and held the door open. Christina veered to the left, toward the kitchen and their bedrooms, and Tom went to the right, toward the living area. Cosette stood in the middle, staring through the glass into the back yard. Finally her feet took her toward Tom. She had started the bonfire, she had to watch it burn.

Tom paced the length of the long room, running his fingers through his hair so many times, whatever styling gel had been holding down his curls was quickly dissipated, and if he wasn't careful he was going to rip some of those curls out. She paused to appreciate how wide and high the ceiling was, how bright the space was. It was going to ring with angry voices in a moment.

Suddenly feeling tired, she pulled out a chair and sat down. Tom stopped his pacing at the sound of the chair legs scraping the floor and whirled on her.

"Explain yourself," he commanded, his voice low, contained.

"You and Sue had a thing."

The nod he gave her suddenly made her think of his performance in Coriolanus. How much he had ranted and raved and flat out yelled his way through that play. //This is real life, buddy,// she thought bitterly.

"Did you love her?"

The rage was momentarily shuffled out for confusion and shock. "What?"

"When you were fucking her, did you love her?" Cosette demanded.

"Is this jealousy?" Tom asked.

The flame inside her pushed up high, into her throat. She was sure if she opened her mouth it would come out and shoot across the room. She didn't know when she sprang to her feet, but she saw Tom's face change from superiority to fear.

"When you were fucking her, Tom," she blasted him, "DID. YOU. LOVE. HER??"

"NO!" The admission stopped her. She pulled back, waiting. "No, I did not," he confessed, almost resentfully. "We were...we were friends. We had an arrangement. It went on for a bit but when I started dating Susannah it ended. It was a decade ago! And I mean, isn't it better to do that than to just pick up some stranger? Hook up all the time? You have to be safe today!"

Friends with benefits, Cosette thought. "Have you done something like that since? With other women?"

He didn't answer for a very long moment. He looked down, and his entire posture screamed that he didn't want to answer. "Yes," he finally said.
"How many times?"

His eyes flicked up to hers. There was an air of something about him, like a student that didn't want to admit how many times they'd gotten away with cheating on a test. "Does it matter?"

It must be bad, if he didn't want to say. So much for being honest about past relationships. At this thought, the skin across her face felt hot and tight. "So you can do that. You can utterly remove any emotional attachment to a woman you're having sex with. You just do it like a machine and cut yourself off--"

"We've already talked about our differences when it comes to our view of sex, Cosette," he interrupted. "I'm not going to keep arguing this with you. You *know* I have a history. It was one of the reasons you didn't want anything to do with me when we first met. So why are you all upset now?"

She drew a few heavy breaths, attempting to calm herself, and then said, "Because it just shows your character, Tom. I don't care that you had past relationships, I don't care if you were in love before, that's normal. But I do care that you can be...like that!"

"Like what?" He stepped closer to her. "Human? Normal?"

"There is nothing *normal* about that. It's degrading. To use someone and let them use you back. And the fact that you can't see that...can't see that it's wrong..."

The rage slipped from her like rising smoke, and left something wet and soft in its wake. She realized she was crying -- her cheeks were so hot but the tears were sticky and thick.

"I mean, what does that say about you, inside? I knew you had a casual attitude toward sex, but I guess it just didn't hit me HOW casual until tonight. I thought at least you had interest in these women, you were just doing things out of order. But you seem to have absolutely no respect for--"

"For women?" His voice had taken on a high-pitched tone, one she recognized from their argument at the country club. It was his defensive tone. "I respect women! I defend their rights, and respect that they're capable of making their own decisions! I don't treat them like children, like they can't--"

"You don't respect the very nature of sex!" Cosette cut him off. "I mean, the reason it exists! Do you even know why? To have babies, yes, but it's power is unifying. And here you are, repeatedly and methodically using it and totally denying any bonding power it might have, just being so completely and totally...selfish!"

"I know you have a very distinct view of sex," Tom said calmly. "I respect that, but it is not just for those things. Sex is part of...I mean, it's so many other things besides! We have these bodies and they're capable of pleasure, how can it be wrong to enjoy that? We knew this about each other, Cosette, right from the very beginning! Why is it that I have to honor your view of sex but you don't have to accept mine?" Tom then seemed to redirect. "And please remember, it was agreed upon -- I've never disrespected anyone, never gone against anyone's consent. Whatever women I was with, they knew the situation--"

"I *do not care* if they were as selfish as you, if they agreed to be used like that! And there isn't ANY HONOR in your view of sex!" she barked. "It's like...it's like you take a knife. A knife is a tool for cutting things. But you insist on using it to slash at your skin and disfigure yourself and you refuse to acknowledge that it's dangerous and morally wrong! And then you throw up the argument that you are free to do as you will -- that you consent to it. Consent makes no difference!
It doesn't stop the harm from occurring! 'Oh, but Cosette,' she said, changing her tone in imitation of a third voice in the conversation, "that's ridiculous, of course we wouldn't do things like that with knives -- sex just feels good!" In her normal voice she ranted. "Just because sex feels good doesn't mean it can't be abused! Drugs feel good and yet we have laws against them. Sex is a drug, sex addiction is a diagnosable condition!"

"I'm not a sex addict," Tom objected, his voice rising higher in tone.

"Really? You need it so badly you're willing to set up an arrangement with a woman so you can get it regularly, when you need it? Maybe addiction is a strong word but it's definitely a habit and it's controlling your behavior! I haven't had sex with you since that one time, so how can I believe you've been going without all these months, when you so clearly need it?"

"Now, wait just a second, I have been completely faithful to you--"

"And how much longer is that going to last until you can't wait anymore? Is that why you wanted to marry me so badly? Sure, it's convenient for the kid but hey, that's just an added bonus. I get to be the 'wife with benefits,' how wonderful! I told you your brain was fucking broken, how the fuck can you even know what love is, what it feels like, what it even means when you've been filling your life with these empty relationships with absolutely no remorse!?"

"I know," Tom said imperiously, "precisely BECAUSE what I've had with any single woman I've ever been with in the past has been absolutely NOTHING compared to how I felt that night with you!"

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Tom was not surprised at his admission. Quite frankly, he was a bit shocked that it hadn't come up before.

Because it had been different. Being with her, how he had treated her...sure, when he'd lost his virginity it had been awkward, but not tender. Sweet, maybe, but with the kind of insecurity that seemed to make the whole experience one best left behind, even though he would never forget it. After that, he had been with a few women who had never had sex before, but he'd never...*felt*...that it was more than sex. That it was something...higher. To go beyond just making it special for them. With Cosette, he had felt...honored. She'd chosen him to give this part of herself to. He had been trying to...live up to it? Sure, he was a gentleman and never wanted anyone to feel awkward or uncomfortable around him, but all those times, all of them...they had always been about *him.* Or occasionally about *them.*

That was the first time it had ever been about *her.*

"I would never, in a million years, try to marry anyone just to have sex with them," Tom returned, his voice forcefully lower. "The sheer fact that I would even *consider* marriage at all, if you truly knew me, Cosette, would tell you how serious I am about you. And my brain is not fucking broken, each and every woman I've ever been with has been my friend on some level, and I have continued to maintain my friendship with them, even after our relationships ended, however temporary."

She stared up at him. He'd never seen her this angry. He had no idea what triggered it, although he was going to kill Matthew if he never got his hands on him. When she had turned to him, spoken those awful words to him...

...he had never in his life struck a woman. He'd never wanted to, or even thought about it. But the
outrage from those words had sent a pulse down to his hand that only sheer force of will had kept from moving.

"Have you?" Her voice was low, a growl. "You know, men are able to separate their feelings, but women don't, Tom. It's not in our nature. It just isn't. Maybe there are exceptions, but it just isn't how we're built, physiologically, much as so many of us might deny it. Sex is bonding by its very nature. You've been using a nuclear weapon and treating it like a child's toy with no respect for its nature or its consequences." She drew back from him. "I don't...I don't know what else to say. I don't know what to say to you. I don't how to make you *see!*"

She pressed her hands to her face. Tom felt the irrational urge to put his arms around her, but there was no way he would even try to touch her at this point. He knew if he did she would push him away, and the very thought of her doing that made his eyes burn with tears he refused to let rise.

"I'm going to bed," Cosette said, her eyes drifting down the hallway, away from him. Tom followed her gaze and saw that Christina had returned and was standing in the doorway, listening but not interfering. Not that she couldn't have heard the entire shouting match from her room. "I...I can't talk about this anymore."

Something in those words...they sounded...broken. Yes, that was the word. Tom felt a flutter of panic and his hand went up to reach out to her, in spite of his self-preservational urges, but he forced it back.

"That's probably a good idea," he heard himself saying. He was sickened by the sound of his own voice. It was...phony. The voice used when the moment has become so awkward that it has to be broken and moved over. "I wouldn't want you to get so upset that something happened."

She paused, her shoulders stiffening, and gave him a brief, defiant stare over her shoulder. Then she walked down the hallway toward the kitchen, shut the door, and through the glass Tom saw her move a chair and shove it under the knob.

Part of him was more hurt by this final action than by anything else she said. That she felt the need to physically block him out, literally prevent him from getting to her if something happened...but no, Christina was there with her, if anything happened, Christina would get him. It was hollow comfort.

He waited until she was out of sight, and then he sat down on the chair she'd vacated earlier, and cried. He wasn't sure what emotion was causing the tears. Maybe all of them. The frustration, the anger, the fear, and worst of all, the heavy stone weight of despair.
He did not sleep that night. For many hours he didn't even want to lie down -- aimless energy kept him from even being able to relax, regardless of his current state of exhaustion. It was like an electric current was running through him on a low hum, just high enough to keep him on edge. But there was no way to vent the energy. Sometimes he would toss a tennis ball at the wall above the second floor room and catch it. He knew this would probably make too much noise, disturb the girls, so he refrained. Then he thought of going and sitting in the garden and smoking, but refused to give in to a crutch. A crutch had gotten him into this, it wouldn't get him out. Finally, around three a.m., he had to go lie down. He tried to close his eyes, but he just kept seeing Cosette's face. He was torn into several parts. One part of him was utterly furious with her, that she would just out of the blue decide to tear into him, that she would decide to get angry at him all over again for information that wasn't new. She knew he had a different view of sex than him. He didn't connect it to emotional attachment like most people did -- that was just the way he was. That enabled him to share it a lot more freely with others, as long as no strings became attached, and he was always so clear about that. Nobody was deceived! Nobody got hurt! But the sheer fact that he'd been compelled to tell her he loved her that night had been enough to make him realize she was utterly unique in his life. She'd always been put off by his sexual proclivities but she had still allowed him into her life, and now she wanted him out of it? How dare she? Couldn't she make up her damn mind and stick to it?

That was where the other part joined in. The part that felt guilt. No, she'd never liked his attitudes, and yet, every time, when she voiced her concerns, he'd found some way to excuse them or charm her or cajole her into giving him another chance. He'd brought this on himself. And it hurt, it burned to have someone with that kind of power over his emotions make such a judgment, deal such a wound with only a few choice words and a single look.

Which led to the third part. Resentment. He hated that she could do this to him. He hated that she could make him question himself, question his decisions, make him want to change in spite of
himself, make him want to please someone so desperately that he dangled like a puppet on a string, waiting to perform. He resented his feelings for her, he resented that she had so much damn power, whether it was through the child in her womb or how somehow she'd managed to get so far into his heart he couldn't bear the thought of digging her out, even though he was starting to have the feeling that it would be inevitable.

He must have dozed off because a scraping sound jolted him awake. He glanced at the clock; six a.m. He got himself out of bed, feeling heavier than he realized, and made a quick change of his clothes. He kept a small fridge in his bedroom for emergencies, so water and food was not an issue, but the first urge was always for coffee.

The kitchen door was open. The light was on and he could smell coffee brewing. He hesitated in the hallway, listening for the step of the person in the room. A clearing throat told him it was not Cosette, it was Christina.

Slowly, he made his way down the corridor. He wasn't sure what he would face but he had to talk to someone. If it couldn't be Cosette, Christina would be the next best thing.

When he entered the kitchen, Christina was rummaging through the newspaper. She looked up at him as he entered, and her expression was sympathetic. He felt a mild sense of relief -- at least Cosette's outburst hadn't destroyed Christina's opinion of him. Then he realized that Cosette's bedroom door was open and she was not inside.

"Where did she go?" he asked, feeling the panic in his gut start to wake up.

Christina hesitated. "She's fine, Tom. She's got her phone. She's a big girl, you know. She's lived on her own for a long time."

"But..." Those instincts to protect climbed all over themselves, trampling the anger as well as all the other residual feelings from last night's fight.

"Let it go for a bit, Tom," Christina prompted gently. "Want to sit?"

He didn't answer, just went to the table and sat down across from her. He got the feeling she wanted to talk to him.

"Can you give me some clue as to what happened?" he asked her.

Christina shrugged one shoulder, folding the paper and putting it aside. "Well, I talked to her a bit last night...or this morning, whichever. Maybe we can blame the pregnancy hormones for most of the insanity, but not all of it." She sighed, rubbing her hands together. "Look, I know this isn't about me, but bear with me for a few minutes. This might be too much information, but I am not a virgin."

Tom blinked at the non sequitur. "You and Henry, then?"

"Nope, Henry won't. Let me back up. When I was in high school, I was a bit of a rebel. Ok, a lot of a rebel," she chuckled lightly. "I waited for my first time until I was a senior, but I'd been building up for it. And I was secretly taking birth control because I knew my parents would freak the hell out if they found out, and I also carried a handful of condoms in my purse."

"Wow," Tom whispered.

"Like I said, rebel," she replied. "But I'll tell you, my first time was not good. Sure, the guy was hot, but it was...disappointing, you know?" She shook her head. "No of course not, you're not a girl.
"You guys are wired differently from us. Even bad sex is good sex for you."

"Well, not necessarily...but what was the point again?" He rubbed his eyes, feeling his lack of sleep.

"I was disappointed, so I rooted around during my college years, trying to find the mythical sexual experience that I'd been promised. Suffice to say, I didn't find it. And then my mother found my birth control pills and all hell broke loose."

Tom winced. "That couldn't have been an easy time."

"Cosette and Grams were always very close, but Grams didn't play favorites. Her door was always open to me and trust me, I took advantage when I needed to. And she gave me a few books to read. It took me some time to read them because...let's face it, I didn't want to. But when I did, I started to figure out what I was doing wrong. I'm not going to go into all the details. But bottom line was that I decided to wait until I found the right guy. I wasn't going to sleep around, because, exactly like Cozy said, we are not wired like you guys are. We bond, and when that bond breaks, it hurts, and it takes a piece of us with it. So I wasn't going to bond with any more guys who were just going to leave me and take a piece with them. And then in my senior year in college I met Henry. He was, and still is, a virgin."

This got his attention. Henry was rather good looking, Tom always thought, and seemed to carry himself with a quiet self confidence that seemed rather opposite Christina's more exuberant nature. "Really?"

"I know, I thought the same thing," she chuckled. "I mean, why? He was hot, he had opportunity. But he explained to me that he had never wanted to cheat on his future wife."

Tom scowled. "You can't cheat on someone you've never met."

"That's what I thought, too," she said with a very compassionate smile. "But that's not how he saw it. That whole idea of 'saving yourself' meant something to him. He wanted to give all of himself, every part of himself, to that one special woman with whom he'd spend the rest of his life. He didn't want to give away any piece of himself to anyone else but her, whoever she was. He didn't want any other women in that bed with him when he and his wife were together -- and that's what sex does, it bonds you to those people, whether you realize it or not. They become a part of you, and you a part of them. You see, we don't see things as just happening *now.* All the things that happen to us in our past make up who we're going to be in the future. Some of us have to make a lot of mistakes before we're able to become what we're meant to be, it's part of it. Some of us, like Henry, figure it out before they go making a bunch of those mistakes. So of course I was worried he was going to think me impure and not worthy of him, as incomplete because yeah, I had given away a very special piece of myself. But he wasn't like that at all. He knew I understood the same thing he did, and was trying to live a good life. He helped me. It wouldn't have been possible if the seeds hadn't already been there. Changing to please Henry wouldn't have worked. It had to be equal. It had to come from both of us."

Tom started to get the point. "So Cosette sees my past as me cheating on her?"

"Well, it sounds kind of harsh when you put it like that. But in a very real way you've been giving yourself away with no thought of that one special person you want to spend the rest of your life with, and what's going to be left of you when you meet them! Which makes you look either completely thoughtless, or like the kind of man who never wants to settle down. The bottom line is that she wants someone she can share all of herself with. All of it. And in return, she wants all of that person back. And if you don't understand or appreciate some basic truths that make her who
she is, how can you two do that? These differences...they make a difference! We all know that you can't undo the past, of course you can't. But you just seem rather...casual about it, you know? Like those things don't matter."

"You..." He stopped himself, not wanting to bark at her, but feeling that frustration renew itself at her words. "The way I've dealt with things," he said slowly, feeling how difficult it was to admit this to someone, "is just to move on. You accept the past for what it was, and move on toward the future. I can't get those pieces back, Christina."

"No, but processing it makes new pieces, makes you aware of your changes, of what you've learned, lost, and even gained. Have you dealt with it?" Christina held up a hand. "I'm not asking you to tell me private things, Tom," she said at his frown. "I'm just asking you. Have you examined the past, seen where it's led you? Dealt with the things that caused you to make those mistakes in the first place? You're so good at getting into your characters' heads and being so thorough in your research, but what about yourself? Do you know yourself as well?"

He squirmed. It had always been a lot harder for him when it came to himself. His non-answer, Christina took for an answer.

"There's another thing, though. When I got engaged to Henry," she said, shifting the subject to try to relieve the tension of the moment, "Cosette took it kind of hard. I mean, she wasn't jealous, she liked Henry but she didn't like him like that. But here was this very Catholic man who understood things the way she did, and trust me, they do not come along every day. And she was older than me, and she had never been in a serious relationship, and it just...I think it hurt. It was during Christmas that year when he proposed. So when she met you in January, I think she was a lot more vulnerable than she would have been otherwise."

"She never told me," Tom whispered.

"I know. There's a lot of conversations you two haven't had that you need to have. I'm not saying you have to have all of them now, but they need to happen. And until you know what you're going to say, they can't."

The coffee had finished brewing somewhere midway in their conversation. Tom got up and made himself a cup, and then sat back down. As he nursed it, he considered her words. They were difficult. What she was advising him to do was very, very difficult. He wasn't sure he could.

But it gave him some idea of what had gone wrong last night.

"Christina," he said, his voice earnest. "Will you please tell me where she went?"

"She's at the coffee shop on the corner, The Coaster. She left around five this morning. She needed to get out of your house so she could think."

It was past seven. "Do you think I should go down there or wait for her to come back?"

She just smiled at him. "You've been chasing her since minute one, Tom. Don't you think you should let her come to you, just once?"

Tom stood up and kissed Christina on the cheek. He abandoned his coffee and went back to lie down. He was suddenly very sleepy.

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Cosette walked back into the house at around 9 o'clock that morning. To say that it had not been an
easy night for her, either, would have been a gross understatement.

She couldn't say why she had felt the need to block the door. But she needed something, some protection. From Tom? Maybe. She knew he wouldn't do anything but she also knew how he was when he was wound up, and she sincerely worried that he would barge into her room with questions and demand answers. She needed to be left alone. Barricading the door seemed the only way to guarantee it.

Of course, this didn't protect her from her sister's onslaught.

"Look, I know you're upset, and I don't want to piss you off any more than you are," Christina said as she came into Cosette's room, after the hour long hot shower Cosette had used to attempt to calm herself down, "but I have to ask what the hell is going on."

"Friends with benefits," Cosette said as she sat down on her bed. "That's what Tom was to her. That woman, Sue. Friends with benefits. Do you know what that means? That means that they were screwing each other and weren't in a relationship. Just friends, but fucking."

Christina sat in the chair at the little writing table beyond the bed. "Well, at least he wasn't taking home a different girl every night."

Cosette shook her head. "That's what he said! And it wasn't any more right when he said it! I mean, he just used that woman! And don't tell me she consented because that doesn't make any difference! What we consent to doesn't determine whether it's right or wrong. Germany consented to be ruled by the Nazis. Dr. Kevorkian's patients consented to be euthanized. It's still wrong. Consent isn't the final say in morality."

Christina mused on this for a long moment. "You knew Tom had previous girlfriends and that he was sexually active. But this new information has really upset you. So you think it's worse when a guy doesn't have feelings for a girl and just has sex with her?"

"Women aren't wired like men are. Women give sex to get love, remember?"

"And men give love to get sex. But he didn't give love in this situation. So it was unequal?"

Cosette let out a frustrated noise. "How are you not getting this?"

"Well, maybe it's because Henry and I talked about it once. A couple of his friends from college had gotten themselves into that kind of arrangement, and then one of them fell in love with the other and the other just...ended it. Boom. And I thought, like you do, that it was worse that a guy would just have sex with a girl with no promise of any emotional commitment, it was like leading her along. And what he said sounded a lot like something Dad would have said. He said that it isn't any different, in today's day and age, the way people have relationships. They meet, like each other, have sex, fall in love, then fall out of love and leave. They live together before marriage so they can have an escape hatch. He said that it isn't any different, morally. People don't wait for a commitment before they get into bed, they just do what they like and then leave when they don't like it anymore. Friends with benefits isn't any different, it just removes the expectation. I don't know, the way he put it, it seemed more honest."

She considered her sister's words for a few minutes, and then realized...this made things worse. "All that proves," Cosette said, "is that I should never have given Tom a chance in the first place."

"No," Christina said, "it means that he has a past. You knew he had a past! You were fine with it before!"
"I was never *fine with it,*" Cosette snapped, getting up and pacing at the foot of her bed. "I was...I was attracted to him! I'm carrying his child! And dammit, I am in love with him! And I wanted it to work! But...but it can't, Chrissy!"

"Why not?"

"First is worst," Cosette muttered. She still hadn't sorted that one out. Out of breath from her pacing (it was hard carrying the extra weight) she sat at the foot of the bed and stared out the patio sliding doors.

"I'm sorry, but I just think you're being really unfair to Tom. He didn't do anything since he got together with you. He didn't do anything wrong tonight and you..."

"Were a bitch?" Cosette finished, tone flat.

"I'd never call you that. But yeah."

"You're right."

Her sudden admission must have thrown Christina for a loop.

"I was awful to Tom. I have to apologize. But it doesn't change anything. It just brought out an ugly truth I thought I could live with, but I can't."

"What ugly truth?" Christina asked, moving to sit beside Cosette.

"You know why I slept with him?" Cosette asked, turning to her sister.

Christina blinked at the switch in subject, but she couldn't resist the invite. "No. I always thought it was really, really strange...until I met Tom, and thought you had just caved because of how hot he was."

Cosette couldn't help but chuckle. "That was part of it, you know. I did it, though, because I was angry."

"Angry?"

"At God."

That made Christina jerk. "What? What the hell?"

"You and Henry had just gotten engaged and I was mad that I...that I had held out and yet you were the one who had met the good, decent Catholic guy who was going to give you the kind of relationship I always wanted. And yet, I was older, I was...."

"Better than me?"

"I'd never say it, but...yeah. I'm sorry, Chrissy. I love you to death, but you know how you were in high school and college. And I didn't do those things! I saved myself and waited! And I felt like...like God owed me. For being a good girl."

"Oh Cozy," Christina wrapped her arms around her sister. "You know that isn't how it works."

"I know that now!" Cosette whined. "But...but it seemed so unfair. No I don't want to take Henry away from you, you two are perfect for each other, and I'm so happy for you, and I know you've grown so much, and I know I'm not better than you, I never was, I understand all of that *now.*"
But when Tom came along, and he liked me, and he chased me, and I tried to hold out but...but once I decided to give it a go, it was like a landslide. Honest to God, Chrissy, I've never been in a situation before like I was with Tom. Before, I never *wanted* to, the temptation was never really there, but with *him,* it was almost all I could think about. And I decided one week that I was just going to do it. But I couldn't get myself to go from zero to sixty in one go, so I had to work up to it. I started doing things, letting my hair down, letting him stay later, letting him...do things. We made out, we groped each other. And then one night I decided it was going to happen and he was just so...so fucking perfect. And I realized that I could never, ever treasure it like I wanted to because it was wrong, I had done it wrong, all out of some childish tantrum. I had fucked it up." Tears leaked from her eyes to run down her cheeks. "I ruined it, Chrissy. But...but if I hadn't, how long would Tom have lasted before it came down to an ultimatum?"

"Tom wouldn't do that," Christina said, squeezing her sister comfortingly.

"He would have broken up with me eventually," Cosette said. "If it wasn't for our baby, for Beatrice, he would have gotten tired and moved on. Men can only chase for so long before they get tired and he wasn't chasing me out of some...some lofty sense of destiny, that we were meant to be together, but out of some base desire to have his way. To get what he wanted."

"That doesn't explain why he pined after you for so long after you kicked him to the curb," Christina pointed out. Cosette had talked to her about that, briefly, in a moment of weakness when she was gushing about how sweet Tom was being.

"That's what I thought, too...and maybe you're right, maybe he really does love me. But it can't work, Chrissy. He's not the one."

Christina pushed several dark strands of hair from Cosette's face. They caught on her teardrops and streaked a wet trail across her skin. "Sweetie, you're tired, and you're very hormonal. You need to lie down and get some rest. Tom can wait until the morning."

But Cosette could not sleep. She hadn't cried like she did that night since the morning she'd woken up next to Tom. It was painful, giving up that hope.

She tried to listen to what Christina said, tried to see if her hormones were having their way with her, and it was bad if they were -- they'd never been this bad since the very beginning. But that phrase, *first is worst,* kept floating through her mind.

Sometime around three in the morning, she realized what it was.

Her grandmother had floated to mind. Beatrice Mitchells was not one to mince words. She was a deeply compassionate woman but she didn't play dumb and she didn't hide uncomfortable truths. It had come as a shock to Cosette when her grandmother began to talk to her like an adult and not like a little girl. It seemed the woman was the only one who respected Cosette for who she was becoming, not who she'd been. So it was her grandmother she'd gone to when, during her first year out of college, she became discouraged about ever getting married, and worried that the older she got, the less desirable she would become. But most of all, she worried that the longer it went, the more awkward it would be for her when that first special time finally came.

"I'm just afraid, Grams," Cosette said to her. "I mean, I plan to be a virgin, but who knows if he'll be? And I just...I don't want to do it wrong. I know we're supposed to wait but...I mean, isn't it good if one of us knows what we're doing?"

Grams looked at her with amusement. "Oh sweetie," she said, smoothing Cosette's hair. "You're only talking about fucking."
Cosette knew her grandmother had a mouth on her. Cosette had probably gotten it from her. But when she used that particular word, she meant it exactly to be the thing it described. "That's the animal part of it," Beatrice went on. "Like it's a messy biological process and you have to get all the steps right. But it's not. There's a reason they call it 'making love.' It's not even really about sex."

"It isn't?"

"No. I mean, sex is a part of it, a very real, important part. But sex comes from love. I know your sexual revolution wants to pull the two apart but they can't be. What happens to the body happens to the soul, no matter what anyone wants to say. That's why people who are raped suffer so much harm! That deeply personal connection, it comes from love. It comes from giving. You don't lose your virginity. You give it. And when you're with your man, whoever he is, on that special night, it won't matter who has done what with whom, or hopefully, what neither of you have done. It may seem a bit awkward and will take practice to get more comfortable, but what it will really, truly be about is you two just loving each other. Just showing each other love. And however your bodies express that love, that's what it's about. Not about doing things 'right' or achieving a goal. You will get to know each other on an entirely new level, and learn what makes each other feel good, and want to give to each other. It's a total self-giving, a total obliteration of self. That's why it's called 'making love.' Period."

And her first time had been treated like a practice run. That's why Tom had been anxious to do it again. And even why she had wanted a third time, to try her own hand at what she'd learned. Sure, Tom thought he was being assuring when he'd said that, to put her at ease, soothe her embarrassment, but what he'd really been saying was not to worry, this time didn't count. You'll get it right next time.

At five, she couldn't stay in bed. She went to Christina and told her she needed a walk. Christina helped her move the chair in silence so as not to disturb Tom, and then put it back at Cosette's request to hold Tom off as long as possible -- he would freak if he knew she was gone. She went to the coffee shop, which was already open for the early risers, and had a few decafs, but even a walk to clear her head and a change of scenery didn't change what was in her heart.

So she went back to the house at around 9, after quietly praying her rosary, sitting in that cafe, staring out the window, listening for guidance. She saw that the chair had been moved, and that Tom was in his room. It was time.

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Tom saw her come into the living room. His room was adjacent to it, and he'd already been awake for a bit, having caught a few hours of rest. He stepped into the doorway -- he wanted to start the conversation, but had a feeling he should let her.

"Good morning," she said, sounding far mellower than she had the night before.

"Good morning," Tom said back, but it felt tight, uncomfortable.

She sighed, deeply, almost mournfully. Then she turned to him, meeting his eyes, and said, with genuine remorse, "I'm sorry."

The words stunned him. He almost wanted to ask "for what?" but was afraid to. Instead he just waited for her to go on.

"You were right. I didn't have any right to get all upset. I was totally out of line last night. I had no
right to get angry at you. I knew things, none of what I saw should have been a shock. No, it didn't have anything to do with your life before me. And yes, I've always known your opinions about sexual relationships. It wasn't fair to you for me to flip out like that. I was horrible and I'm genuinely sorry."

She paused, waiting for his reaction. He found he had very little to say. If she was willing to admit it...what could he say?

"I...accept your apology."

She nodded, but didn't look any happier. "You've been very good to me, Tom. You've been attentive and considerate. You've done everything right. I have no reason not to trust that you'll be a good father, than you'll take care of us, in spite of however you're feeling about the situation. You've proven yourself responsible, and reliable."

"Such words to make a man swoon," he said, feeling that bitterness leak out in spite of himself.

She nodded. "I'm not the girl for you, Tom."

The words were sudden, plain and flat, and they were like a slap across his face. He blinked, trying to recover.

"I don't know why you put up with me. Other than your sense of responsibility. But I'm not going to cause you anything but pain."

"Cosette," he sighed her name, "you were hormonal. I know you don't like to admit it but being pregnant can make you behave in strange ways--"

"There wasn't anything strange about how I acted last night, Tom," she said, very cool and rational. "It was just a more intense repeat of a conversation we've had a thousand times. You and I don't work. I can't get over certain things. I can't accept certain things. And you can't change them, not for my sake. And we're in an unfortunate situation where we're stuck with each other, but--"

"Stuck? That's a lovely way to talk about having a child together."

"If we'd been married, if we'd done things properly, it would be a joyous occasion and that word would be completely wrong to use, but in this case it applies! You're stuck with me, I'm stuck with you. We make the best of it. But let's stop pretending it's more than what it is, can't we?"

For a moment, Tom seemed to have been paralyzed. He literally could not move.

And then when he did, all he felt was rage.

"So that's it then?" he snapped, his voice echoing as he stepped further into the room. "That's the last word? I don't get a say at all in the ending of our relationship. But of course not, why should I be surprised, since you've been calling all the shots since the very beginning! You've never treated me like an equal in this relationship, not once! You make your declarations and I'm supposed to fall in line!" He snapped his fingers for emphasis.

Her eyes flew open. He had never yelled at her, not at this level. Not since that awful morning. He had cajoled, he had flattered, but he had never out and out screamed at her like he could hear himself doing now.

"I have danced to your tune the entire time!" he thundered on. "Whatever you have asked, I have done! I haven't expected anything from you, I haven't once asked you to violate your beliefs, I have
respected you at every turn, and now, now you just announce, with no option for discussion, that we're over?"

As he railed, he saw something shift in her face. Something he saw that morning. She was putting on her armor, and it infuriated him more. In a fit, he struck out at a nearby table and knocked off the books and papers that sat on it. They flew to the floor with a crash.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Christina hovering in the doorway. He forced himself to lower his tone. Of course, in this moment, he realized he had absolute power. Both women were at his mercy. He could throw them out into the street if he chose to. But no, he wouldn't do that.

But this was not going to be like that morning, he decided. She was not going to discard him like trash this time.

"You honestly thing I've been calling all the shots?" she said, her voice steady and hard. "Whose house am I staying in, much as I didn't want to? Whose name is getting dragged around the internet, at your request? I defied my parents, I put my place of work at risk, I even gave up my job--"

"YOU CHOSE TO DO THAT!" Tom cried, pointing his finger at her. "I told you not to! But no, you were so ashamed of what we'd done, of me, of Beatrice, that you had to go run and hide!"

"That isn't fair!" she shot back, but tears had sprung to her eyes at those words.

"You've been ashamed of us since the beginning," Tom spat, but felt his spite start to sink under the weight of guilt as the tears overflowed and streaked down her cheeks. "I had to beg you to even consider a future with me. I shouldn't be surprised you're so quick to chuck it."

"That's isn't it at all, Tom," she sobbed, her hands scraping at the tears, pushing them away. "And you know that! How can you just throw all of that at me!"

"Like you did last night?" Tom challenged, getting closer to her. "Now do you understand how it feels?"

Those amethyst eyes sparkled in fury. "You...you asshole! I apologized! I know what I did!"

"No, I don't think you do," Tom said. "I've tolerated the unbalance of this from the beginning but I'm sick of it. Your parents hate me. I'm not good enough because I'm not Catholic, I haven't lived like some celibate monk, and now because I have a history that's a bit more extensive than you first thought, you decide that you're done, and it isn't fair! I have limits, Cosette, and you've exceeded them all!"

"I know," she said, that fury shifting into something worse. Defeat. "You should be glad to be rid of me. Because who I am isn't going to change. You can call me a judgmental bitch all you want but it won't make me change any more than it will make you change. I have as many reasons for being the way I am as you do for who you are. We've blinded ourselves by coasting on these warm, fuzzy feelings but they won't last. That's not how serious relationships work. Our fundamental cores are so diametrically opposed, and I tried not to see it, but I can't look the other way any--"

"You've never tried at all!" he shot back. "All you've done is judge me inferior! You've given me absolutely no credit for how I've abstained since the moment we've been officially together!"

"For how long? A few months?" she said. "What about a few years, Tom? It's not training for a movie role. And what's going to happen when Beatrice, a grown woman, needs guidance about
men and how they should treat her? Are you going to let some man use her the way you've used women?"

"I would never do that!" he roared. "I would kill any man who did to Beatrice..." And then he derailed.

"What you've done to me," Cosette finished for him. "Exactly like you told my father. Exactly how my father feels about you."

"I didn't seduce and desert you, Cosette," Tom argued. "You felt something for me, that was why--"

"I used you that night, Tom," she said. "I was so angry, you have no idea what I was going through then. I decided I was going to sleep with you because I was mad at God that he hadn't sent someone better than you into my life for me to fall in love with."

The words were a punch. A kick in the groin. Tom almost stumbled back.

"You said you loved me," he whispered.

"I do. That's why I was angry. I was angry that I was in love with you." Her voice softened but her words were the most painful thing ever. "And when our daughter falls in love, or says she's in love, are you going to encourage her to do what she thinks is right? That if she's in love, it's okay for her to sleep with someone, before she's married? Because God knows why women and men do the things they do. And why they're usually for the wrong reasons, or they're doing things the wrong way. That's why there are rules, Tom. That's why some things are just always wrong."

"And are you in love with me now?" he managed.

"My feelings for you don't change the facts. We can't choose who we love but we can choose what to do about it." She softened. "Tom, I don't care that you have a past. My sister has a past. I love her just the same. But she decided to change her future because that past never brought her happiness. What I care about is what you think of that past. If you think you didn't do anything wrong, that your behavior was completely acceptable, and that if I wasn't in the picture, if you'd never met me, would go right on doing the same thing? *That* is what I have a problem with! If you had made a choice to reorder your disordered views of sex and love before I came along, if you were trying to live a healthy life and took the idea of chastity into your own heart and embraced it for *yourself,* not just because your new girlfriend wouldn't sleep with you, things would be different. But right now, it's just you dancing to a tune, like you said. You letting me call the shots. And how long has that lasted? You can't build a lasting relationship on that! We've argued this before but you...you just won't see. And it hit me last night how deeply you and I...how different we are. About something so fundamental. You think it's just a detail but it's not! And the fact that I can't get you to see that, just makes it even worse!"

Tom drew several deep breaths. He had a very, very strong feeling that this situation had spiraled beyond his ability to contain it, and whatever he said next would be his last word on the subject.

"Cosette, you know I believe in God. I don't have the same beliefs as you, but I do believe in him. And you and I both believe that things happen for a reason. We make plans, and God laughs at them. What we think we're supposed to do, what's supposed to happen, it's not really up to us, is it? It's up to Him, yes?"

She nodded.
"Since the moment I've known you're carrying my child, my life has started to change. In ways I never, ever though it would. And those things have changed about me, too. You think I'm only changing to please you? How can either of us say what causes a man to change? What things God uses to create change in our lives? I see now, more clearly than ever before, the harm my past behavior has caused, not just to others but to myself. Because now, when the real love of my life comes along, I can't get her to trust me because of how I've behaved. And that kills me."

Tears flooded her eyes again.

"Tom," she whispered, her voice wavering. "I can't honestly believe that if not for this baby, anything in your life would be different. If I hadn't given in, if I hadn't been in the state I was in when we met, if I'd been as strong to resist you as I thought I was or wished I'd been, you would have had to give up eventually. You would have walked away and gone back to the life you were comfortable with."

"No, I wouldn't have."

"What would you have done? Tried to seduce me? You were not the kind of person to just accept that I wouldn't have sex with you and go on as if nothing was wrong. You would have done everything short of forcing or blackmailing me to get your way. Given me an ultimatum. Manipulated me if you had to."

"You really think that of me?"

"You've already done it, haven't you? You think I've been calling all the shots but I've given in, haven't I? I'm here, in your house. I'm carrying your child. I'm accepting your money. I'm going to be guarded by security you hired. You push and you prod and you poke until you get what you want."

He blanched. "I had no idea your true opinion of me was so low."

"If I've got to accept that I've been judgmental and unfair, you have to accept your shortcomings as well. And if I suddenly decided that I didn't believe what I did, or never had believed it, if I'd been as easy as the last girl, you would just be doing the same routine over and over, and I'd be just another notch on the bedpost. The only thing that makes me so special is my morality and that it resists yours."

"That isn't true. How can you still think that after all this time we've spent? And you know there isn't any way to know which way it would go. I still maintain that I can and have changed, Cosette. I believe you being in my life has been for a better reason that just being my baby mama. And you're being completely unfair in wanting to cut it off now!"

"So we're at an impasse," she whispered. "What do we do? Because I can't go on like this, Tom. I want the whole package, mind, body, and spirit, and truthfully...my spirit is completely unsure of you."

8 8 8

Repelled.

What she really wanted to say was she was repelled by him. By his behavior, by his attitude, by the wounds he'd placed on his soul that he refused to see for what they were. Her body wanted him. Her mind was fascinated by him. But her spirit said no. Bottom line, no.

It made her feel horrible, and sad. There were so many things that were going to worsen by her
decision, but she had to make it.

She started to back away. She had to get some distance. The tears threatened again, and she hated crying in front of him. She hated the feeling that crying gave her -- the feeling of being out of control, so vulnerable that she couldn't protect herself. And he would go into protective mode, and that wasn't what she wanted from him. She wanted space.

There was plenty of it in this large room, with the morning light coming in through the east windows. She walked toward the long sectional sofa sunk into the floor, her arms wrapped around herself. Tom didn't seem willing to move more than a few feet from his bedroom door, but his eyes were a weight on her as she strolled.

"So you want to just end it?" he finally said, his voice carrying a mild echo as it reached her across the room.

Guilt rippled through her. She totally and completely understood why he would think she was being judgmental and unfair. People like him, who had never resisted their physical urges for something better, always had a hard time understanding someone who not only *could*, but *did.* And she had done nothing to show him a better way. She had given in once. Once was all it took. As much as she refrained now, it couldn't undo what had been done, and the consequences that bound them. And those consequences demanded to be addressed.

But she knew it wouldn't work. Both she and Tom were caught in the emotional stages of a relationship, where the feelings were more prominent than the facts. She'd let it go for her entire stay here. Now, as awful as it made her feel, she could not do that any longer.

Yet even if she didn't marry this man, it wouldn't stop him from being the father of her child. He would still have influence. Him and his modern view of the world, where the goal of sex was for pleasure, sex was an expected part of a relationship, sex and love could and would be separated...these things, would he pass them on to their daughter? She had a feeling he would be as protective and controlling toward Beatrice as he was toward her, but when she was an independent woman, trying to make her own life choices, she would see the examples of the adults before her. Actions were louder than words. Tom would have as much pull as Cosette.

*Couldn't she try?* a small voice asked her. Even if it didn't work, what did she have to lose by trying? Her own happiness? Was it so contingent on finding a relationship? She could be as happy with Tom as she was this past week. She could still live her faith, still strive to teach Tom, as he had asked her to do. Maybe his motives were imperfect but what motives weren't?

But she couldn't bring herself to accept a "handyman's special" as her potential life partner. Something very deep and powerful inside her was convinced it spelled disaster.

Tom must have taken her long silence for hesitation. "You said you have to accept that you're being unfair. I thought once an error was detected, it was supposed to be corrected? Or am I understanding your spirituality wrong?"

She turned around. His tone was strange. Almost...indifferent.

"Usually," she said.

"So in the interest of being fair," he said, slowly starting to cross the distance, "can I please cast my vote?"

"I don't know why you'd want to stay with me, Tom," she said, assuming how he was going to
"vote," to use his words. "I'm not going to change any more than you are."

"Another way you're being unfair, if I'm not being too impolite in pointing it out. We all need to change, don't we?"

She sighed, exhausted. Her lack of sleep was coming back to haunt her big time. "In spite of current circumstances, I have no deep dissatisfaction with my life."

"You said you slept with me because you were angry at God."

"And I realized I was wrong. I've since worked to rectify my attitudes. Of course, it's been a little difficult in all the other things that have been going on---"

"Precisely my point. You made a choice, and look at what happened. How do you know it wasn't meant to happen? You believe there's a reason everything happens, don't you?"

"Yes," Cosette said slowly. Here he was again, she thought, working the situation to get his way. But he wasn't wrong, and that made her listen.

"And this has put you and me together. You don't think that's a coincidence, do you?"

"I'm not going to play your savior, Tom. I'm not anyone's savior, that's Christ's role. You have to make your own choices."

"I am making my choices. I always have, no one has ever made my choices for me. I've always done precisely what I choose to do, regardless of consequences. I know you believe I'm only abstaining from sex because you're making me. But who is to say this isn't all part of that higher plan that none of us can ever understand? Doesn't God work in mysterious ways?"

She shook her head. Good words. She felt their pull, felt the urge to give into them. "I also believe that God gave me a pretty good internal compass," she said. "And it's not pointing at you."

"I don't believe that," Tom said, and she caught only the barest, most slight hint of amusement in his eyes. "I mean, you're here? You've done all these things, allowed yourself to make those choices to bring you here? How do you know what is God's plan and your skewed compass? You said yourself you made a choice you knew was morally wrong. You're perfectly capable of being wrong, you admitted it."

That sparked anger. "I knew it was wrong. I am not going to willfully repeat my mistake. Continuing down this road will make both of us miserable."

"As opposed to being apart? What will that bring? You know how unhappy I was those two months we were apart. But what about you? Were you just all business as normal? Water off your back?"

"Like you said," she managed through gritted teeth, "you just move on." She didn't want to tell him. She didn't want to tell him that it had been an effort every single day not to think about him. To rub out of her memory every sensual trace of him. The guilt of how she'd hurt him. Until she realized something was off and there was now a child inside her. His child.

He nodded. "How did that work out for us?"

Crap. Crap, fuck, and shit. She felt the hook sink in, the old familiar feeling of giving in to his words, of letting him have his way, letting her see his logic.
"So what do you suggest?" she asked.

"Not repeating past mistakes," Tom said, coming closer. He was only six or seven feet away now. "We can't just shut each other out when something goes wrong. We need to talk. We need to do what we originally planned to do. Talk more about your faith, more about us, as a couple. Not as parents, but as a man and a woman in a relationship."

"You're going away for two months, Tom," she said. "How do you propose we do that?"

"I'll visit soon. And we can call each other, text, skype. And when I come back to LA in two month's time, we can resume face to face."

She hated it when he was rational and made sense. Nobody could create a rock-solid argument like he could.

"I need some space, Tom," she said. "Emotionally as well as physically. And I seriously, very seriously think you need to consider your own spiritual state without me being a factor. At all."

He looked down. The way his jaw worked, she sensed he wasn't too happy with this request. "So what do you mean by that, without you as a factor."

"As trite as this sounds, we need a break. We've been trying to force this into working, or maybe force is the wrong word," she amended at the flash in his eyes. "More like...influence things in our favor. And it's caused a lot of blind spots. I'm not saying we break up completely, but...I need distance. And if you aren't trying to change to please me, you need my influence removed so you can make serious considerations, too. It makes sense."

He looked pained, but nodded his head. "That's not...unreasonable." His fingers idly picked at each other in front of him where his hands met. "I'm not completely thrilled with it, though."

She felt a deep cleansing breath move through her. This felt good. "It's called discernment," she said. "All people making a serious spiritual decision have to do it. God won't get impatient and chuck His plans for us. If we're both in line with His will, it will happen when it's meant to happen." *IF* it's meant to happen, but she didn't need to say that.

He nodded.

"I am sorry," she whispered. "I know I've hurt you a lot. I don't want to. I'm really trying to do the right thing."

He gave her a tiny little smile and nodded. "Come here?" he whispered back.

She took a step, and he took a step. His hands gently braced on her upper arms, and she grasped his elbows. He pulled her closer and she permitted him to give her a gentle hug, but she refused to melt into him like she'd done in the past. Then she felt his hand snake up along her spine, and it settled in the crook of her neck and shoulder, holding her firmly in place. His lips descended on her temple, a long, sweet kiss, and then when he pulled back, his mouth hovered down a bit lower.

She didn't want to shove him away, but she didn't feel right kissing him, not after the declaration of semi-independence she'd just made. Maybe he was just seeking reassurance that she still loved him. She wasn't sure how much of it she wanted to give him, especially if her discernment showed she had to stick to her original instincts.

Firmly but without shoving, she moved back, breaking contact. "I'm going to go take a nap," she said. "I didn't get much sleep last night. I don't think you did either."
His face was definitely put off, but he was trying to keep his expression neutral, which just gave him a mild kicked-puppy look. "No, I didn't. Maybe that's a good idea. Maybe we can all have a late lunch, or an early dinner?"

"Sounds good, since we leave tomorrow," Cosette said, heading toward the kitchen.

"Sleep well," he called softly. She felt him watching her as she went. It wasn't as heavy or angry as before, but she knew her victory had cost almost as much as declaring the war.
The aftermath.

To say that things took a different tone after that day would have been understating the situation.

Tom did as Cosette asked. He put distance between them. She knew it was what she asked for but it killed her to see the pain in his eyes whenever they were together, pain he was holding back, pain he was staying silent about.

Sometimes, Cosette knew she'd screwed up, but she couldn't figure out any way to fix it. And sometimes, she was utterly convinced she was right and that Tom needed to see it. Neither option gave her much to work with.

The rest of the day, after their very intense discussion, they did have a late lunch, after Cosette woke from a sleep that she knew she'd gotten but hadn't really felt. They maintained polite conversation, but it wasn't warm and didn't flow naturally like it had before.

Even Christina seemed affected by the status quo between Tom and Cosette. She didn't speak much to either of them. In fact, Cosette was starting to worry that Christina was mad at her, but she couldn't deal with it...yet.

The next morning, Tom took them to the airport. As they gathered their stuff in the corridor leading out the front door to the waiting car, Cosette felt the need to say something, do something, to establish some kind of rapport between her and Tom again. It was hard to see his eyes -- he was wearing his glasses and the glare kept catching on the lenses.

"I'll schedule the ultra sound for when you come visit," she said to him as the driver took their luggage down the walk and put it into the trunk. "And I'll keep you appraised of any...developments."

How lame she sounded! Like this was a business arrangement!

"Thank you," he said, giving her a somewhat stiff smile.

She reached up, grasped his shoulder. She gave it a squeeze, and he looked at her, the smile fading into a expression that was softer, a bit more peaceful, but no happier.

"I'm still with you," she said softly. "We're still in this together." She reached up, brushing his cheek with her thumb.

He looked down at her bulge. His hands went to it, their wide expanse nearly encompassing her curvature. Then, unexpectedly, he went down on one knee, as if genuflecting, and his lips brushed the fabric over her belly. Then he looked up at her, and those blue eyes, so big and round, magnified through the lenses of his glasses...damn him, how could he pierce her so utterly with just a fucking look?

Then he was up again, in front of her. "Come on, we don't want to be late," he said, his tone a bit
warmer.
They were still quiet, but less strained on the way to the airport. Tom came inside, helped get them
checked in, and even waited with them for a short while in the lounge until a phone call beckoned
him back to the world he occupied.

Cosette felt a strange pang as he prepared to leave them. She was completely sure that if they
hadn't had their fight, Tom would have stayed with her until the absolute last minute. And then she
berated herself for being an inconsistent wreck. She couldn't keep playing yo-yo with his
affections. She caught the look Christina gave her as she pulled away from a final goodbye
embrace.

"You'll let me know you made it home safe?" he asked them.

"Of course," Christina answered for them.

"Call me for anything," Tom said, directing his words to Cosette. She felt a momentary flutter at
the tone of his voice -- that slightly bossy, trying to sound sweet but actually kind of dominating
tone she was so familiar with.

"I will. You can too," she added.

Something in his eyes flickered. He gave her a little half-smile -- the most genuine smile he'd given
since yesterday morning.

The words, "I love you," suddenly swelled in her throat, and she wanted to tell him. She wanted to
tell him that, but something wouldn't let her. Was that fair? Was she supposed to tell him? She
hadn't wanted to sever them quite so much, just...or maybe she had. She was confused, tired,
anxious. And then she realized that Tom was looking at her expectantly, and her mouth had fallen
open, reading to form words.

She closed her mouth, and stepped closer to him, away from Christina. Her sister got the message,
absorbed herself in her phone. Then, chest practically to chest, Cosette looked up at Tom and
whispered, "I do still love you. That hasn't changed."

He seemed to consider her. He certainly didn't light up like he had a few nights ago. But his eyes
were soft and his hand brushed through her hair when nodded, and answered. "You know how I've
always felt about you, Cosette."

She nodded. She didn't blame him for not saying it, but it stung. He pecked her forehead, gave her
that little half grin again. "Bye."

"Bye."

It wasn't long before they were called for their flight, but things got considerably more awkward
between the two sisters after Tom left. Cosette didn't want to argue with Christina, and there was so
much on her mind, but one can't sit beside another human being for fourteen hours and not get
tired of the tension.

The first two hours, Cosette occupied herself by running scenario after scenario through her mind,
wondering how she could have been better, how she could have talked to Tom the other morning
with a lot more compassion. She knew she'd hurt him, possibly worse the second time, when she
had sincerely meant to apologize. But it had imploded and she had absolutely failed to contain the
situation. As if another person's feelings were something that needed to be *contained,* she
thought bitterly.
She should never have exploded at him in the first place, was the best conclusion she could come
to. The second she found out about Sue, she should have just retreated to her room, not engaged
Tom in a fight, just apologized to him for what she said (or never have said it to begin with, where
the hell had her brain been?) and gone to her room, begging off talking about it. She should have
sat him down later and told him she was worried about him. Asked him if his lifestyle choices
were ones that had made him happy. Sought to figure out how to show him how he was hurting
himself rather than making it about *her.*

That was what a good Christian would have done. But instead she'd gone into jealous, judgmental
harpy mode.

In hour four, after she woke up from her restless nap, she finally confronted Christina.

"Go ahead. You've been wanting to let me have it for a day now. Just do it."

Christina blinked. "Why? You won't listen."

"I will."

Christina drew a heavy breath. "No. I'm...I just can't help but feel like...I mean, I know how I
would have reacted if Henry had said something like that to me."

"Like what? Which awful thing I said are you referring to, in particular?" Cosette winced at her
own tone, but suddenly a defensiveness had sprung up in her.

"About being broken." Christina shook her head. "I was broken too. And quite frankly, we're all
broken to some extent."

"But you recognized it in yourself," Cosette stressed, struggling to keep her voice down. "You
made efforts to improve yourself before Henry even came along."

"Yeah, but that doesn't change what I've already done," Christina replied. "And it certainly doesn't
mean I'm *fixed.* You think I haven't tried to convince Henry that we should make love? He
would be perfectly within his rights to be upset with me for the times I've brought it up, because
it's hard for him, too, to stick to a resolution like that, and we have to support each other and not
give in. I may still bring it up, when I'm having a weak moment, even though I know perfectly well
at this moment that it's better for us to wait. Tom has totally respected your abstinence and made no
efforts to convince you otherwise, but I can't say I've been as innocent."

Cosette glowered. "It's different."

"It's not. And when you tell him you love him..." Christina looked away, and from the jump in her
jaw muscles Cosette could tell she was struggling with her temper. "You don't treat someone you
claim to love like that, Cosette. You just don't."

"Maybe I shouldn't love him, then."

A short barking noise that could have been a laugh issued from her sister's throat as she turned on
her. "You don't want to, obviously. I mean, I don't think you have any idea how awful it would be
to hear the person you love tell you that you're broken and they don't want to fix you."

"It's not our job to *fix* people," Cosette growled. "A lover is not a savior! Tom believes that love
is acceptance. But I'm supposed to accept that he runs around and has sex with whatever woman
catches his eye?"
"Has he, since he's been with you? I don't think so! And don't give me that he would still be running around if he hadn't met you, because there is no way to know what goes on in a person's head, and that's just a risk you have to take! Who knows if I would have stuck to my resolutions if I hadn't met Henry? He came along and being with him helped me realize more fully why I needed to change. That was how it was meant to be, obviously that was God's plan. How is that any different than you helping Tom? What if that's part of God's plan, too? No, forget *what if,* I think it absolutely is!"

"Do you honestly think that Henry would have gotten involved with you if you'd still been the person you were in high school?" Cosette asked.

"The person I was in high school *is* still a part of who I am now," Christina returned. "And who the hell knows what would have happened? We don't get to know *what would have happened.* We know what is. And right now, what *is* is a man who loves you and does *not* deserve what he's getting."

Cosette retreated, stung. Yes, she had asked. She hadn't quite braced herself as well as she thought.

"He's no saint," Cosette muttered.

"Oh, and you are?" The words were harsh. Cosette slumped a bit more in her seat, feeling their truth. She had no comeback, nothing with which to defend herself. And Christina seemed absolutely resolute in her opinion. She went to her magazine and wouldn't look up again for a solid ten minutes. When she did, her tone was calmer but her words were no more assuring.

"There are some serious things you haven't considered," Christina said. "I mean, let's say that you and Tom are broken up, not getting back together. So he's free to move on and be with someone else. And whoever he picks...that person is going to be a part of your daughter's life! And who the hell knows who she'll be, some starlet, a gold digger, someone who tries to push Bea out of his life?"

Cosette gaped at her. "So that's why I should be with him? Because I don't want trouble later on? And besides, let's say we stay together now but get divorced later. I would have tried and it could still happen that way!"

"And what if it doesn't? What if you stay happily married for decades and decades and he converts and becomes...well, a much better man that you're afraid he'll turn out to be!" She was grasping her magazine, crumpling the pages in her vehemence. "But I can tell you one thing. Scenario A is definitely going to happen if you *don't* try. He's hurt, he's angry, and God knows what he's going to do in that state. And if you apologized and told him you take it all back and basically throw yourself at his mercy, he would forgive you in a heartbeat and all the fan-fucking-tastic things I've seen between the two of you this last week can keep on happening. Yes, you two may fail but at least you'll get the satisfaction of knowing you're right, I know how you *love* that. And if you don't, then, God forbid you should get your dream guy and a happy life."

"He's not my *dream guy,*" Cosette snarked.

"Grow the fuck up, Cosette!" Christina barked, and then lowered her voice. They were attracting stares.

Both sisters regrouped, looking away from each other -- Cosette out the window and Christina down at her magazine.

"It's a ridiculous reason to try and established a lasting relationship with someone," Cosette said,
her voice struggling to be level, "for the sake of avoiding him bringing some floozie into our daughter's life when that could happen anyway."

"No, the real reason you should try," Christina declared, her voice actually level, "is because you love him. Period. You love him and if you love someone you would do anything for them. Help them with whatever. And if he breaks your heart, well, that's a risk you *always* take. I mean, look at Mom and Dad! Nobody gets a guarantee, ever. But you're just afraid to try, Cosette. God knows why, but you keep finding excuses."

Now Cosette was near tears. Her fears were *real.* She was utterly sure of that. She had turned them over and examined them and tried to figure out if she was being silly or shallow or stupid and none of those things had seemed that way. "I'm not making excuses," she said, choking. Christina gave a little start, tuning her head toward her sister when her voice started to break. "You think I didn't want to try? I did! But how can...how you can..." The tears were coming fast, eradicating any kind of sense she was going to make. She grabbed the pillow and turned into it, shifting utterly away from her sister, burying her face and refusing to speak to Christina again, unless it was absolutely necessary.

8 8 8

The first time he and Cosette had broken up, Tom had been miserable. This time? It was different. This time he was angry.

Sure, she had apologized -- some kind of apology. He wanted to believe, deep down, that she was just hormonal because of her pregnancy. After all, you weren't supposed to make any serious life decisions when you were pregnant, right? He had read all of "What To Expect..." and had branched out, trying to understand her strange hormone fluxes. He tried to make excuses for her.

But he was hurt. And when he was hurt, he was angry.

Christina had regaled them with a story of the one summer she spent at the counter of a fast food restaurant when she was in uni (or college, as they called it in America). One of the other young women who worked there was pregnant when Christina started. And she was, in Christina's words, "an utter bitch." She was by far the most vicious, mean-spirited person Christina had ever met in her life, and whenever she asked her other co-workers whatever she had done to earn this woman's ire, the others would just shake their heads and say, "She was a nice person before she got pregnant."

But Tom couldn't give Cosette that much of an excuse. So he did the traditional British thing -- kept a stiff upper lip. Endured and moved on. Kept his head high. Even when Matthew called him up and asked him for a drink, he had not bemoaned his situation, or put Cosette down for her behavior. Although Matthew did apologize, profusely, for his fuck-up.

"I had no idea, mate," Matthew had said. "She just seemed so intent and...I should have belted up right away. I didn't mean to throw a spanner into the works."

"Don't give it another thought, mate," Tom reassured him.

"Are things okay with you and your girl?"

Tom tipped his drink. "Everything is the bee's knees," he had lied. "We worked it out."

Of course it wasn't, and of course it couldn't be hidden. That very night, pictures had been taken. Nothing too serious but Tom and Cosette's conversation, although not directly overheard, was
being speculated upon by the expressions on their faces. Particularly on Tom's face. Somebody had snapped a shot on their phone of him and it must have been the moment Cosette had said...that *awful* thing. His eyes were slightly bugged, his jaw was open and rigid.

Luke alerted him to the situation. "There's a snap making the rounds of you and Cosette. Everything okay?"

"Fine," Tom said.

Luke was not going to press but he also was probably one of the few who could see through his client and friend. So he said, "People are talking that there's trouble in paradise. If you want to head it off, you should tweet, like we were talking about."

So Tom posted on Twitter a single picture. It was a selfie he'd taken of the two of them on the Eye, after he'd given her the necklace, before they'd gotten off, while the car they were in was descending. She was leaning back into him with a gorgeous smile on her face, and the necklace he'd given her caught a bit of the light, making it sparkle.

They both looked so damn happy. Tom felt himself grinding his teeth, drew a deep breath, and wrote the last words he wanted to write, but knew they would shut a lot of people up and he had to do it.

"The love of my life," he typed. And he posted the picture. Then he sent Cosette a brief text message with a link.

8 8 8

Cosette had just turned on her phone when they landed. Tom's message popped up and she felt her heartbeat accelerate. She read the message he wrote.

//A picture of our discussion outside the pub from that night is making the rounds. So I finally tweeted. This is just to shut up some detractors.//

And the picture was that one he'd taken on his phone. He'd sent it to her but she hadn't done anything with it. The caption read: "The love of my life."

Her eyes flooded with tears.

Henry met them down in baggage claim. Christina went straight to him and he hugged her, for a long time. They didn't start making out or anything, but it definitely didn't help Cosette hold back the tears. She bee-lined for the restroom. When she came out the two had parted and were chatting quietly. Henry looked up at her approach. Christina did not.

"You're luggage is coming in over here," he said. He pulled all the bags off the turnstile (two for each sister) when they came down, doubled them up on top of each other and insisted on pulling both loads out to the car on his own -- Henry was a rather husky guy, well built, and capable. It wasn't an enormous effort and Cosette appreciated it greatly.

As she had promised, Cosette texted Tom, telling him of their safe landing. She asked him if he wanted her to call when she got home, but there was no answer. She did the calculations -- it would be late at night in London. Maybe Tom was busy. Or asleep, he did have a flight to Australia the next day.

Henry took her luggage inside for her when they arrived at her house. Christina did not come in and Cosette did not invite them. She gave Henry a hug and a kiss on the cheek before he bounded
back to the car. Doubtless the couple wanted some time together after a week apart. Cosette called Tom's cell phone and left a message that she was fine, home safe. Then she saw there was a voice mail waiting for her.

"Hello, Ms. Mitchells," the friendly female voice said. "This is Blake from Emerald Security Services, and we were told to contact you today by Mr. Hiddleston. I understand that you'll be arriving directly from London, but as soon as you're able, if you could please return our call so we can set up a meeting and get your services starting as soon as possible. My personal cellular is ......., and again, that's ....... Please, call at any time, even if it's the middle of the night. Mr. Hiddleston told us that the security password was Amethyst. Looking forward to meeting you!"

Cosette played the message back so she could get the phone number. She went and sat in the living room, holding her phone on one side of her on the couch cushions, trying to ignore it, trying not to check and see if Tom called while she was on the other line and she just hadn't heard it. And then she got angry at herself for that, let the phone lie there and went into the nursery.

It was empty. Everything had been moved out. All four walls were blank. She wanted to go to the Home Depot to pick out potential shades of pink, purple and blue --she was still rather undecided about what she wanted to paint it -- so she could get to work. All the equipment was gathered in one place -- brushes, rollers, paint pans, and the blue tape so she could design some trim if she wanted. She also had plans to use stencils, but hadn't decided what designs she wanted, so she would probably wander over to Michael's as well.

There was a knock on her front door. She went to check and saw her mother on the front step. Of course her mother had a key but she respected Cosette's privacy and wasn't going to barge in on her. Isabella was, in all actuality, a rather welcome sight. Cosette let her in.

Her mother hugged her. A bit longer than normal. "How are you, sweetie? You have to be tired."

"I'm okay. A bit restless."

"Where did Christina and Henry go?" Isabella asked. "I didn't see their car."

"They went home, I guess. His house, hers, I don't know."

Isabella frowned. Then she looked down at Cosette's bags, still sitting in the hallway. "Chrissy didn't help you unpack? Well, let me do it, then. You need to rest."

Cosette tried to object but her mother wouldn't hear it. One at a time, Isabella rolled the bags down into the hallway, turned them and unzipped them. Cosette's bedroom was a wide space so there was plenty of room to still walk around, and Isabella got busy sorting clean laundry from dirty, hanging up clothes, and then went and got a load going in the washing machine.

Not having much else to do, Cosette went to her shoulder bag, which she'd set on her kitchen table, and started to take things out. At the bottom was the velvet box holding the choker Tom had given her, which Tom had said she should put in her carry-on luggage, just to be safe.

The mere sight of it make Cosette burst into tears.

Isabella must have heard, because Cosette felt warm, familiar hands on her shoulders, guiding her into the living room. She was pushed down on the couch and Isabella sat beside her, her arm wrapped tightly around her. Cosette let herself slump, her head at first on Isabella's knee, but then her mother put a couch pillow there to cushion her, and Cosette curled up like that, as much as her bulging stomach would allow. Gently, Isabella brushed Cosette's hair until the worst of the tears
had passed.

Slowly, it came out. The entire week. How everything had been going so well. And then the night at the pub. The comments about friends with benefits. The fight. Her miserable attempt to make up only to make it irrevocably worse.

The thing with Isabella that made her much more suited to this task, in spite of the fact that it was actually Raymond who usually had the wise words, was that she was incredibly patient. Raymond would have grumbled with irritation and told Cosette to stop taking the long way around, but Cosette had to tell someone all about it, and she'd had literally nobody to talk to, except Christina, for the last week. And Christina had her own perspective. Cosette needed someone to see hers. So Isabella listened to all of it, asking the occasional question to clarify. And when Cosette was done, she wiped her daughter's tears and stroked her hair away from her face.

"Do you think I was wrong?" Cosette asked, but knew what her mother would say.

"I think that you're in love with him, but you are justifiably afraid of where that love will lead," Isabella said. "Marriage is a unifying force. People mistakenly think that it's all about finding someone to be your companion for the rest of your life, but it's so much more than just a glorified friendship. It's about being unified. That companion is with you for the journey you take toward sanctity. How can you be unified to someone who doesn't share your deepest held beliefs?"

"But I miss him," Cosette whispered, and then groaned. "What's wrong with me?"

"You're pregnant," her mother said simply. "And in love. I hate to be harsh with you, Cozy, but these are the sort of things that should have been considered before you two conceived a child. Even if you didn't precisely mean to. You knew he wasn't a fit companion when you were dating him but you let it go along because you were attracted to him and you liked his personality, his wit, his charm. Sure, those are great, wonderful things. But it's something much, much deeper that turns a man into a husband."

"I led him on," Cosette whispered.

Her mother gave a little shrug. "Maybe a bit. You're in a difficult situation. You have a permanent connection to him. He likes you, loves you maybe, you love him, and you two want to make it more. It's natural. Now everyone seems to think that nature should be allowed to take its course, that natural equals good, but I've never thought so, and I don't think you do, either. You're two magnets that are forever forced to be just close enough to feel the pull, but coming together, you don't really fit. It's a cross, sweetie. You're trying to figure out how to carry it."

"But he *could* fit. He says he wants to. He says he wants to change."

Isabella gave a little sigh. "I don't know. Maybe he can. But if it's true, he'll do it regardless of what you do. A change like that has to be for himself and no one else."

"That's what I said," Cosette sniffled. "But I was so bad about it. I hurt him. He was so upset with me."

"Why was he upset? Do you know? Was it because of how you acted or what you said?"

"I don't know. It could be either, both. But he was...so angry. He said he'd been dancing to my tune, that I'd been calling the shots in the relationship, that he'd done everything I wanted and it wasn't fair for me to declare we were over and not let him have a say."

"But you said you didn't end the relationship completely, just that you wanted distance."
"To him I think it's the same thing. He was just...very cold, the rest of the time."

Isabella grunted. "Yes, pouted because he hadn't gotten what he wanted." At Cosette's objection, her mother silenced her. "Please listen. I think Tom is a good man. I've been reading up on him, articles and things he's said, and he's very, very intelligent. And this," she reached out and touched Cosette's belly, "is a responsibility. It's an obligation, and he wants to fulfill it. From what I've read about the man, once he commits, he commits entirely. And while I don't think he's stuck up, I do think that appearances have been drilled into him for a very long time. His family was very kind to you, and I understand why. You present very well, my little Cozy. To them, you're just like them. Someone who has at least a superficial morality, who tries to live a good life, does no harm, and happens to have made a bit of a mess and is trying to make the best of it. And of course Tom would sweep you off your feet, romance you, buy you jewelry and dress you up and take you places, and to a superficial person, and I'm not saying that as a bad thing, but to a person who understands what it takes to maintain a convincing shell, that is what love is! But if you hadn't been pregnant, and found out, after all that, that he had been with many women before you, and had not even had relationships with them but 'arrangements?' You would have given him a nice speech and not thought twice about moving on. It is only this commitment," again she tapped Cosette's belly, "that makes you think more is required. But bottom line, he doesn't have your depth. Maybe one day, with a conversion experience, he will, but not now."

"Christina said," Cosette managed when her mother seemed to have gotten it out of her system, "that maybe the reason all this has happened is for me to help Tom. To help him like Henry helped her."

Isabella smiled, shook her head. "Oh, your sister is such a romantic. It's a good thing she's managed to keep that, after all the times she's been hurt. She's a bit biased, Cozy. She wanted Tom and you to be together like you want two heroes in a movie to end up together. Maybe she thinks because she's also been with other men, that she's like Tom, and took it personally. I know she likes him. She's pulled for him even before you introduced him to us. Maybe when she talks to Henry he'll help her understand how it's different."

"But what if it isn't different?"

"Then things will take their course anyway. You and Tom are still in each other's lives. There's no telling how you'll help him. You don't have to be romantically involved for that to happen. He wanted you to be with him the *way* he *wanted.* But was that the way you *needed?* That is what real love is, Cosette. It's wanting what is best for that person, even at great personal cost to yourself."

"I wish I could say I was that noble," Cosette said, turning away from her mother, feeling tears starting to drop across the bridge of her nose. "But I was jealous. I was so jealous...I mean, I knew Tom had had prior relationships but it just didn't hit me...and I can't get jealous of what came before me."

"Actually, you can, dear."

Cosette sat up, confused.

Her mother pushed the dark curls back from wet skin. "All times are *now* to God. He knows who you will be with before you do. So in a sense, you always belong to the one you're meant to be with. That's why we call it waiting, why we say we're 'saving ourselves.' We wait until our movements through time catch up with God's time and we're with the person ordained for us. Sure, we have free will, but people who put their trust in God aren't going to say no when His plan is revealed. That's why we're meant for one person, so that we give all of ourselves to them. Christina
knew from before Henry that she had, in a very real way, betrayed him. And she mourned that, and was renewed, and she set herself to wait for *the one.* If she hadn't, do you think Henry would be wanting to commit his life to her? She wouldn't have been ready for that, even if they sincerely did love each other. She would have needed some time, would have needed to grow in understanding before she could truly be to Henry what he is to her. So Tom, he's been treating his body so casually, thinking that everything he does is fine as long as everyone involved says it's okay, not thinking about how it's going to hurt *the one* he's supposed to be with, never thinking about what kind of person she would be, how she would feel, what she would think. Never thinking of the harm he's doing to himself, inside, in his own heart. Never thinking about how it might affect the true union God wants to give him, the real treasure. If that person is you, Cozy, then it will still be you in a year, two years. Love is patient, remember? And if he's not the one, then he isn't. And nothing will change that."

Cosette wiped at her eyes. "I still wish that I had been kinder when I told him. Not angry. If I had sat him down, told him that I was concerned about him--"

"He would have smooth-talked over you and dismissed your worries," Isabella said. "That's the kind of man he is. Dominant. Not a bad trait, but sometimes they don't see that they need someone to watch over them, too."

They sat in silence for several minutes. Then, Cosette said, "What should I do?"

"Pray. For him, you, your daughter. That's what you do."
Fourteen Weeks Ago

Chapter Summary

Tom and Cosette both find someone to help them forget their misery, in vastly different ways.

Her name was Lydia.

She was petite, hardly reaching to his shoulder. Her ginger hair was very short but stylish, smooth against her skull, and flattering to her shape. Sometimes she would have streaks in it, various colors, mostly shades of blue but occasionally green, purple, even pink. She may have been short but she had a long, slender neck, usually decorated with a choker, and Tom couldn't help but find her pale, freckled skin rather attractive. She was the mistress of sunscreen, constantly applying it. She took one look at him and the next day she had three bottles for him, and explicit instructions of how he needed to apply them, at what times and in what conditions.

She was his driver. She was actually Canadian, she worked for the company, went where they sent her. She had taken the job because of some uncle being owed a favor and she got to travel to lots of different places and wasn't afraid to learn how to drive them. It seemed to be a gift of hers, she said. She was twenty-eight and had no inclinations to settle down, although Tom had seen at least three different men attempting to chat her up.

Every day, she picked him up and took him to wherever they were working that day, and every night, she took him back to his rented place. She was polite, never prying into his work, but she also had an air about her of interest, never finding anything boring or commonplace. She had seen a lot, she said, but it never seemed to burn her out. It only teased at more, something bigger, something deeper.

They started talking a few days into filming. Tom's anger and depression was wearying, and talking to Lydia took his mind off things. She had nearly a psychologist's way of seeing around things, and by the end of the first week had somehow gotten him to confide in her about his...relationship woes.

He wasn't detailed. Just that he and his girlfriend were having problems, and she could sense his loneliness, and more importantly, his anger. She didn't ask a lot of questions, treading so lightly that she didn't seem terribly interested in it at first, but with a few choice remarks, her sympathy was soon keenly felt.

He suspected she was attracted to him -- he'd caught her eying him when she thought he wasn't paying attention -- but she didn't make a move. Although she did imply that she was discreet, as she'd done this job for many actors and knew that there were rules -- number one being: hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil.

He was attracted to her, as she had the kind of throwaway attitude of not really caring what people thought, of living and letting live, and having more than a few dark secrets, although she never spoke of them. There was something in the gleam of her eye and the twist of her lips that belied something more. Something...interesting. But of course Tom didn't entertain those thoughts for more than a few passing seconds.
At least not for the first two weeks.

In the midst of this, calls to Cosette were becoming routine. They had lost their banter. She kept him up to date on doctor's visits, he shared with her humorous things that had happened on set, but it was polite and controlled. The warmth was gone. She seemed like she wanted to say something else to him, and he waited to hear it, but it never came. He found himself swallowing all the endearing things he used to want to say to her, and over time, he wanted to say them less.

This filled him with an overwhelming sadness he struggled to ignore. It helped when it came to playing Loki, pushing that damage down, repressing it, letting it fuel Loki's usual resentments, which had started to feel stale.

Then the script came to him by special messenger -- it was official, he was being considering to play Morpheus in Neil Gaiman's Sandman, as Joseph Gordon-Levitt had backed out months ago and the studio was finally regrouping and rebuilding. They wanted him, as his own name had come from the writer's lips.

That was when things got serious.

Lydia, of course, had signed an NDA, as all did when it came to working with movie studios. So when she saw his script as he was getting in the car one morning, he didn't worry or panic. But she did, however, mildly flip out.

That was when she showed him the ankh she wore around her neck, usually hidden under the collar of her shirt, as she got tired of explaining that she wasn't a Christian and it wasn't a cross. The ankh was cross-like, except for an upside-down tear-shaped loop on the very top instead of the top beam of a cross.

She also showed him the tattoo going down her right shoulder blade, the names of all seven aspects of the universe -- Destiny, Death, Dream, Desire, Despair, Destruction, and Delirium, once called Delight.

Turned out she was a superfan.

Tom was hesitant about playing the lead in another comic-movie-adaptation, but Lydia was a wealth of information. All of Neil Gaiman's theories about mythology, and the origins of gods, and the meaning and ways of telling stories, and why we were compelled to do it -- these were the topics of many conversations that soon started to last longer than the ride back to his place, and he would invite her in, and they would talk.

She was smart. She had done research, and knew a lot of mythology, and even informed him on things about Loki that he wasn't aware of -- which was surprising, because he'd done very thorough research himself. She had book recommendations as long as her arm. Talking about these things led to other subjects of interest.

In the beginning of the third week, that was when she made it clear that whatever happened between them, it would stay between them. She wasn't stupid, she said. She knew the rules.

It wasn't so much that Tom was so attracted to her that his mind was clouded. It was that the loneliness that had been eating away through him had been stalled by Lydia's presence, but just talking to her was no longer enough to keep it at bay.

The emptiness was starting to become too much. The hole in him demanded to be filled.

The first time, it had been a few kisses, a little bit of groping. Then it turned into conversations
over the phone, during stolen breaks that soon became about things they'd like to do to each other, and then flat out phone sex. And finally, at the beginning of the fourth week, she snuck out of his place at three in the morning, walking down to the car she'd parked a few blocks away, so that no one would know she had spent the night.

A few hours later, when Tom was sitting in the make-up trailer, he received a video sent to him from Christina's phone. The video was of Cosette sitting on the couch, giggling, while the coffee mug that was balanced on top of her ever-growing stomach did a little dance that caused the liquid inside it to mildly sploosh out. "Beatrice has got some mad skills. She's gonna be a dancer or a runner," came Christina's commentary.

And only then did Tom know he'd gone too far. When it was too late.

8 8 8

It was the next day after they'd come home that Henry called Cosette and arranged for the two sisters to sit down and talk. At first, Cosette didn't want to bother. She was so miserable that she almost wanted to wallow in it, but knew that wasn't the right thing to do. So at dinner, she was rather stunned to find that Henry had taken her side.

After small talk, and then bigger talk, in which Christina and Cosette were honest with their feelings, and Christina expressed in particular how she felt that Cosette was being unfair to Tom, Henry had presented his opinion, the first he'd done since the whole thing had begun.

"The bottom line is that Cosette and Tom are trying to make something out of basically perverse beginnings," he said, after they'd finished eating.

"Perverse?" Christina objected. "What they did wasn't--"

"You misunderstand me," Henry said. "What it comes down to is the meaning of the word. I mean it in it's truest sense, something out of the natural order, something displaced from where it's supposed to be. Anything concerning sex outside of where it belongs -- between two people bonded for life -- is out of the natural order. It was made to belong in a particular setting and taking it outside of it is, in the true sense of the word, perverse."

"So," Cosette said, hesitant, "you've thought this was a mistake from the beginning? Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because it wasn't my place," Henry said. "I consider you family, Cosette, but you're a grown-up and you make your own decisions. Your parents interfere because they have to, it's their nature, but if I had said anything, it wouldn't have been taken well."

Christina sulked a bit. "You didn't even say anything to me," she said. "You just said that we'd see what happened. And I thought you liked Tom!"

"I do, that doesn't have anything to do with what's right and wrong." Then Henry shrugged. "I tend to keep my opinions to myself unless I feel it's absolutely necessary. You know that. I don't expect anyone to do the same, I just think I'll regret things less later. It's a personal choice. And I don't really mean to say that it's a mistake, I just never thought it was actually going to work. Or I was skeptical of it, because yes, you started off totally on the wrong foot. And while most relationships have funny, strange stories of how they started, violating your conscience and your most deeply held beliefs are not exactly fertile soil to grow something healthy."

They all paused to silently contemplate these words for a moment.
"I just think," Christina said, "that love is stronger than all of that. Tom loves you, Cosette. And I
know you love him."

"Well," Henry said, looking uncomfortable, "maybe we have to examine it more carefully. Or you
do, rather, Cosette."

Cosette just looked at him, the wheels in her head cranking slowly. She rested her cheek on her
hand, having a feeling of where Henry was going with this.

"I can't pretend to know what's really going on in your heart," he said, a bit softer, leaning toward
her. "But I do know how powerful lust is. And how it can distort your view of things. I'm not
saying you've confused lust for love, but it is possible that the lust is stronger. And lust is very
different from desiring your partner, lust is about using someone."

"Tom's lust or mine?" Cosette said.

"I don't know. Either. Both. It's just that, if that's the case, it could explain why you suddenly
reacted so badly to Tom's previous relationships. It could have been..." he shook his head,
considering, but she interrupted.

"Me realizing that maybe I'm not so different, and in being disgusted with myself, I took it out on
him?"

"Really?" Christina said.

Cosette shrugged. "Beats anything I've come up with. I mean, you can't make a silk purse out of a
sow's ear, as the old saying goes. And that's what we've been trying to do. Create a real, honest,
and let's face it, I want a holy state of partnership because that's what it's supposed to be, no matter
what anyone else says or thinks these days, that relationships are all about fun and romance and
sex...something real has to edify us both. And it wasn't."

"But it was!" Christina insisted, slapping her hand on the table. At the rattling of the leftover
dishes, each of them looked around a bit awkwardly, but Christina went on, her voice lower. "I was
there. I saw how you two were. It was real."

"I'm not saying there weren't real feelings," Henry said. "I'm not saying it didn't have those
elements. But you can only get so far with one of them not really understanding the other on a
deeper level. Even though I'm sure he did try."

"So you think I did the right thing?"

"I think, since you're asking, that the kind of relationship you and Tom should have right now
needs to be more focused on getting to know each other. And on being parents, rather than trying to
be romantic. And if you care about Tom, and he's truly open, you two need to talk about things
much more serious than the state of your feelings for each other."

"I wish I had sat him down," Cosette said, frustrated, "and told him that that kind of lifestyle wasn't
good for him, that God wants something better for him, and that I was worried about him. But
instead I just got all pissed off and fucked it up." She glanced at Henry. Usually she tried not to
swear too much in front of him, as she knew he didn't care for it. "Sorry."

"It's not too late for that," Henry said.

Things had been better with Christina after that, but Cosette felt the distance. Whenever she would
call Tom, it was always brief. They didn't talk like they used to. Their subjects were usually about
the baby, parenting, plans for this and that. Tom would talk about what was going on with his film and Cosette would update him on her decoration of Beatrice's room.

She was only allowed to paint half of one wall a day -- paint fumes were not something she should be exposed to for too long, even though she had all the windows and the door wide open, and fans blowing to keep the smell from building. She would start on the top part of the wall, work half way down, then the next day do the next half. It took two weeks just laying down the basic colors. She painted a wide stripe along the center of the room, encircling all four walls, and then used stencils to paint various things on the stripe, such as butterflies, birds, animals of different types, flowers, and anything else that she liked. She left space between them, in case something else occurred to her to do later.

She had help from a special source. The security company had come to the house the next morning after her dinner with Henry and Christina and had set up shop.

Blake from Emerald Security Services had arrived at her home bright and early on a Monday, with a young man named Joseph with her, who was one of the three agents who would be providing her security. Cosette invited them in and offered them coffee, which they eagerly accepted.

"Mr. Hiddleston has arranged for a full time security detail," Blake explained. She had a straightforward manner that Cosette found refreshing. She had curling blonde hair and was, in Cosette's opinion, quite beautiful, and suddenly made her very conscious of all the swelling and stretching her body had done over the first two trimesters. "We'll have three men on it, Joseph here, and also Kyle and Fitz. Each man will take an eight hour shift with one man on back-up."

Joseph smiled at her reassuringly. "We try to be as unobtrusive as possible, unless it becomes necessary to be a visible presence."

He had to be around her age, and around Tom's height, also rather slimly built. He had very dark hair, cut short, and a thin beard that was carefully groomed. He had deep brown eyes, and wore his suit like it was a second skin.

"Mostly we'll need to make sure the home is secure," Blake continued, "so if it's acceptable to you, we'd like to do a perimeter check. We won't invade your privacy, but we do need to be aware of all windows, doors, and any place large enough for an individual to hide in, which includes closets and cabinets."

"When you need to go out, for at least the first month, we would like to accompany you," Joseph said. "I realize that this might come across as intrusive, but we're very good at being inconspicuous."

"Actually, I could probably use the company," Cosette said. This all felt a bit overwhelming, but quite frankly, with the way things were with Tom, knowing that he cared enough to keep her safe when he wasn't there made her feel just the tiniest bit better.

"There are a few more things we need to go over," Blake said, giving Joseph a little nod, "but if you don't mind Joseph is going to begin his check. Are there any areas in the house that you are sensitive about? Things that are private?"

"Mostly the bedroom," Cosette said.

"We'll be checking the closets but only for space, not searching with any detail," Joseph said. "I won't be going through your drawers or anything," he added with a little grin.
"My clothes closet is a walk-in," Cosette said, "so you'll probably have to go in there, but... yeah, don't worry, there's nothing embarrassing in there. I'm pretty boring, actually. I don't even own any lingerie. And I don't know why I said that."

They all gave a little chuckle, and Joseph excused himself.

"There is a part of our service that I need to disclose to you," Blake said. "It is important that I inform you that we have a strict no-fraternization policy. It's not unusual for our agents to become friendly with the clients, but in the rare cases where attraction is involved, any suspicion of more than a friendship will cause the agent to be reassigned."

"Oh, okay." Cosette gave a little shrug. "I think I can control myself."

Blake smiled at her. "It's just a precaution. I'd rather tell you now than have something happen and you find out later. We've also had issues where a third party, such as in your case with Mr. Hiddleston, hires us to watch a significant other. And at some point, the significant other needs protection from the paying client. We make it very clear in these cases that we take orders only from the one we are protecting. Mr. Hiddleston, in this instance, should there be any difficulties between you, and he tries to terminate our service, will not be able to do so in those circumstances. It's a clause in the contract. We have extensive contacts with abuse prevention services and will intervene if necessary."

Cosette felt a bit startled. The very thought of Tom being a *threat* to her was absurd, but... he was angry at her. And she knew she didn't know all his many sides. Although she couldn't imagine him ever wanting to allow his daughter to be hurt, let alone hurt her himself.

"Once again, I'm telling you this in the spirit of full disclosure. Trust is a very important thing to develop with clients, Ms. Mitchells."

"Cosette," she corrected her. "Thank you, Blake. So, no dating my bodyguards, and you'll protect me from everyone, even Tom, if necessary. Anything else?"

"That covers the most important parts. I'll leave you a copy of the contract for you to go over so you are aware of all the details of our service, but Joseph can also answer any questions. He will be taking the day shift, from eight until four. Then Kyle will take four until midnight, and Fitz is the night owl and will take the midnight to eight shift. You currently do not work outside of the home?"

"No, although it's August and school will be starting soon..." Again, Cosette didn't know why she was saying this, "but I'm on leave of absence."

"Then the ones you'll have the most to do with will be Joseph and Kyle. Kyle not quite as much, as it's the evening shift and he usually sticks to the outside, unless you have places to be in the evening."

"Maybe my parents' house, but that's it, usually."

"And Fitz stays outside during the night shift. Although you might have to become accustomed to when he's doing a perimeter check. Usually he leaves a text for the client while he's doing it, so if you wake, check your phone first to see. There's also an emergency button for the middle of the night, and he'll be responding to it, so if you mistake him for a prowler, he'll be able to reassure you right away."

Cosette shifted uncomfortably. "This is a lot to take in," she murmured.
"It's much easier than you think," Blake consoled her.

She was right. Cosette liked all three of the men very much.

Kyle was in his mid-forties, happily married, and his wife worked the night shift at the hospital. They had two children, both in college, and were enjoying getting to spend their days together.

Fitz was the quietest of the three, but had a rock-solid presence that was very reassuring. He moved like a cat and never woke Cosette once, and she never had to press the emergency button. He was single, never married, but cared for an elderly mother during the day, so the night shift was the best time for him to be at work, and his sister was on call in case anything happened during the night.

Joseph was a widower. Cosette found out one afternoon when she was making him a snack after he cleaned up her mess in the nursery -- she'd spilled a bit of paint and Joseph dealt with it. He didn't wear a suit when he was helping her with the paint, and kept a change of clothes on hand -- usually a t-shirt and sweats.

"You need to be careful around those fumes, especially now," Joseph cautioned her. "Usually the husband or boyfriend is supposed to be dealing with that stuff right now."

"Do you have any children?" Cosette asked.

"Yeah, a little boy. He's just started pre-school, he's four. Hugo."

"That's a cool name. You don't hear one that much."

"Yeah, Leandra was a big Victor Hugo fan."

"My mother named me after Cosette from Les Miserables," Cosette pointed out.

"Yes, I noticed," Joseph replied with a smile.

Then Cosette realized what Joseph had said. "You said she *was* a fan," she said softly. "Did something happen?"

Joseph looked up at her from his coffee. "She had small cell lung cancer. She died about eighteen months ago."

"Oh. Cosette's hand went to her mouth reflexively. "I'm so sorry."

"Yeah. It was hard. It still is. Hugo was so young I'm worried he won't remember her. And he was still in that stage where all they want is Mommy. He got really attached to my mother for a bit. Her mother had passed away when Leandra was in her teens from the same thing. But Hugo just kept asking for Mommy, and..." he trailed off. "Anyway. It took a long time to adjust, and he's stopped asking. I keep pictures of her around and he knows that it's Mommy, but...I don't know. I'm a bit angry that we didn't get more time. We were supposed to grow old together."

Then he shook himself and stood up. "I'd better go change. Thanks for the coffee. Kyle will be here soon to take over his shift."

Something about this suddenly made Cosette feel very small and silly, worrying about her problems, when people in the world like Joseph had it much worse than her. It provoked thoughts that she'd never had before. It made her think about how grateful she should be that Tom wanted to be in her life, in Beatrice's life, so very much, and how Beatrice was blessed that she was going to
have a father who loved her so much. There was no telling what the future held.

This caused her to become much more compassionate toward Joseph. As he was around during the days, she spent more time with him than either of the others. She asked him questions about Hugo, looked at the pictures on his phone, and did everything and anything in her power to make him laugh or smile. She felt so incredibly bad for him -- he was still grieving, she recognized, but like herself and Tom, had a strong attitude that you simply had to keep moving, you had to keep going forward and not let the bad things keep you stuck in one place.

Then she found out that he was Catholic. The first week, he went with her to Church on Sunday. She had stopped going to the church where her parents went, as she usually went with them on Sunday morning, and had started going to another church in a neighboring suburb. Joseph had to go with her, but he said he would sit a few pews behind her. She noticed that he knew all the Mass parts, and even went up for communion -- and then in the car on the way home, he showed her his wife's rosary, that he still carried.

It wasn't that she was trying to flirt with him, it was that she could talk to him about things that she usually couldn't talk to others about, except her parents. He admired her library and she recommended books, half of which he'd already read. She tried to loan him things but he refused them, then would download them on his Kindle the next day. They would wind up talking about them, and this made her shallow conversations with Tom feel even more awkward.

And then one week Joseph wasn't able to take his shift. He was replaced by Kyle, and a new agent, Rodney, took up the evening shift. It was his vacation, Blake told her, and Joseph and Hugo were going to South Dakota to see Mount Rushmore.

That was when Cosette realized she'd gotten too attached to her bodyguard.

It wasn't that she had feelings for him, she told herself. But it was a nice distraction, and distractions were necessary. Tom was coming to visit next week and she was nervous. She wanted to talk to him about things, but was worried -- horribly worried -- that things were going to go south again and dreaded it turning into another fight.

She had worked herself into a bit of a wreck over it, so when the actual event happened, it caught her completely off guard.

Joseph was back from his trip, and had a couple hundred pictures of the various things he and Hugo had seen and done. They sat down at Cosette's kitchen table in the late morning sun and started talking.

And before either knew it, it was noon.

And at noon, Tom arrived at the house.

He walked in, took one look at Cosette and Joseph laughing and talking and having a wonderful time, and immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion.

8 8 8

He tried not to do it again.

He didn't understand why he was compelled to do it again.

He knew it was wrong. But something in him had woken up and it demanded to be sated.
Lydia was discreet. She knew all the tricks. She parked around the corner and walked to the house in a heavy hoodie, hiding her identity, so if anyone did see her, they wouldn't know who it was. She left before the sun came up. Tom never asked her to stay.

Their conversations dried up. Before, he'd liked talking to her. She had helped him make up his mind to say yes to the Sandman film. But now, those tattoos that he traced with his fingers felt like accusations.

Destiny.

Death.

Dream.

Destruction.

Desire and Despair.

Delirium.

Maybe Cosette was right about him. But he didn't want to admit it. He didn't think he had a problem. He was just being weak. And technically, Cosette had broken it off with him, so it wasn't really cheating, was it?

Filming was reaching a midpoint. His week off was coming. He wasn't in the film nearly as much as he'd been in the first one, maybe a bit more than the second. He wasn't quite his usual self, and he knew his co-stars, especially Chris, saw it, but he faked it well enough. He smiled and laughed and gave hugs and took selfies, and the internet seemed happy that he was playing Loki again. The faction that had viciously hated Cosette seemed to have been momentarily silenced by his tweet. He'd been explicit enough in his statement.

Was it true? Was Cosette the love of his life? The thought brought him pain. Sometimes sharp, sometimes dull. Always aching just under the surface. If she was the love of his life, both of them were royally fucking it up. And if she wasn't, he had no idea how there could be anyone else, and despaired of there ever being.

So when his time came to leave for Los Angeles, he talked to Lydia. She had snuck in, as usual, but he was packing and told her, politely, that he didn't think they should continue this. He did have a girlfriend who was pregnant with his child, he explained, and as fucked up as their situation was, being with Lydia just made it more complicated.

"I like you very much," Tom said. "I value your friendship, Lydia. I just don't want to continue the physical aspect. I hope that doesn't offend you."

Lydia had laughed. "Why would it? You're a great fuck, Tom, and I'm sorry we're stopping, but of course it's fine. I knew it was only temporary anyway. The last thing either of us want is for this to get messy."

He felt better after that. Until he arrived at Cosette's, and knocked on the door, and heard her cheerful, "Come in!" and found her sitting at the table with a rather handsome man who was smiling and laughing with her.

Maybe he wouldn't have jumped to the wrong conclusion if it wasn't for the sudden fall of Cosette's face. The smile that had lit it up disappeared and she paled, as if his sudden appearance were anything but welcome.
"Tom!" she said. "I thought you were Christina."

"Did you forget I was coming today?" Tom asked, his voice much sharper than he intended.

"No, of course not." She scurried up, and Tom knew guilt when he saw it. The man at the table stood up, too, and Tom knew protectiveness when he saw it, too. "You want something to eat? Did you have lunch yet? I've got some bacon and avocados, I was going to make some sandwiches."

Tom looked from Cosette to the stranger. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything." His tone was sheer English gentility, but when Cosette turned and looked at him from where she was scurrying about the stove, he locked eyes with her, and willed her to hear the double meaning in his words.

"Of course not." She walked closer to him, but there was hesitancy about her. As little as six weeks ago, she would have reached up on tip-toe to kiss him, burrowed herself against his chest in greeting. Her eyes were guarded, and it reminded him sharply that their current relationship was in a state of shambles. "Joseph's going to do his latest perimeter check. You'll be happy to know that guarding me has been extremely boring for all three members of my little security team."

Now he realized. Joseph was part of Emerald Security Services, which he had personally arranged. They'd come to him very highly recommended, and at the time he'd thought nothing about their strange little contract clauses, addressing things such as her possibly needing protection from himself, and how any fraternizing was strictly forbidden and would result in reassignment.

This sure looked like fraternizing to him.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Hiddleston," Joseph said as he slid into his suit coat. "I'll give you two some privacy. When I'm done, I'll be in the car if you need me, Cosette," he said, and went out the side door.

"How are you?" Cosette asked. Her tone was formal. It seemed that whatever warmth had been in the room left with Joseph.

"Fine. I got in late last night, and then had some calls to deal with this morning." He moved to the kitchen table, pulled out a chair.

"Want something to drink?" she offered. "I got a six pack of those sodas you like, knowing you'd be around this week. Or maybe you'd like to see what I've done with Beatrice's room first?"

"I'll take a soda," Tom said. When she brought it to him, he noticed that her hands were a bit swollen. He glanced down -- she wore a pair of stretchy pants that exposed her calves, and they looked a bit swollen as well. "How are you doing?"

"Gaining weight. Some mornings I feel like the Pillsbury Dough Girl." She tugged at the T-shirt she was wearing -- a plain soft pink. "I'm glad I don't have to get into work clothes; I went to Wal-Mart this week and got some maternity T-shirts. I'll need to up my pants size soon, the way things are going. Almost in the third trimester."

"Wal-mart? You could be buying much better stuff than that."

"Yes, but I'm being frugal. Besides, when Beatrice is born I won't need this stuff anymore."

Tom nodded, sipped at his soda. "You're feeling okay?"

"I get tired more easily. I'm spending entirely too much time watching Netflix on the couch."
"Sit down, Cosette," he said, and then heard his tone. He glanced nervously at her, but she was giving him a little smirk. "What?"

"I kind of miss you bossing me around," she said very softly, as she obeyed. She pulled her chair so she was sitting facing him, not against the table directly, as it was curved, so they were both sort of sticking out into the walkway of the kitchen. She fiddled with the hem of her shirt, and Tom braced himself, knowing she had something on her mind.

Of course she did.

"I figured maybe Joseph was filling in the gaps," he said.

Cosette frowned. "Why would you think that?"

He shrugged. "You just seemed rather cozy, pardon the pun," he commented. "Just don't forget the no-fraternization policy."

She looked at him for a very long moment. The lines around her eyes hardened as she examined him. "I'm not fraternizing with him. He just came back from a vacation with his three and a half year old son. He was showing me pictures." She paused, looked away, something flickering in her eyes. "Joseph lost his wife, his son's mother, about a year and a half ago. Forgive me for being compassionate. I feel sorry for them. That's not fraternizing." She stood up, her sudden movement causing the chair to slide. Her bulk didn't make it smooth, and even as she practically stormed over to the stove, and busied herself opening the packet of bacon on the counter, Tom couldn't help but notice that she was starting to waddle.

He looked down at his soda. He'd been so careful with his own indiscretion, and Luke had been very carefully monitoring the gossip. No leaks. Yet.

Did he feel guilty? He couldn't quite decide. Sitting here, looking at Cosette, having seen her with another man that could make her smile and light up and laugh and attract her warmth which he hadn't seen in a bit...something in him felt strangely vindicated. Like she couldn't hurt him because he had a shield. He had someone else...

...whose very existence proved everything she had said about him was right.

*Ouch.* Where did *that* thought come from?

"Look," she said, setting the packet down and turning, leaning back against the counter on the heels of her hands, "I know things are weird between us. And I know it's my fault they're weird. But...but I can't just replace you, you know. I wouldn't do that. I hope you know I'm not that kind of person who would run out and find someone else, just to make myself feel better."

Tom could hardly look at her. He kept his eyes down on the soda bottle between his hands.

"Tom," she said softly. There was such pleading in her voice...he felt his eyes move up of their own accord. God, her eyes...big and soft and gentle. Looking at him with such...what? Was it love? He couldn't let himself think it, it hurt too much.

She stepped closer, grabbed her chair, pulled it toward him sat down again. She leaned forward, the huge ball of her belly hanging between her knees. Her hands rested across the curve, almost as if she were hugging it. "I've been thinking so much about that...that last awful day. That night before. I'm afraid to say anything about it because I'm worried it's going to explode in my face again. I've been playing in my head over and over again all the ways I'd wish it had gone. Maybe I was jealous of that other woman, Sue, maybe that's what made me so angry. I should never have
attacked you, and I tried to tell you that before but it just turned into another fight. And I tried to break it off with you because..." she wrung her hands, "because I really did think it was the right thing to do. I did think we were incompatible, but that was just...I don't know, maybe it was just me being scared."

"Scared of what?" Tom asked, his voice a touch harsher than he intended. "I've done everything humanly possible to allay any and all of your fears, Cosette. What could you possibly be afraid of?"

She shut her eyes, breathing in and out slowly. "When I found out about...those things, I reacted badly. I got mad and accusatory, when that wasn't the right thing to do. I should have waited until I was calmer, and talked to you honestly about it, but...but you have this power over me, this way of charming me and... and..."

"Manipulating you?" he tossed out.

She shook her head. "I don't want to fight. Please listen to me, Tom, I've thought about this so much this last week, what I wanted to say to you. It hurt me to know you'd done those things, and it scared me because of how invested I was in you, how much I cared about you, and how I saw you doing things to yourself that were destructive."

He felt his scowl deepen, but fought against his temper. He didn't want a repeat of that awful morning. He would get up and walk out before he let that happen.

"I got angry because you didn't see the harm that had been caused," she admitted. "You say that you're willing to wait when it comes to me, but...I think you dismiss my real concerns about this, how using me as a reason is not going to work in the long run, and I think you sometimes just try to play it off like...everything will be all right, it will work itself out. And that's now how it works. We have to really talk about these things. And I wish I had done that, I wish I had come to you and talked to you about them, talked to you about how having all these different kinds of sexual relationships, about how your attitude that separates sex from its purpose is bad for you, how it's hurt you--"

"How it's hurt me," Tom echoed, flat. "I don't think it was me being hurt that you were thinking about that night, Cosette."

"No, that's true. I turned it into being about me and that was wrong. I got all self-righteous and I blew it. I know that. But the more I thought about it the more I was convinced you wouldn't have listened to me even if I had done it right." She looked down at her hands. There were tears building in her eyes, and Tom felt that awful twist in his gut. He hated it when she cried. "You try very hard to take care of me, Tom, and I feel like I have utterly failed to take care of you at all. Sometimes I don't know if it's because my mentality is so different from yours that I get overwhelmed when I try to approach it, but also sometimes...like I said before...sometimes I feel like I don't know you. Not really. That there's an intimacy between us that's missing. And I'm scared that maybe you don't know how to be intimate like that, that substituting physical relationships, sexual intimacy, for real emotional intimacy has...I don't know, I don't want to make judgments about your psyche, but I see it. I see how you hold that part of yourself back."

"Hold myself back?" he cried. He struggled to stay calm, took a few breaths, kept his voice even and soft. "I've admitted my feelings for you, Cosette. In ways I never say to anyone. I've told you about my unhappiness. I've told you things about me I don't tell people."

She nodded vigorously. This dislodged some of the tears and they started to streak down her cheek. He desperately wanted to reach out and cup her face in his hands and wipe them away with his thumbs, but instead he just flexed his fingers where they hung between his thighs. "I know. I
haven't appreciated that. I've...I've been greedy for more. Maybe I've just handled everything badly from minute one, I can admit that, but I don't think I'm wrong in my fear. I desperately wish I hadn't said the things I did, but the meaning behind them still stands. I feel we do need a massive step back because all these feelings are clogging the works, I know definitely for me."

"If we didn't have any feelings, we wouldn't even have a relationship!"

"Maybe not, but...what kind of feelings, Tom? This baby is a giant flashing neon sign that things are out of order between us. And we're struggling to correct it, but that effort is...it's almost like it's a catch-22. We want to play things like two people starting a relationship but we have obligations to each other that only people well along in a relationship should have. And in my opinion, by well along, I mean *married.* It's not slow enough, and it's too slow at the same time! I feel like I keep tripping over my own feet!"

"And I don't," Tom declared. "Until you exploded at me, I thought everything was going very well. So pardon me if I'm still a bit taken aback." He didn't mean to sound so bitter, but could hardly help it.

She sighed, deeply. "You and I have very different ideas of how relationships work. And they say to never make a life-changing decision when you're pregnant, and deciding to be official with you...well, that's life changing. I don't want to take it back, but I know that whatever happens to us, whatever ultimately comes of our partnership, whether we end up together or not, it comes second to us really knowing each other. Because whatever else happens, we are going to be connected for the rest of our lives, Tom. And that responsibility is much bigger than either of us realize."

She let out a breath and leaned back in her chair, slumping a bit. She leaned her elbow on the table and grabbed the soda Tom had set down and took a swallow. "Sorry," she said. "I needed--"

"It's fine," Tom whispered.

"I love you, Tom," she said. "I think we need to understand what each of us means by that word. When I say I love you, I want what's good for you. What's truly good for you. Not just what I think, but what *is,* even if it isn't me." She sought out his eyes. "Saying I want to truly be friends isn't a kiss off. It's not a 'I love you but I'm not *in* love with you.' The true kind of...virtuous friendship I want with you is the basis for whatever kind of relationship we have later. I'm not backing out of what I said when I told you that I was in this for real. But I think the shape of it needs to be something else for a time, something more important, something fundamental. Can you understand that?"

As she spoke, her words entered through the cracks that had gone sore and red with all the anger he'd been feeling over the last month. He didn't want to give in to it -- being with her was so confusing sometimes, and it made him so emotionally tired. But..."I...I want to try," he admitted. "But it feels more like we're slowing down because things are getting too serious too fast, and you can't handle it."

"I totally understand that," she replied. "But I haven't been keeping my options open for anyone else, Tom. Even though we both have to accept the real possibility that you and I may not work, it won't be because we gave up on each other. It's because we'll realize the best thing for the other may be someone else." She drew a deep breath. "In light of all that's happened, I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to just...to stop. Right now. I mean, a lot of damage has been done and I'm not sure it can be fixed. But I want to."

"Do you?" he asked, pointedly.
She nodded. "I don't know if I can, though. So I want to be fair to you. You want to say no, you want to tell me that you want to see other people, I'm okay with that. I won't hold it against you. You and I can work out being parents, people do it all the time. We can still have that friendship, since we're going to be connected for a long time. Don't feel you have to commit yourself to me if that's not what you really want, in light of everything that's happened. But if you want me, if you want to try again, at a different pace, and try to figure things out so that both of us are comfortable, I'm here. Wherever it goes."

He looked away. His brain was spinning. He should tell her, he realized. He should admit to her what he did. Maybe he could just tell her he met someone else? No, it wasn't true. He liked Lydia, or *had* liked her. But he'd slept with her out of loneliness. Out of despair. She might understand. She might have compassion on his frailty, see it as his woundedness, not think of him as a cheating cad but as someone who needs to grow, and he would be sorry and do any penance she wanted. Because he wished desperately that he hadn't ever done it.

Yet there was still that simmering anger, the pain she'd inflicted on him that hadn't healed. The pain that had driven him to the loneliness, the despair. It was her fault. She should take responsibility for it. She wouldn't have any right to judge him. That wouldn't stop her, though.

And in that moment, some part of him saw that she would be right. She was so different from anyone else he'd ever known. No, she wasn't perfect, far from it, but she saw things from a point of view that he'd never much considered. He wanted to learn about it, be a part of it, explore it. It would require a patience from him he wasn't sure he had -- especially not now, considering what he'd done.

But no. He couldn't. This fragile peace, the hope in her eyes, the tears glimmering against her jaw, he knew that if he opened his mouth and said that he'd had sex with someone else, that it would destroy that hope. That all her earlier convictions, all her earlier anger -- it would totally justify it.

He couldn't do that.

He reached out, offering his hand. She took it. He rubbed the tips of his fingers along her palm, becoming conscious of how much he had missed the texture of her skin. "I want to try, too," he said. "I can't say I know exactly what you want of me, but...I will do the best I can."

"That's all I can ask," she said with a little smile.
Chapter Summary

The countdown to how long Tom can keep his secret has begun.

(Thirteen)

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but Joseph has been reassigned."

Cosette stared at Blake. It wasn't normal for the woman to make calls to her house, unless it was serious. So far, Cosette's case had been rather low-action and textbook. But the pained look on the woman's face made her gut twist.

"Did something happen?" Cosette asked.

Blake was the epitome of professionalism. Even with the particular glint in her eyes. "You haven't done anything, Cosette."

"Did Tom complain?" Cosette's brain was spinning. The rest of the week of his visit had been...not abnormal, but there had been something off and Cosette hadn't been able to put her finger on it. She had felt so much better, saying those things to Tom, and in her eagerness to re-establish the status quo, she made considerable efforts to be less distant from him. For his part, Tom had been...not warmer, not really. But there had been something about him. Something physical. She couldn't figure it out.

Usually Tom respected her personal space, even though he did like to hover around her. But several times she felt as if she were mere moments away from having to remove his hands from her person. She felt it like an electric field, like something crackling about him, not drawing her in but pulling him to her. The looks he gave her, as if he wanted to kiss her, he wanted to do things but some invisible barrier just barely kept him back.

But he didn't actually *do* anything. It was just there. A feeling, a sensation.

Every time she tried to talk about her concerns over his past relationships, he seemed to find a way to change the subject. He was good with his tangents -- sometimes she wouldn't notice for a good twenty minutes that he had sidetracked her until the nagging feeling she wasn't saying what she wanted to say got to her, but by then it was too late and either he had to go or she did. And sometimes she would catch him staring into the distance, knowing there was something on his mind, and even once she was absolutely positive, from the intense way he stared at her, that he was about to confess something to her...

...but nothing. Tom had gone back to Australia and she returned to her normal routine, feeling somewhat better and somewhat worse.

Joseph's contact with her that week had been minimal. She chalked it up to Tom being around so much and wanting to leave them alone as much as possible, but even when Tom *wasn't* there they hardly talked. She figured he was wary of arousing any more jealousy and was waiting for Tom to go, but the very first day she was back on her own, nothing changed.
And now today he had not come at all. Instead a new agent, Isaac, a broad-shouldered, curly-haired Latino with a gentle smile had taken his place. Sure, he was sweet, but she instantly knew that the two of them would have nowhere near the banter that she and Joseph had shared.

"No, Mr. Hiddleston didn't complain," Blake assured her. That strange glint got stronger. Was it...pity? "Joseph requested the reassignment." At Cosette's sudden physical jolt, Blake reached across the table and grabbed her wrist. "Please, Cosette, let me explain.

"I'm sure Joseph told you about what he's been through, with the loss of his wife, Leandra. He wanted to come talk to you himself but I advised him not to. Actually I pretty much ordered him, otherwise he would be here right now. The thing is, he's developed some feelings for you, and please, do not feel responsible for that in any way. He's been vulnerable for some time but he's been...well, you sort of get numb in situations like that, when you've suffered such a profound loss, and when someone comes along who makes you feel something, *anything,* you have a tendency to get attached very quickly. He liked you a lot, and he was concerned that like had turned into something else. But he's also one of my most professional agents and knew that was unacceptable, so when Mr. Hiddleston left, he requested reassignment. I am very sorry to say that as long as he's in our employ, he won't be allowed to contact you in any way. And I'm really sorry about all of this because I know you liked him and trusted him. I know you're going to be upset and we don't like it when our clients are upset, but I hope that Isaac, who is one of the best we have, will be able to find his pattern here quickly."

Cosette had gaped at her through most of her explanation, but then slowly, her slackened jaw shut. "Was it *because* Tom came to visit that he realized this?" she asked.

"I think so. It's not unusual for clients to get jealous of our younger agents, especially when they're attractive. That's why we normally don't put them with young women, why your other two agents are a bit older, but we've had a rash of retirements lately and a large percentage of our current agents are younger and we haven't had much choice."

"Are you saying I'm not attractive?" Isaac asked. He had returned from his perimeter check, making himself familiar with Cosette's home. His mild, teasing tone had a flirtatious edge to it.

"And Isaac," Blake continued, deadpan, "is just incorrigible, but we've found his effectiveness is superior to his pick-up skills. And truthfully, we've never had a single complaint about him. Surprisingly enough."

"But you said Tom didn't complain?"

"No, Joseph told me about Mr. Hiddleston's reaction to his presence in his weekly report. I thought he was mistaken, just taking Mr. Hiddleston's agitation for surprise, but that was when he told me his side of things. So. Here we are." She sighed. "I hope you're not too upset, Cosette."

Slowly, she shook her head. "I'm going to miss Joseph a lot. Please tell him I'm...I'm sorry that things went this way."

Very subtly, Blake narrowed her eyes, but she nodded and smiled in a friendly way. Cosette didn't really think Blake was going to tell him, but she couldn't worry about it.

"And ultimately," Cosette added with a little half smile, "you guys are paid to do a job, not be part of a soap opera. You've been excellent, not being intrusive, and keeping Tom's rabid fangirls at bay. I've appreciated it."

"Thank you, Cosette." Blake stood, nodded at Isaac. "I'll let you to it, then. Call me if you need
anything."

8 8 8

(Twelve)

"Tom, I'm trying to bury this, but you're not helping."

He had been on set for three days when the phone call came. Luke usually didn't bother him with this stuff unless it was serious.

Usually, when he stayed somewhere, it wasn't a problem. Being in a rented house in a nice neighborhood, with a good record and non-nosy neighbors.

But the Twitter account had appeared and disappeared in a flash. He had no idea who it was, which house around him was the culprit, and knew even less who lived in any of the houses around him. But whichever one it was, they had caught pictures of Lydia, in a hood so her identity was hidden, in his driveway, and the timestamp on the tweet read two a.m. local time. And the tweet that accompanied it had nearly set off a frenzy until Luke got it buried.

"@twhiddleston's two a.m. booty call is keeping me awake, fucking hell."

It was one tweet. The one thing going for it was that he wasn't in the picture. There was no way for anyone to verify that the picture was of his rented flat and so far Luke kept any of the tabloids from picking it up by throwing out other gossip and getting Tom to agree to interviews.

And all of them wanted to know about the baby.

"I'm not doing anything out of the ordinary, Luke," Tom protested.

"Whoever that is, I don't care," Luke said. "I don't care who you fuck or whatever. It's totally your business. But you don't shit where you eat, Tom. That's when it becomes my problem, unless you want this squeaky-clean image we've managed to convey to go belly up."

Luke was mad that it even happened, Tom realized. He *was* mad that Tom was cheating and all the work they'd done to present an unmarried girlfriend to the public and keep the shitstorm from coming down on Tom's head was being undone.

And Tom knew that. But he'd be buggered if he was going to admit it.

"If you want to keep doing your thing, fine, but don't do it at your house. Whoever had that Twitter could take another picture. For all we know there's a stalker hiding in the bushes waiting for something to happen, you know some of those people follow you wherever you go."

"Then we should increase security," Tom floundered.

"Tom. Go somewhere else...her place, a hotel, wherever. But not your place. Got it?"

Tom didn't plan for there to be a next time. He reassured Luke, hung up.

But Lydia showed up at the end of the week.

She continued to drive him back and forth to set every morning and every night, and their conversations were not strained -- at least not on his part -- and he felt like everything was normal. What Cosette didn't know wouldn't hurt her, he had Luke and his team keeping his image clean, and all was going to be fine.
And yet she was on his fucking doorstep at 1:39 a.m., and he had to let her in because he could not talk to her outside and risk irritating whatever neighbor had gotten the shot before. For all he knew they were getting another shot.

"What are you doing here?" he hissed at her as he let her inside and bolted the door behind her. He made sure all the shades and blinds were drawn.

"You have other plans?" she quipped.

His reply was to open Luke's message and show it to her. "Would you know anything about this?" he asked, the tweet on his screen.

Lydia squinted at it. "Not my account," she said with a shrug.

"No? Then who else knows about us? You said you knew the tricks to be discreet. This isn't looking too discreet, Lydia."

"Nobody knows about this, at least nobody on my end. What about you? I mean, you got a stalker? Someone who wants to make you miserable, in some demented hope you'll fall into her arms? Most celebrities do."

Anger built in his chest. His fists inadvertently clenched. He felt himself moving closer to her, and her slowly backing away. "Look, you want to fuck me, that's fine, but you will not fuck with my life. I may get some bad press but you will definitely get your ass fired if we end up in some cheating scandal -- don't they make you sign some kind of non-disclosure agreement? You're best interests are in keeping your mouth shut." His voice was getting louder, he could tell by her wince. "If this comes out, guess who gets to look like a demented fangirl? Who do you think everyone's going to believe, me, or some slutty driver who's bitter because she didn't get to bang the next big celebrity?"

Lydia's back hit a wall and her eyes widened in fear. Tom caught himself. He ran his words back in his head and was, on some level, utterly disgusted with himself, but he would not allow this to happen. Cosette was *not* going to find out. And throwing Lydia out now would just raise more suspicion, possibly wake the neighbors. Who knows how pissed she would get? Or worse, get hysterical and start crying? He had to backpedal.

"I wouldn't do that," Lydia said before he could figure out what to say. Her voice was small, like a child's. "I've never...I mean, I know how it works. I don't know where those pictures or that tweet came from, honest to God, I don't. You think I want people to find out? Men are called studs and sex symbols and women are labeled sluts and whores. I don't want to go through that. I like my life the way it is, and..."

"Shhh," Tom hushed her, coming closer, pulling her into his arms. "It's okay. I'm sorry, I just...I'm under a lot of pressure and...things aren't good right now. This was a nice way to escape from my problems but it isn't worth this kind of hassle."

"I'm not trying to be a hassle, Tom," she said, her lips against that sweet spot on his neck.

He didn't remember much more of the conversation. He wasn't sure he cared. It took little to no persuasion for them to get into his bed again. And later on he stared at the ceiling and wondered what the hell had happened.

He wasn't this easy. In spite of some of the worst gossip about him, he wasn't the kind to fuck anything that moved. And he wasn't, he was just fucking Lydia and he didn't seem to be able to
But, in all truthfulness, it was nice to forget. It was nice to escape into that physical bliss, that excitement, that adrenaline, for just a little while, and pretend his problems didn't exist. Pretend he wasn't making them worse.

Because twenty four hours later, Luke was calling him again.

"It's worse this time," Luke said. "That one site that likes to be a thorn in your shoe has gotten screen caps of the tweets. They can't verify anything so it's up to people what to believe, but I can't seem to do anything about it but keep the more reputable gossips sites away from it. I can send a generic cease-and-desist to try and scare them but I doubt it will work. If you stop now, Tom, this might still dissipate, but if they get one more shot of whoever she is outside your place, it might be out of my hands. The sites more friendly to you are blowing it off to your handful of jealous, obsessive fangirls and dismissing it, but I don't know if it will stay that way if you keep antagonizing them."

In a momentary fit of frustration and confusion, it was Chris he wound up talking to.

The two were at Chris' place. Elsa was putting the kids to bed after kissing Daddy goodnight, and Tom watched them go with a strong pang of envy.

Would he ever be able to put his kids to bed at night? There would be times, he knew, when he could be home, but what kind of home would it be? Cosette would never consent to living together, and she wanted to slow the relationship down to a mere crawl (in his opinion). Beatrice could be five years old by the time she had both parents under one roof.

When he'd been with her the last week, in spite of the relief of tension between them after their talk, things had not been right. At first he thought it was because she was keeping him at a distance, but then he realized she kept wanting to talk about things that made him think too much about what he wasn't telling her.

And he simply didn't want to think about it.

When he didn't want to talk, his fallback had always been to go to physical activities. Lydia, for all the trouble it was, had been adventurous, ready to try different things, keep it fresh. She wasn't a relationship so she wasn't in danger of becoming a rut.

But she wasn't who he really wanted.

How many times had he been inches away from grabbing Cosette and kissing her? Touching her somewhere that he knew would get him slapped or shrieked at -- or worse, she wouldn't? He could clearly remember that week that led up to their one night together, how she let him get closer and closer. At least twice he had been utterly compelled to grab her as she walked past the couch and pull her onto his lap, but hadn't only because...well, she trusted him. The temptation served well as a distraction, but it only made the frustration worse.

He started to ramble about all of this to Chris. And Chris, who'd known him for some years now, seemed to have him figured out.

"Transference," the Aussie declared. At Tom's scowl, Chris chuckled. "Come on, mate, you're the one with the fancy degrees. You're transferring. You want Cosette but you can't have her, and for some reason...what's her name? Lisa?"

"Lydia," Tom muttered.
"She's available. So why not, you think. Like the old song, if you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with."

Tom pouted. "You almost sound like you approve."

Chris laughed. "I learned a long time ago when you were running around with Kat that you were gonna do what you were gonna do with the girls no matter what I said. I used to wish you'd settle down, but it only seems to have made things worse for you. Of course, you would pick a girl with a moral spine who doesn't tolerate you flirting with the entire female population. And half the male one. Your problem is that you want complete devotion from her and complete freedom for yourself. But I've told you that before. What was that you said to me one time? When you're auditioning, you hold back. You want them to know they have to take you on to get the whole package, the full commitment before you'll put out all the way."

"I said that in an interview, too," Tom grumbled.

"Well, believe it or not, it works in relationships, too. One of the things that can make some girls worth having is her having the same attitude, but toward sex. You want to take her home, Tom, you gotta buy the whole package. You don't get to take her for a ride like she's a car."

"You did, with Elsa."

"I said some girls. I picked different from you. Maybe you picked wrong. Pick a different girl. Because she isn't going to change, and neither are you."

Tom rested his head back on the back of the couch. "I didn't pick wrong. I'm sure of her the way I'm sure of roles I take on, but it's more--"

"It's the kid, Tom. The baby is messing you up. And a wife is not a role. She's not a part you can inhabit. Being a husband is completely different than anything you've ever, ever done before. And you sure as hell can't do it with a secret that big between you."

"I don't know what to do," Tom whispered. "If I tell Cosette, she'll just be justified in all of the things she was afraid of. And if I don't tell her I think I might go crazy with guilt."

"That's a good sign. At least you care enough about her to be worried. Believe it or not it's a step."

"I'm not a heartless cad!" Tom objected. "And I've never cheated on any girl before!"

"Of course not, you can't cheat when you never commit. You get bored too easily. Maybe you're bored with Cosette. Maybe you're just trying to make something work that can't. You're one of the most ambitious actors I've known, mate, and I used to worry that ambition would keep you from ever settling down, but it seems you're just redirecting it. You should just tell her and take the consequences. Before she finds out on her own."

8 8 8

(Eleven)

It was half way through September by the time Cosette worked up the nerve to invite Shelly over. The longer she had waited, the harder it had been, and the first email she'd send was tentative, hesitant, guarded. She was embarrassed, plain and simple, by her own behavior, but it just seemed that all those people from school...were from another life. And contacting them felt like going backwards, somehow.
Which made absolutely no sense, but there it was.

Shelly replied as if no time had passed at all. She didn't reproach or reprimand. And when Cosette told her the whole thing was so complicated, and that if Shelly really wanted to know, she could come by the house, she was there the very next afternoon.

And it really was as if no time had passed.

"You look beautiful," Shelly said to her.

Cosette didn't feel beautiful. Whatever glow she'd ever had was lost with the weariness and the stress and the loneliness.

Because she was lonely, desperately so.

Joseph had distracted her from it, but now Isaac was in his place, and while Isaac was easy going and sweet, she didn't have the same rapport with him, and he certainly wasn't as visible as Joseph had been.

Of course, now she knew why. Joseph liked her. Had she liked him? Maybe if she was a different version of herself...still that teacher, who knew who she was and what she wanted, maybe *that* Cosette would have been all in. But this Cosette, in her third trimester and struggling to figure out her relationship with the father of her child, this Cosette was secretly relieved she didn't have to decide.

Cosette and Shelly sat together for a long Saturday afternoon, in which Cosette told Shelly just about every detail of the last summer that she could remember. She told her about the trip to London, how Tom had wooed her, how she had found out about Tom's past relationships, and every single ugly detail of the fight that would come to mind. She did this without shame or any kind of defensiveness, simply stating facts. Shelly took it in with seriousness but not judgment.

"I have to tell you," Shelly said when Cosette was mostly done, "I've been watching a version of this on the internet." She sighed, deeply. "You know, after that day I overheard Tom in his trailer...I took a massive step back. I mean, I had the worst crush on him. Let's face it, I was plain out obsessed with him, and I couldn't shake it. He's so smart, and sweet, and charming, all those things you would associate with a dream guy, and I could only imagine what it would be like to be in close range with him and see him without the six feet of PR between you and him. But there's a darker side, too. I mean, he's got his share of crazy fangirls who are spreading some pretty horrendous lies, but let's face it, by normal standards, most celebrities are a bit crazy. Don't they have to be? And he gets all this attention, and has so many willing takers, and that can't lead to a moral lifestyle, and *you,* you've always been...I mean, I've admired you. I always felt I was the way I was because God hadn't given me too many choices. I could never attract a guy like Tom."

"You're too good for a guy like Tom," Cosette said without thinking. She looked hard at her fellow teacher. Shelly was innocent, but not naive. And looks were only looks. "Trust me, Shelly. Don't think God's short-changed you. He's preserved you. I was tempted and I failed. I'm not bewailing the consequences, but..."

"I know what you mean, Cosette." Shelly smiled at her. "So whatever's happened, you have my complete sympathy, whether you're right or wrong, I don't really care."

Cosette smiled at her, squeezed her hand. "I appreciate it. I could really use a friend right now."

"You have your family, you know," Shelly reminded her.
Cosette shrugged. "Yeah, but Mom fusses over me and I hate to even bring Tom up around Dad. Christina and Henry have been great but Christina has some notion about Tom and me that I'm not sure of, and Henry...Henry's probably been the best of them all, but I hate to talk to him too much, he's got enough on his plate planning his wedding with Christina, and he is a guy, they don't have the patience for all this jabber. I just need someone who isn't biased." Then she chuckled. "Of course, I am talking to the woman who made a playlist of about fifty of Tom's videos and send them to me."

Shelly shook her head. Her smile was rueful. "Well, that day did a lot to get me over him. But admittedly, knowing you were involved with him and then not hearing anything for so long, I kept following him on the internet just to see if I could catch something. I saw the pap pics, I saw you two at Wimbledon. He even tweeted that you were the love of his life."

Cosette shook her head, looked away. "Don't believe anything you see on the internet."

Shelly didn't laugh. "I'm worried about you, Cosette. All this up and down, back and forth. This can't be good for you." She seemed to hesitate. "My aunt, when she had my cousin, she had preeclampsia. Nobody knows what really causes it but she was getting a divorce from her husband at the time and the stress...I mean, it just adds to it, you know? And you're a bit red-cheeked right now. Are you watching your blood pressure?"

Cosette had to think. At her last visit, her doctor had told her to get a blood pressure machine and monitor it. She had just taken it as being typical concerns from an OBGYN, and had adopted a wait-and-see attitude. "I've got a monitor, I'm to keep a record for the next week to show her when I see her again."

"Okay, good. Look, people have been wondering about you. I've talked to Richard a few times but he only told me that they had to close your email account because the fans had gotten hold of it and were harassing you. I think Tom is right, you need to stay off the internet."

"Can you do me a favor?" Cosette asked. Shelly nodded, waited. "I remember you telling me that your brother worked for a magazine. You've got an eye for gossip stuff that's true and not true, right?"

"Yes," Shelly said, cautious.

"If there is anything that comes up, will you show me? I need someone. Tom's PR people are more interested in protecting him that keeping me appraised about anything and Tom just tells me not to worry and that he'll handle it. I need someone watching for me and I can't do it, there's so much I get overwhelmed."

"I don't know, Cosette," Shelly said. "It's not that I don't want to, but sometimes there's stuff...I mean, when he was dating Elizabeth Olsen, there was a picture taken by someone with a cell phone and it got on the web of the two of them together, and then there was a whole series of denials about them being together, but all these pictures...I mean, it's just confusing. I don't know how good of a judge I'd be over what you should know about and what's just gossip. I don't want to cause problems between you."

"It won't be you," Cosette assured her. "I want to know if something like that comes up. I mean, not him being pictured with a woman, big deal, Tom's always getting pictures done with someone else, but I mean something really ugly that might be strange enough to be true. Just so I can ask him about it."

Shelly seemed to consider for a long moment. "I'll keep my eyes open," she said. "But what do you
think there could be? I mean, do you think Tom would be unfaithful to you?"

He'd been so weird that week..."Do you remember Arlene Spencely?"

"The blogger? The one who wrote the article about why she won't date a guy who was 'willing' to
save sex for marriage? Yeah, I'm still subscribed to her."

Cosette felt a flood of affection for Shelly. She didn't give her enough credit. Shelly was probably
one of the only friends she had who took the whole chastity thing as seriously as she did. (Or as she
had, she thought bitterly.)

"That's Tom. He's been willing to wait. And every time I try to explain to him why that doesn't
work I come across as judgmental and argumentative. And we just fight. I'm not saying I think he'd
cheat, I just...I worry, you know? Especially because of how things are right now, and it's just not a
lifestyle he knows how to deal with."

"You don't trust him." It wasn't accusatory. It was almost gentle, an attempt to comfort.

"I want to, but he's just been so conditioned. Much as he wants to say he can handle us not having
sex, I just can't quite buy it...but trust isn't trust until it gets tested." She sighed again, deeply. "I
don't know. I'm such a mess in my head. Things are so unsettled, and I just...I need another pair of
eyes. If it gets icky you can tell me you don't want to do it anymore, but if you could, please, just
for a while."

"Okay, Cosette. I will."

8 8 8

(Ten)

He was supposed to be there for one more week, but wonder of wonders, his schedule closed up a
week early and Tom was heading out of Oz. Normally this would have made him sorry, but this
time he felt a strange sense of relief. After a week at home in London, he was heading back to
L.A., and he'd be away from Lydia, and it would be over, and he could pretend it hadn't happened.

If only she'd stop giving him those fucking puppy eyes.

He hadn't pegged Lydia for the type to get attached. She had been all over the idea of him coming
to her place, even though Tom only went two times; both times he extracted a promise from her
that she would not show up at his place in the middle of the night. He showed her the picture from
the website that Luke had sent him, showing her that they could be exposed, and then they would
both be in trouble. Studios may be willing to turn their heads to stars screwing the help, but if the
help got caught it was always worse for them. Unfair as Tom might have normally thought it, this
time it worked in his favor.

But the director's birthday party was at the end of the week, and the crew was taking the
opportunity to double dip, also bidding Tom a fond farewell, as he was always very popular and
everyone was always sad to see him go.

Of course Lydia would be there. As his driver, it was perfectly normal for her to join in on his
goodbye. And she showed up in that fucking grey hoodie she always wore.

He tried to avoid getting photographed together, but she practically chased him across the party and
there were so many cameras. He didn't put his arm around her, didn't touch her, but knew that a
picture was going to get taken of them in proximity.
The next morning, the picture was paired up with the two pictures of the mysterious grey hoodie outside of his place, in addition to a picture of his place in the daylight with him standing on the step, confirming it was, in fact, where he was staying Down Under, although the address was not reported. It was not a pap pic -- someone had gotten it on their cellular phone. It wasn't the first time the place he was staying had been staked out. Even his personal London address was common knowledge. But this was the first time it was a serious problem.

"I have to give them something else, Tom," Luke said. "It's getting too tempting to blow apart your facade, although I think enough of them like you and don't want to spread dirt on you, and that's working in your favor. But I have to throw something else out, something that might work in our favor in case your liaison does get out."

"What the hell could that be?" Tom demanded.

"Your fight with Cosette. That earlier picture, the one of you two outside the pub. We can tell them that you've had a falling out and that you're taking time apart while you're filming."

"She's going to suspect something if we let that out."

"That's why you can't tell her we let it out. You have to just let her think one of your friends or someone at the pub did it. Because if you do tell her you had to let it out, she's going to want to know what you're covering up. So you can't. It'll be fine, Tom, you're already fucking someone else, a lie about this isn't going to make it any worse."

"That's cold, Luke."

"I'm your friend, Tom, not your pastor, but it comes down to: you pay me and I do my job. Come on, you know what business I'm in, you think I haven't covered up worse? This is all about your relations with the public, the image you want them to see -- and a cheating scandal will scar you, trust me, unless we can make you sympathetic. And we're not slandering Cosette or anything, just showing there's cracks in the relationship. That way we can play the 'you were already broken up' card if it comes out and you won't be labeled as a cheating scumbag."

"To everyone except her!" Tom felt a shiver up his spine simultaneous with indignation at Luke's choice of words. He knew the people on his team were paid to protect him. And normally, he had no qualms of conscience about that. But it felt like this was just snowballing. He should just tell her. Just call her and tell her and come clean. Maybe she would understand! She had doubts about him already, legitimate concerns...

Not that he let her talk about them anymore.

Their conversations since his visit home had been less tense but no more lively. He covered up with saying he was busy with his hectic schedule, and now with him coming home early, it would totally back it up. So they had hardly spoken for more than five minutes at a time, mostly just checking in to make sure the other was still alive and well, and he had already put her off while he'd been visiting, so more delays were not a big surprise.

On his very last day in Australia, as he was waiting for Lydia to take him to the airport, Cosette called him.

"Your mother and I have been talking this week," she told him, "and she picked out this gorgeous crib for Beatrice. She's having it sent, it should get here by the time you arrive. If you're going to be around, would you consider putting it together? If not I can always talk to Henry, or maybe even pay someone to do it."
This was why he couldn't tell her. He couldn't risk their future. He couldn't gamble on Cosette's compassion, not when it had already bit him in the ass.

So he didn't tell her.

888

"I found something."

Cosette sat on her couch, Shelly beside her. It had barely been a week since their conversation and Shelly was already concerned.

"The only reason this struck me was because you told me about your fight," Shelly explained, showing Cosette the picture of them outside the pub. "You said Tom's friends were there that night? It sounds like one of them talked."

The blurb under the picture read a very unoriginal "Trouble In Paradise" line, but what followed got Cosette's attention.

"Looks like Tom Hiddleston and his baby mama are in rough waters. A friend close to the couple says that their time in London ended with a nasty fight. 'Tom was hanging out with his old friends, not really paying a lot of attention to her,' the source revealed. 'One of Tom's ex-girlfriends was there. Tom stays friends with everyone, you know? Guess she didn't like it so she stormed out of the bar.' Hiddleston followed and got his lady love into a cab, but their were some harsh words exchanged. 'We could hear some swearing.' What does this mean? Hiddleston has been a bachelor for so long, and while his list of women friends..."

Blah blah blah. Talk about Elizabeth, mostly, came after that. Cosette stopped reading.

"You think one of Tom's friends would have done this now?" Shelly asked. "I mean, it's been two months. If it had been a bystander it would have come out much sooner."

"Maybe one of them needed money," Cosette grumbled.

"Well..." Shelly mused. "I'm sorry, but there's been talk that Tom's own team leaked this because they're trying to cover up something else."

Cosette nearly dropped the phone. "They do that?" she asked, stunned.

"It could just be gossip, but its coming from people who I respect. At least, they're not online crazies. When all that stuff was going on with him and Lizzie Olsen there was a lot of tabloid crap like this. They were together, they weren't together, back and forth. Raised a lot of eyebrows."

"So what are you saying? What could it possibly benefit Tom to have his PR people leak the story about us fighting?"

"If they did leak it," Shelly said, "it was because something worse wasn't run. That's how it works. You'd be amazed, some of the stories I've heard from my brother. But they aren't public knowledge because these actors and actresses have PR companies that give something else over to keep the worst stuff from the headlines."

"You'd think the magazines would want the worst, it would sell more copies."

"Not really, they don't want to make the celebrities and their publicity agents outright hostile to them, then they wouldn't get any more interviews. And the smaller stuff usually sells enough to
make everyone happy. No such thing as bad publicity, as long as it isn't too bad. Look, I'm sorry, I feel like I've stirred the shit pot, but you wanted to know, and I've seen this before. I just wanted to give you a heads up."

8 8 8

"You know someone who works for a magazine?" Tom replied with a scowl, shaking his head. "And that means you believe them over me?"

He hated this. He hated lying. He was doing everything he could to step around it. He was good at keeping his mouth shut but he wasn't good at out and out misdirecting. To blatantly say something he knew wasn't true made his stomach churn.

Cosette's face was getting angrier. She had called him for a video chat, even though he was due to leave for Los Angeles in five days. Apparently it couldn't wait. Even though the international quality of the picture wasn't supreme, he could see every shadow on her face.

She hadn't danced around it. The second the call had connected she jumped right to it, asking him about the story from the pub, which of his friends might have done it, or did Luke let that story get out? Tom responded with a smooth, "Why on Earth would he do that?" and Cosette, quick as a fox, replied with her explanation.

"Who is this person you're listening to, anyway?" Tom demanded. "Not Christina--"

"No, a friend from work."

"You're talking to people from work now?"

"Don't change the subject, Tom." She tapped at the keys, the hollow clicking sound resonating over the line. "I was going to wait and talk to you about it when you got here but then this has been going around this website called Tumblr and they're talking about you getting late night booty calls while you were in Australia."

The link she'd sent came up and Tom clicked it, in spite of himself.

And there it was. The pictures of Lydia in her grey hoodie. One of her at night, one of his rented house to confirm the location, and one of them at the party together within spitting distance of each other. Maybe the official gossip sites hadn't gotten it but these people could always be relied on, couldn't they?

"So here's my theory," Cosette said, her voice sharp, fuming. "You and this girl are...I can't even say it. And somebody found out so Luke let the story about us fighting get out to keep this from becoming public."

"You," Tom declared, trying to sound imperious, "are getting hormonal again. You did this to me before, Cosette, you exploded on me and then you regretted it later. Are you sure you want to do this again?"

"That's not an answer," she said, suddenly calm.

"Why are you jumping to all these horrible conclusions?" Tom tried again. "You are determined to think the worst of me, aren't you? Maybe it's a good thing that article about our fight got out, that way it won't come as an absolute shock to the public when we break up!"

She stared at him, hard. "Tom," she said, so softly he almost didn't hear. "You're right. It's been an
awful week. I've started to have Braxton-Hicks contractions and I was in the hospital a few days ago getting checked out--"

"And you didn't call me!?” His voice was much louder than he intended, but anger made his ears burn. "You call me to tell me about some bullshit magazine gossip but not to tell me that you've been having early contractions?"

"I knew you'd freak out," she snapped. "And it was bad enough! But it's typical, especially for first time pregnancies. But yes, I've been on edge. This is all hitting me the wrong way, Tom. I need you to tell me." Her voice turned pleading. "I know it sounds crazy, but please, can't you just humor your pregnant, hormonal girlfriend in her third trimester? You're not doing anything with that girl, are you? I mean, it's just set craziness, right?"

Tom shook his head, rubbing his lips and chin in a nervous habit of tension.

"You've been weird lately," Cosette went on when he didn't answer soon enough. "And not just, we had a fight and things are tense between us, I mean, weird, off, like you're hiding something, and I have this bad feeling, and I just want you to be honest with me, you've always been honest with me. I understand if you want to break up and see someone else, I've been no picnic--"

"I don't want to break up," Tom said, although his tone was hardly tender or pleading.

"Then just tell me it's nothing. Tell me I have nothing to worry about."

"You don't have anything to worry about," he reassured her, softening. "I told you I didn't want you looking at that online stuff anyway. This is why!"

"So you didn't...you didn't sleep with her? Have sex with her?"

Time felt like it was slowing. Cosette was watching him through thousands of miles of distance, studying him with an intensity that was more frightening than anything he'd previously experienced. He wanted to say no. No, he'd never touched her. But every time he drew a breath his tongue felt like lead and wouldn't form the words.

Surprisingly, he also wanted to tell her that it was none of her business. She hadn't wanted to be in his bed again, she had shoved him away, she had railed at him for his previous escapades, she'd made her thoughts on things very clear. But she didn't want him to have anyone else, either? Who did she think she was? She wasn't his wife, she hardly felt like his girlfriend.

"Why it is taking you so long to answer?" Cosette asked. She had gone still, her eyes seeming bigger through the screen. He was grateful he wasn't in the room with her, those violet eyes could cut him to pieces at this moment.

"Cosette," Tom started, struggling for a truth, any truth, he could cling to. A truth that wouldn't destroy everything. "I have to say that I'm a bit surprised you're making such a thing out of this. You wanted distance between us. I know you don't think it counts as a break-up--"

"You did have sex with her." The words were plainly spoken. Blank. No inflection.

Tom's mouth hung open. "I didn't say that."

"And you aren't denying it, either. You son of a bitch." And the image of her face disappeared as the computer informed him that the call had been ended.
Nine Weeks Ago

Chapter Summary

Back to the beginning.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tom pulled up against the curb in front of the house. He was barely out the driver's door when Raymond came out at him from the front door like a shot.

Cosette's father was on the younger side of elderly, but he moved fast when he was pissed. To Tom's horror, he saw that Raymond was carrying a baseball bat.

"How fucking dare you show your fucking face here you little motherfucking whoredog!"

In the back of his mind, he suddenly realized where Cosette's bad habit of swearing a blue streak came from. He had no time to think anything else, his front brain was utterly preoccupied with the impending knowledge that Raymond was going to clock him with that bat and there was nothing he could do to protect himself without potentially hurting the older man.

Then suddenly Henry was there, somehow he had gotten between them. He could hear Christina's shriek of panic in the background, looked up to see her standing at the front door on the very top step, where (the back of Tom's brain was just not interested much in helping him at this moment) he and Cosette had sat that one night so many months ago, listening to the night sounds, his arms around her warm body, just peaceful and together.

"Get out of my fucking way!" Raymond roared, spittle flying from his lips. Although Henry was between them and there was still a few good feet of space, Tom was pushed back by the force of the man's rage.

"Mr. Mitchells, please," Tom started, but even to his own ears it was weak and pathetic. "I just want to talk to her."

"You leave my daughter alone!" The imperious tone almost made Tom back right up into the car. It was as loud as if he'd screamed into a microphone. It bounced off the street, the houses, the trees, and Tom could imagine it being heard blocks away. "She's suffered enough because of you!"

"Raymond," Henry pleaded, his voice strained. He had one hand on the bat, which Raymond was clutching till his tanned hands were white-knuckled, and the other wrapped around Raymond's wrist to keep him from wrenching away and going after Tom bare-handed. "You're going to give yourself a stroke!"

"Daddy, please calm down!" Christina begged. Tom glanced at the house. Where was Cosette? Or better yet, Isabella? She couldn't be thrilled to see her husband having this kind of fit so publically.

In a moment of madness, Tom dashed for the house. His only thought was to get to Cosette.

It had been two days since she'd hung up on him. None of his calls would go through. He called
every five minutes at first, until her phone sent him right to voice mail, and he was sure she had turned it off. Then he started calling on the half-hour, knowing she would turn it back on, eventually. Then every hour, but she did not answer. Eventually he was given a recording that his number had been blocked. And in the meantime, he had someone getting him an emergency flight to L.A. It was the very last seat and he had to rent his own car, but he preferred that -- he needed to be in control of *something.* He could hardly stand the wait at the rental counter, but they were highly efficient once he was being waited on, packed valet-style and sent on his way.

He'd gone straight to her house. And now he was nearly at her door, but Christina was in his way. She put her hand out, barking in a commanding tone almost like Cosette's teacher voice, "STOP!"

Tom nearly obeyed. "I have to talk to her," he pleaded, his voice cracking. He felt like a vein was going to give way, either his neck or forehead, both were throbbing with pressure. Christina must have seen it because she looked extremely apprehensive of him.

"You touch her!" came Henry's voice from behind him, "and I'll take this bat to you myself!"

Tom turned briefly, barely catching Henry making a panting Raymond sit down on the lawn, and turned back to see Christina leaning around him, face contorted in concern.

Then the screen door behind her swung open, and Christina vacated the space, going around Tom and down to her father. She gave Tom a rueful look as she passed, and Tom turned toward the person coming out the door, thinking for a moment that Cosette had finally had pity and was coming out to deal with him directly.

This was not Cosette.

The man was about his age, maybe a bit younger. He was Latino, with thick black curling hair that fell around his collar. His eyes were sharp, his jaw was chiseled, and while he was not quite the same height as Tom, he had a thicker build, and wide shoulders. He was dressed in a suit, and Tom had the awful, horrible feeling that he was there for Cosette.

Had she replaced him already? Righteous indignation followed that thought. How dare she---?

"Mr. Hiddleston," the man said. "Please calm down, or I shall be forced to physically escort you off the premises."

"I need to see Cosette," Tom said, finding himself unable to say anything else.

"She does not need, or want, to see you," the man replied very calmly. He had a soothing manner that made the threatening stance he took take just the right pitch. "So I suggest you be a gentleman and respect her wishes."

"Let him in, Isaac. Please," came her voice from the hall beyond. Isaac turned his head, and then looked back up at Tom. Tom had never been made to feel more like a criminal in that moment, the way Isaac eyed him.

"Yes, Miss Mitchells," Isaac said, turning and opening the door.

8 8 8

The moment Cosette had disconnected that call, she felt the weight of her world begin to tremble on her shoulders.

Disbelief. She had misunderstood him. Of course he was going to deny it, he didn't want to dignify
her outrageous accusation with a response.

But the more she played it back in her head, the more she was convinced. Tom had slept with that woman, whoever she was, and was just plain lying about it.

Why would he do that? The answer was quick. Because *she* wouldn't sleep with him. And worse, she had made it clear what she thought of his previous, unresolved habit of sleeping with everyone else. Ok, maybe not everyone, but certainly any mutual takers, which in his profession, had to be too many and too often.

This led to blaming herself. Crippling, almost narcissistic self-pity. She sat in her desk chair and just stared into space, as if encased in some invisible grip, unable to move, struggling to process her new reality.

Of course the phone was going off. She ignored it. It went to voice mail. It came back. Over and over, yet she tuned it out for a while, let it ring. It felt like somehow, she still had a chance. She could pick up that phone at any time and Tom could fix everything, explain everything away like he always did.

Why couldn't she pick up the phone?

His desperation, calling over and over again, seemed to provide some perverse kind of comfort. She was suffering, at least he was suffering too. Her brain offered up an analogy of suffering from a severed limb, and the limb itself was scrambling to try and reattach itself. Which was ridiculous, but her brain was off the rails at this point.

How long it took her to turn off the phone, she wasn't sure, but she had some idea it had been more than an hour from the way the clock hands above the kitchen sink had moved.

In a daze, she moved to the bedroom. She laid down, tried to shut her eyes. Her dreams were filled with Tom and other women, women from the past, from the present, from people she'd met during her time with him, women she didn't know, women who looked like that Lydia. She woke up feeling like she'd daydreamed the whole thing and not slept an actual wink, but her mother was in her bedroom, shaking her awake.

"Cosette?" Behind her mother, her father hovered. "What's going on, Cozy? You shut off your phone."

"She's alright," came a voice that was not completely unfamiliar to her. Which one, Fitz or Kyle, was on duty during the night? The sky was dark outside, what time was it anyway?

What exactly she said, she couldn't remember. She mumbled something. But her parents weren't about to just dismiss the fact that they'd been so worried about not being able to reach her that they'd come over and used their emergency key to let themselves in.

The next several hours were a bit of a blur. She tried to explain it to them but it sounded like horseshit to her own ears. Tom had cheated on her. Tom had been with another woman. How did she know? Did she have proof? Her mother was skeptical, but her father was all too ready to believe. Then her parents argued, asked Cosette to repeat things, and she was tired now, actually sleepy, and she got irritable and snapped at them.

They didn't want to leave her alone. Raymond busied himself with the crib Diana had sent, looking at the directions, not pulling out pieces but occupying himself with seeing if maybe he could at least help get the thing started. It was a way to distract himself from the jittering rage he felt.
Isabella made her something to eat but she didn't want it, just picked at it. Then from somewhere Christina appeared, trying to talk to her. It all felt like muffled noise.

Somewhere around that evening she became more aware of her surroundings. Someone had called her midwife, Rachel, worried about the shock Cosette seemed to be in. Henry had turned up at some point, too, and Cosette had the most bizarre feeling of tuning into her life as if it were a television show, already in progress.

"Well, that is bad news," Rachel said, having been told by someone that Cosette had just found out that Tom may have been cheating on her. "Stress isn't good for expectant mothers, to be sure. Your blood pressure isn't great right now. We have to do something to get you to calm down."

Cosette looked down at her arm. When had someone put a blood pressure cuff on her? She hated those damn things, how hard they squeezed. She had hardly felt this one.

"I am calm," Cosette said.

"Your demeanor is calm," Rachel told her. "But your body isn't. Your increased blood pressure has been a concern of mine for a while but this has ratcheted it up a notch."

Cosette watched as Rachel busied herself making some relaxing tea -- she was a sweet woman, middle-aged, with short dark hair sprinkled with gray, and gold-rimmed glasses. She had a soothing manner about her, but when she put the tea in front of Cosette, Cosette had to bite down the urge to fling it across the room.

"I don't want tea," Cosette said, her voice a dark, angry growl.

All three women in the room -- her sister, her mother, and her midwife -- all turned to look at her with the same expression of surprise. Christina caught it first, swiping forward to snatch the tea from in front of her, as if afraid of what Cosette might do.

"I have an idea," Henry said, walking into the kitchen. "Come on." He gently took Cosette's arm and brought her into the living room, where the recliner was set up with extra pillows. It was the beginning of October, and while Los Angeles was rarely ever actually cold, the temperatures were definitely lower, and Cosette kept a few throw blankets around in the living room. Henry made her sit down, and elevated her legs on the recliner's extension. He laid one of the throw blankets across Cosette's shoulders. Isabella and Rachel took up positions on either side of Cosette; Rachel, following Henry's implication, showed Isabella how to massage the pressure points on the back of Cosette's knees and heels of her feet. Then Henry lowered the lights and turned on the iPad he had sitting on the little table beside her. It made the soothing sound of thunderstorms and rain falling in tinkling patterns. Then, in a low, soothing voice, he instructed Cosette in breathing exercises. Which she did, much to her own surprise.

It took a while, but eventually, her blood pressure did return to a much lower rate. Rachel still wasn't too happy with it, but she was mostly reassured that Cosette would be fine, and instructed her to make an appointment with her doctor that week to discuss ways to treat the issue. It wasn't uncommon for pregnant women to develop blood pressure issues, and the danger of preeclampsia was real.

They had brought her out of the shock, but unfortunately, it was just enough to dissolve her into tears that didn't seem like they were ever going to stop. She would sob hard for several minutes, calm down enough into hiccupping sobs, to just dripping tears, and then would shift back into soft sobs, and then more hard choking one, like a parabola on repeat.
The fortunate part was that the effort needed to cry wore her out, and Cosette got a decent night's sleep, with Christina staying watch. Both wound up rising early, though, and Cosette was ravenously hungry, so Christina called Henry and asked him to bring them some breakfast burritos, which he did, and they sat around the table, both Henry and Christina trying to find a way to get Cosette to talk without getting her all upset again.

"Cozy," Christina cajoled, "when do you think you might want to turn your phone back on?"

"I hadn't thought about it. Maybe I should try." She got up, still holding her breakfast burrito in one hand -- bacon, eggs, potatoes, cheese, and avocado -- as she disappeared into the bedroom to get it.

No messages.

"That's not good," Henry murmured when she set it down to show him.

"He's probably on his way here," Cosette murmured.

"You think he'd do that?" Henry asked. Christina started to nod her head with emphasis, eyes wide.

"It's okay, I'll have one of the guys throw him out," Cosette sighed.

"Sweetie," Christina tried again, "are you 100% sure of this? I mean, you're going on a rumor on the internet--"

"I'm sure," Cosette breathed, meeting her sister's eyes.

Christina looked to Henry, as if for help. "Are you willing to consider the possibility that it's a giant misunderstanding?" he asked.

Cosette's answer was to get up, go to the living room, and bring back her lap-top. She opened the pages that Shelly had shown her, and put the lap-top in front of Henry. He read it quietly for a few minutes, scrolled through some other information, and sighed deeply.

"And when you directly confronted him about it, what exactly did he say?" Christina asked.

"He looked like a man caught with his pants down," Cosette replied, her voice starting to take on an edge. "A deer in headlights. He didn't deny it. He could have just said, of course not, that's ridiculous!"

"Maybe he was too shocked," Christina suggested.

"It is *not* like Tom to be speechless," Cosette said. "If it wasn't true, he would have been offended, he would have yelled at me for even considering such a thing. He would have been outraged. Instead he just looked...caught."

Christina and Henry exchanged looks. They were interrupted in their conversation by the kitchen door opening, and Isaac arriving for his shift, letting in Raymond and Isabella. They were chatting casually, friendly, and Isabella, with a smile, walked over to her oldest child and kissed her on the cheek.

"Glad to see you up and about," she said, then stepped aside to let Raymond through.

Cosette stood up and practically threw herself into her father's arms. Raymond hugged her tightly, avoiding squeezing the bump which had grown exponentially in the last two months. He stroked her back, her hair.
"How are you this morning, my little Cozy?" he said, his voice hoarse.

Cosette said nothing, just hugged her father.

"We're trying to sort things out," Henry said. "We're not completely sure about what's really happened. Maybe I should call Tom. Someone a bit more neutral, help mediate the situation?"

"Let the bastard rot," Raymond said, his hand going against Cosette's ear, as if to mute his words from her hearing. Cosette let out a sound that was either a giggle or a sob, even she wasn't sure.

"Dad, you've never liked Tom," Christina snapped defensively.

"And now I've got good reason." Cosette gently pulled away, and Raymond smoothed her dark, frizzy curls, which still had not been brushed that day. "I know you don't want to talk about this yet, Cozy, but I've called in a favor from a lawyer friend of mine."

"A lawyer?" Christina practically shouted. "Dad, what the hell?"

"Sir, I think that's a bit premature," Henry said, standing up.

"I tried to tell him," Isabella said. "We're not even completely sure what's actually happening right now."

"A lawyer?" Cosette echoed, curious.

"It's better to be prepared," Raymond interjected. "I just want to make sure that you and Beatrice are safe, Cozy."

"Safe from what?" Cosette asked, real fear starting to take shape on her expression.

"Tom has a lot of money, and I just want to make sure all the custody aspects of this situation are set in stone so he can't try to change them."

"You *do not* think," Christina did shout this time, standing up, "that he would try to take their daughter away from Cosette! You do not!"

"Everyone, please calm down!" Henry said, his voice booming out over everyone else's. It was rare for him to shout, so they all were a bit startled.

"Christina's right," Cosette whispered. "He wouldn't..."

"We have no idea what anyone would do," Raymond stated. "And my friend is exactly the right person for this. And he owes me big so we don't have to worry about expensive retainers. If we do, the leftover child support I know you aren't spending will help out. I just want to make sure he doesn't turn vengeful, Cosette. And California is known for being all about the mother's rights. Much as I don't like the fact that fathers have so few of them, in this case it works in our favor."

"Too soon," Isabella admonished him from where she was doing the dishes Cosette had never gotten to.

"It's not too soon," Raymond insisted. "You want to get in a custody battle with a man who lives on another continent, who has access to resources and certainly enough money to clog this thing up for years? We have to be proactive."

"I need to sit down," Cosette groaned. She slumped back into her chair. And just then, all of them heard a car pull up outside.
Raymond grabbed the baseball bat that Cosette kept by the back door and launched himself out the front the second he knew who was out there. Henry was after him like a shot. Christina followed, shouting unintelligibly. Isabella moved to stand beside her daughter, waiting to see what Cosette would do.

Tom was here.

As if in a trance, Cosette stood up and walked to the living room, watching through the ancient lace curtains her grandmother always had spread over the huge front window. Hearing the commotion, Isaac came into the hallway, and as soon as Tom had gotten free and made his way to the front step, he went out to put an end to the theatrics.

But Cosette knew. She couldn't turn him away. The fear was already planted. Tom would not take her child away from her, she wanted to believe that. It was easy to believe that Tom had slept with someone else -- the man had been conditioned for so long, she'd tried to tell him -- but it was not easy to think he would be so cruel. No, Tom would try to convince her that either he'd never slept with that or any woman, that it was all a misunderstanding, or else he would justify it somehow, and reel her back in, back under his wing...

No. It would not happen. A steely resolve made its way into her spine. She stepped into the archway that separated the hall from the living room and called to Isaac.

"It's okay. Let him in. Please."

Then she turned away, crossing the room, trying to get as far from him as she could. She had to speak to him, but it didn't mean she had to be near him. She didn't even want to look at him. She heard the screen door open and close, heard his footsteps, and kept her back to it all, eyes fixed on a spot on the wall behind the dining set.

"Cosette," Tom said, his voice a living thing on its own, reaching across the distance and sliding around her brain, around her heart, and wrenching it all over again.

That was when her mother stepped in. "Young man," Isabella said, her voice controlled, calm, "I think we are all in a rather nasty state at this moment. The absolute best thing for you to do is to clear the air. Tell the truth. Cosette believes you guilty of an infidelity. You need to clear your name, if it's untrue. It is the first thing you must do."

That was when Cosette turned around.

The look on Tom's face was an arrow through her chest. His mouth was slightly open, his brow furrowed in an expression of...dismay? This wasn't denial. This was him desperately trying to figure out what to say without lying, and also without admitting his guilt.

"Is it true, Tom?" she challenged him. "Tell me. You're very clear to tell me when I'm wrong. So tell me now. Have I just fucked everything up again? Or am I right?"

8 8 8

He couldn't say it. He could not say the words. They would not form in his mouth, like they would not form before.

Yes, I slept with that woman. Her name is Lydia. We had an affair throughout the entire shoot. But it's over now. And I thought we had broken up, hadn't we?

"SPEAK UP!" Cosette screamed, her face like something out of a horror movie. She had swelled
since he'd been gone, her cheeks rounder, everything about her rounder. Her breasts, already considerable before the pregnancy, jiggled with the force of her voice.

Isabella reached out for her daughter and gasped her arm. "Cozy, breathe," she instructed her.

Cosette shook off her mother's touch, but didn't take her eyes from him. They were piercing, hateful, enraged things. It had to hurt to make them flash like that, those had to be eyes she turned on a student who had gone too far and needed to be snapped back for their own sake.

"Cosette," he tried, "I'm...I'm sorry."

"It's true," she whispered, her voice the utter opposite in level and exactly the same venom.

"Y..yes..."

"Get out." Flat now. Toneless.

"You...please...let me explain."

She laughed, heartless. "Explain?"

"Yes, explain!" he cried, somewhere finding his natural defenses kicking in. "It happened during...that month before I came to visit. You and I...I mean, we weren't...you wanted to step back, and...and you know how we left things in London--"

"SO YOU FUCK SOMEONE ELSE." She hadn't quite shouted it. She had shot her voice across the room like a cannon, projecting it right into his eardrums and making them quiver.

Tom opened his mouth to speak again but words deserted him. He struggled, flailed, knowing they would come, they always came, words were his thing, he could make her see--

Cosette let out a long breath, her hands going to her hips. "I asked you, you know," she said, her voice suddenly conversational. "I asked you if you wanted to see someone else. You said you didn't. Why did you say you didn't when you obviously did?"

"Because I didn't want to be with her the way I was with you," Tom said, and knew instantly that it was vomit.

That dark eyebrow arched so high across her pale brow. "So you just wanted a friend to fuck, right? Some stress relief? Not a relationship." She rolled her eyes, turned her head again, long-suffering on her expression. "You are just un-fucking-believable, you know that?"

"Cosette," Isabella muttered, obviously irritated by her swearing.

"Then leave the room, mother, because more is coming!" Cosette snapped.

"Don't talk to your mother like that, Cozy," came Raymond's voice from behind. Tom turned and saw that Christina and Henry were moving Raymond through the hall and into the kitchen. Isaac, however, had planted himself in the living room about five feet behind Tom, hands folded in front of him, feet spread in a position that clearly showed he was ready to move at the slightest signal.

"Who is this guy?" Tom demanded, jerking his thumb at Isaac, turning back to Cosette.

"He's one of the security team," Cosette answered as if they weren't having the fight of their lives.

"Where's Joseph? I thought he was on day shift."
Cosette looked irritated. "Joseph isn't on my detail anymore."

"Did...did that happen because of me?"

"No, because of me," she bit out. "Don't change the fucking subject, Tom."

"Can *he* at least leave the room? This isn't his business," Tom tried, suddenly feeling intimidated.

"That's not going to happen, sir," Isaac said, still very calm.

"I pay you!" Tom barked. As if that would do any good. He knew Isaac would protect Cosette from anyone, including the man who paid him.

Isaac just looked at him, deadpan. Tom felt the irrational urge to punch him, but knew he would only bruise his hand and probably get punched much worse, from the look of Isaac's arms.

"Isaac," Cosette tried, "maybe--"

"Sorry, Miss," Isaac replied. "Company policy. In these circumstances I have to keep you in eyesight."

"Fucking hell," Tom grunted.

"Tom!" Cosette rejoined, but her voice had gotten surprisingly calmer. "You're just stalling! You were pissed at me, you felt hurt, blah blah blah, so in retaliation you decided to find a fuck buddy to keep you occupied. And you didn't tell me because you knew it would be over! Any chance we had to get back together would be shot. Right?"

"I...I shouldn't have slept with her, I know that," Tom said, taking a single step closer to her. "But before I came here during my break, you have to admit that things were pretty bad between us--"

"Yes, I know that!" Her tone was strong but she still seemed to be getting more rational. "But I told you, I told you when you first showed up, I told you that if you wanted to see someone else, to just tell me. Why didn't you tell me *then?*"

"Because I knew you'd be angry! And when you're angry," he went on, finding some footing in remembering how much she'd hurt him, how awful her words had been, "you're anything *but* understanding. I knew you would fly into a million pieces and I just couldn't handle it again!"

She jerked her head back, expression wide open in incredulous surprise. "And this is better?" she asked, tone matching her face. "I'd been a fuck lot less angry if you'd just told me when you came here last month! I gave you an out and you didn't take it and I cannot for the life of me figure out why!"

"I was ashamed," he murmured. "I was ashamed because it felt like all those awful things you said to me...like somehow I'd made them come true. I knew how she would see me."

She seemed to consider his words. "Well," she said, getting more serene. As if she'd come to peace with it. "I guess it is my fault, then."

"No!" Tom objected, loudly. "I did wrong. I did it. I...you don't understand, you've never quite understood...it was a mistake, but I didn't want it to ruin everything."

"A mistake. Was it *a* mistake, Tom? Or was it made over and over again?" She scowled at him,
folding her arms. "I mean, come on, since we're in the mood to confess our sins, let's have it all. Was it one time? A night you got drunk, depressed, gave in to temptation? Or was it more than that? Was it sober, something you two agreed on, because you were tired of being denied and you wanted some good old-fashioned stress relief?"

"Does it matter?" he quipped, tone caustic. "Your compassion for either is the same."

Her lips twitched. "Usually, a man would say, 'Baby, it was only once, she doesn't mean anything to me, you know I love you and only you.' It was a fair imitation of his voice and it made him wince. "But you aren't saying that. Just like you wouldn't admit to me over the videochat. When I'm wrong you're quite vocal. So when you sidestep like this, it makes me think the worst. So just tell me, Tom. How long was it going on?"

His teeth clenched. Stupid, stupid fucking words.

She stepped closer to him. "You can't tell me, can you? It's that bad. Probably the whole time. Maybe it's still going on, maybe she lives in London and now you two have a nice cozy arrangement--"

"No," he declared. "No, it is over."

She nodded. Still scowling. Her eyes raked over him, then drifted off.

"I don't love her," Tom said. "It was never like that."

She met his eyes again. "That makes it worse, Tom. So much worse. If you loved her, if you realized what I've been trying to tell you all along, that you'd rather be with someone who was more like you, if you were wanting a fresh start with someone new, I could understand that. I'd still be pissed, but it would...it would make sense, and I couldn't begrudge you that. Instead, you used her, whoever she is, like an object, a thing. And she let you, that much is probably true, people just use each other, that's what lust is. Mindless, animal sex, it sounds like such a good idea. And it does nothing but destroy. Slowly or quickly, that's all it does." Her voice was quavering, and Tom felt his guts rolling over themselves, hearing the tears about to emerge. Then, she turned her back to him. "Please leave," she said.

"We can still talk about this," he objected, taking another step as she moved away.

"We're done," she said, tossing him a defeated look over her shoulder. "There will be no more talking. I don't want to talk to you, to listen to you. Whatever it is, it doesn't matter. It's over."

"Time to go, Mr. Hiddleston," came Isaac's voice at his shoulder.

No. No it would not end like this!

"Please, Cosette--" he tried.

"Get out!" she ordered, tears glistening. "It's done, Tom! You, me, all of it!"

Tom's eyes fell. Cosette must have thought that he was looking at her pregnant belly because her next words fell like a judge's gavel.

"When she's born, we'll arrange custody. I'll send you updates through a mediator. Henry will probably do it." Back to calm again. Resigned. No quarter. "But I don't want to see you, Tom. Don't show your face here. If you want to fire my security, fine. If you want to cut off my child support, fine."
"I wouldn't--!"

Outraged choked him off. But Isaac was done with this scene, and he gently grasped Tom's shoulder.

"Please, Mr. Hiddleston."

Tom wanted to fight but knew he wouldn't win. He glared pure malice at Isaac as he was shown to the door. When he stepped outside, there were flashing blue and red lights.

Someone had called the police.

Chapter End Notes

So right now...that's it. That's all I got. Writer's block has been ugly and stress-related. I just can't seem to write over these last couple weeks. So I honestly don't know when the next update is coming. If I get a chapter finished, I'll post it, but no promises.
Chapter Summary

As both Tom and Cosette struggle to come to terms with recent events, Tom decides he has to make one last plea.

Chapter Notes

Yeah, I know, I didn't have anything. I had scraps a week ago. But sometimes it just comes together. I still don't know when the next chapter is coming, it's even less progressed than this one was. But I do hope I have at least a few more chapters in me before I either hiatus this fic or take the leap to the next stage.

In an irony Cosette would never forget, the police had been more concerned about Tom's safety than anyone else's. It had taken a full twenty minutes for Isaac (who had to flash his credentials as a bodyguard) and Henry (who had to help an exhausted and overwrought Raymond back out so he could explain what happened to the officers) to reassure the men that nobody had actually been assaulted and that tempers had just flared past their breaking points. Cosette knew that Tom would not want it reported that the source of the issue was an infidelity on his part for fear that it would somehow get to the press, so was not surprised when Tom mustered quickly and reassured them that it was fine, and apologize for the disturbance. He even signed an autograph for one of the cops, who recognized who he was.

But he had sat in his car for at least a half hour before driving off. Isaac watched him the entire time from the front window, occasionally walking out into the porch. Tom alternated between staring at the house, staring blankly out the windshield, and even, occasionally, putting his head down on the steering wheel. But eventually he'd started the car up and gone away, and that was the last she saw him. For a month.

October of that year would always be remembered as the month of tears. Cosette couldn't pretend to be puzzled by them, but she could be frustrated with them. Just when she thought she was fine, she was coping, they would come again. During a movie, when she was shopping, and sure as hell about anything and everything having to do with the impending labor, they would come. Sometimes a trickle, sometimes a sob, usually starting out small, growing in intensity until they ripped a chunk of her chest out, and then they would taper off, only to return in an hour, three, the next day.

Her blood pressure was now a real concern. The stress of the situation couldn't entirely be blamed. These issues happened, and causes were unknown. But the stress didn't help, and as soon as Rachel and her OBGYN knew about the situation between her and Tom, they both spoke to Tom at different times and stressed to him how important it was that she not be provoked at any cost. And by provoked, they meant approached or spoken to in any way, at any time, for any reason.

Of course, this meant that Luke had to be the one to approach her about the State Of Things.
Because, after all, they had gone through considerable trouble to introduce her to the world as Tom's Significant Other, and now dealing with the break-up was just as tricky. Cosette had a lot of power, although she didn't fully realize it. She could trash Tom to any tabloid that would listen -- and there were many, many that would -- and tell them that he cheated on her, and she'd kicked him to the curb. Of course, Tom would have to counter, or at the very least defend himself, and God-knew what he might say. Or what the public might believe -- he was pretty popular, and everyone always went on about what the "nice guy" he was.

So when Christina came to her a week after the big explosion in her front yard and told her that Luke had asked permission to call her, she hemmed and hawed for a few days, but finally agreed to talk to the man. After all, he wasn't the guy who had broken her heart. He just worked for him.

Luke had a surprisingly deep voice, and he was a few inches taller than Tom in the videos she'd seen of him. She'd only met him briefly while in London, which made her wonder how well the man could look out for her best interests when it came to publicizing their match. It took a while for it to sink in that Luke was actually only looking out for Tom, and Cosette was just a tag-on, but at the time Cosette was willing to trust Tom to protect her, and he had come through on that front. Now, she was on high alert.

"What can I help you with, Mr. Windsor?" she asked him curtly when her cellular phone went off and he identified himself.

"I hope I'm not catching you at a bad time, Miss Mitchells," he countered. Although his tone was sweet as pie. He was a publicity agent, after all, and smoothing ruffled feathers was his number-one skill. "Of course, to be fair, you could argue that all times are bad, right now."

"Yes, well, you would know."

"Miss Mitchells...Cosette...would it help at all if I agreed with your decision? That Tom absolutely deserves everything that happens to him?"

That made her do a double-take. "Depends on if you mean it."

"I mean it. I told him, not in so many words, that he was setting himself up, but, well...he is my friend. He's been loyal to me, and I am paid to deal with his public image, in spite of my distaste for his actions. I know that probably doesn't get me too many points in your eyes, but, well, it is the business."

"No, actually...no. I understand." There was a kind of integrity in that. As backwards as it was.

"And I am not in any way going to encourage you to change your mind, or defend him. I promise."

In spite of herself, Cosette felt herself relaxing. "All you're worried about is how it looks to the public."

"Honestly, do you really want the scandal? Wouldn't you rather keep things private? Tom's spoken about your moral integrity. This is as much for your benefit as it is for his."

"I didn't cheat on anyone."

"No, I don't mean that. I mean, the amount of gossip that will come from this. So many people may be scandalized. Aren't we supposed to keep things like this to ourselves?"

Cosette almost wanted to laugh. So he thought using her own principles against her was going to work. Sad part? It was.
"I'm not going to go running to the gossips, Luke," she assured him. "And no, I won't sign a PDA or whatever they're called."

"NDA," the Brit muttered.

"Whatever. My word is good enough. And I don't like being restricted. But I do want to know what you're going to run on our break-up and I would like approval of whatever story you're going to put out there."

"Well, I already let it leak about your fight," Luke said. "That was part of Tom trying to cover his tracks. I hope you're not too angry with me over that one, but once again, I was paid to do a job, and I had to protect him."

"And hide the truth from me."

"It wasn't up to me to tell you anything, Cosette," Luke said, and she could sense the sincerity in his tone. "That was on Tom. Once he did it, well...you see my problem? My hands were tied. What he did was wrong but it wasn't on me to expose it. I have to take his part, he's my client, but I don't have to agree with it."

Much as Cosette wanted to snarl something about the Nazi soldiers using the same excuse of "just following orders," she didn't. Luke was in a bad spot but he at least had the balls to own up to it. She had to respect that, considering the alternative. Besides, he wasn't about to quit working for a client who had been loyal to him in difficult times, just because of something "small change" like cheating. That was tiny in his industry. Cosette gave a shudder. Another reason to be well rid of Tom.

"Fine. Just email me the details."

"Have you spoken to Tom at all?"

"No, and I don't plan to, at least not until Beatrice is born. So you'd better get the story out there because the public is going to suspect something when there are no pictures of the happy family to post on the internet."

The story that had come out a week later was surprisingly low-key. Cosette and Tom's fight was verified, and the couple was simply "reported to have split over personal differences, but will maintain an amiable relationship in order to raise their child. They ask for privacy at this difficult time." It wasn't good enough for the gossip sites but nobody was going to tell what happened.

After that, anything important had come through Henry. Christina -- who sympathized with Tom, although she agreed that his cheating was utterly deplorable -- wanted to do it, but Cosette preferred Henry. That didn't stop Christina from talking to him, Cosette knew. What exactly they discussed, Christina hadn't thought to bring it up to her yet.

Soon it was a month. Time and distance had done nothing to help. Cosette still thought about him. More than she ever did when they were together. She felt the pangs; she would catch herself smiling at a memory, or something that Tom would find amusing or interesting, or she would just feel it swell in her chest, that emotion which she forbid herself to name. Every single time it just hurt.

And then she would hate herself.

She would hate herself for ever allowing him into her life, into her heart.
She would hate herself for sleeping with him, especially out of some sense of entitlement.

She would hate herself for not ultimately resisting his pleas for them to try to work things out as a couple, for trying a relationship, when she knew, she *knew* it was not ever going to work.

Then she would hate herself for exploding at him that awful evening. For pushing him away so hard. Even though her reasons had been valid, her approach had been disastrous.

She started to understand how drug abusers got pulled in. Something bad has its appeal and yet you lie to yourself and somehow convince yourself that it's good, or at least it's not as bad as it seems, it's just for fun.

Then came the regret. It was possibly even worse than the self-loathing. The regret took on the form of vain wishing, or seeing where she should have said no when she said yes. Simple moments in time change everything.

Meanwhile, she continued to grow. Beatrice was only a month away from coming out and birth plans were now a topic of discussion. But thinking about their little girl...it just made everything worse. Because she would have to be around Tom again. She wouldn't have a choice. She couldn't deny the man the right to be a father, it was his child! And she couldn't stay away, Beatrice would need her incessantly for the next full year, maybe two. So she had to suck it up. Which, right now, felt impossible.

Even Beatrice's movements, which were plentiful, and charting her growth, and the extremely detailed scans of her little face and body inside Cosette's womb, they were shared with Tom through Henry and Christina. Cosette couldn't share them with him. Any thought of Tom sent her blood pressure soaring. It was the only thing keeping him at bay, the threat to her health.

Because she knew he hadn't gone quietly.

Things were delivered to the house that she hadn't ordered. Sometimes it was her favorite foods, sometimes it was accessories for the room she was slowly putting together. Occasionally it was a piece of clothing. The items always came through her security. Usually Isaac, as he was on day shift and she interacted with him the most, had the responsibility of showing them to her. She had a hard time rejecting them -- for all of Tom's faults, his taste was always spot on. The clothes were pretty, and the food was hard to resist. She would always put the things for the baby in the room, letting them pile in the corner.

Isaac even told her that Tom had driven down the street, very slowly, a couple of times, usually while Cosette was coming back from some appointment and not paying attention as she was getting out of the car. When that happened, Henry would immediately call him and warn him off. But he never did this in Cosette's presence -- at least not after Tom called him during a gathering at Raymond and Isabella's house, and Cosette had hardly been able to resist throwing several loud, angry comments out so that he would overhear them. Whenever Tom was even within earshot she would find herself overcome by a tirade of furious words. Sometimes she could hardly remember what she said. She just knew it was ugly, and afterwards it would leave her feeling like she'd just thrown up.

But sometimes, in the most painful moments...she just missed him. And it was so much harder knowing that a single word from her would bring him back.

She told herself that it was only because of the baby. Tom wanted to know his child, to be with his child. Cosette herself was just a means to an end. How much could he actually love her if he was willing to degrade himself and another human being in a physical relationship, knowing full well
what Cosette would think of it when she found out, let alone how hurt she would be? Love honored. It didn't do *that.*

And, of course, there was the self-blame. If she hadn't been so awful, Tom would never have been driven to find relief elsewhere. That one was a particularly sharp thorn that dug deep. She could never talk herself out of it, so she would just shrug, tell herself it didn't matter, Tom was ultimately better off without her, and eventually he'd figure that out. She couldn't fix it, so she moved on.

Shelly approached her that week and told her that the staff wanted to know if they could throw her a baby shower. At first Cosette wanted to refuse but both her mother and Christina said that they had offered, all she had to do was accept. The baby wasn't a punishment. She deserved, in spite of all the trials of the last month, to enjoy one of the benefits of motherhood. And they were a bit desperate for her to be distracted from her own misery. Shelly promised that the other teachers were aware of the fact that she'd broken up with Tom, and were all deeply sympathetic. So Cosette agreed.

It was nerve wracking, going back to school, especially when she felt she was as big as a house. They arranged the shower to take place at the school on a day that the staff was having one of their in-services -- they set aside the afternoon for teachers to work in their classrooms, and decided to use the time instead for the shower. Which meant there would be no children, which Cosette was mildly relieved about. That way she wouldn't have to face students gawking at her to see what she'd become.

None of that, a voice inside her chided. She was blessed, not cursed. Beatrice was healthy, in spite of Cosette's borderline blood pressure. She had a beautiful nursery waiting for her with a fantastic crib gifted her by her wonderful grandmother, and in spite of Tom's shortcomings, Cosette was confident he would not neglect his daughter. She was due in five weeks, and she had to check in almost every other day, with appointments on a weekly basis.

Shelly drove her over to the school. Everyone greeted her with warm hugs, although Cosette was sure half these people couldn't really stand her. There was, however, a rather large pile of presents on the conference table, most of which she was sure were diapers, and of that she was extremely grateful. There were lots of sweets, and Cosette's favorite sandwiches from the deli around the corner, and because she couldn't drink, a lot of sparkling apple cider.

"When are you due, exactly?" Lisabeth asked her, one of the older teachers.

"December 18th," Cosette answered as she sipped her sparkling cider. She munched one of the white chocolate covered Oreo cookies that had been decorated with pink accents to celebrate that she was having a girl. Pink and purple streamers hung everywhere, and they had put a silver tiara with purple plastic gems in her hair. Even the guys humored the set-up, wearing the pink leys that were part of the experience.

"I gotta tell you," Amy said, one of the kindergarten aids that had had a baby the previous year, who Cosette often chatted with in the mornings in the carpool line while kids were being dropped off, "you looked pretty well kept." Amy held out a magazine, which she had folded so that Tom was pushed behind and only the picture of Cosette showed. It was from London, from that evening where Tom had bought her that lacy dress and she'd worn the amethyst choker, and the picture was from when they'd been leaving the dance club and had been caught by the paparazzi. It was a good picture, where she was smiling and bright-cheeked. "You still have that dress?"

Cosette tried not to visibly falter, but her face obviously fell. Shelly was at her side in an instant.

"She gave it away to some other expectant mother to enjoy," Shelly said, covering. "Don't show it
to her, she misses it!"

"Why did you give it away?" Amy cried. "You could have hung onto it a bit longer!"

Cosette gave a half hearted shrug. She didn't tell them that it had been one of the first things to go after that awful day. She'd sent it over to a crisis pregnancy center for them to find someone who would really need it and use it. Maybe they would loan it out, as it was very nice, and really only good for a certain period of time. She only kept the choker because she planned to give it to Beatrice one day. How she was going to explain that, she wasn't sure, but she knew she had time. Maybe by then she'd be able to cherish those memories.

"It had to go," Cosette said quietly.

Shelly gave Amy a dirty look, and Amy looked mildly abashed, but it was a single dip in a rather enjoyable afternoon. Everyone hugged her at some point, and asked her when she was planning on returning. The very thought of her *not* coming back horrified them, and she was bolstered on all sides with reasons and anecdotes of why she should return the following year.

She left with an armful of gifts and the first glimmer of hope she'd felt in some time.

8 8 8

Tom was in hell.

The only thing keeping him going from day to day was knowing that each day brought them closer to Beatrice's birthday. That day, things would change. But until then, there was only this.

Silence.

Henry kept him up to date on everything. Reporting facts, impersonal and objective. Tom had suggested emailing Cosette, but Henry said he would have to read it first, and Tom wasn't sure he could handle that. It took a month before he was desperate enough to try it. Then Cosette wouldn't open the email because even the thought of it sent her cheeks flaming red and tight.

When he had walked out of her house, he'd felt like he was being dragged to the gallows. He didn't even care that two police officers were standing at the end of the driveway, blocking his car. They had been called because a neighbor reported a domestic disturbance, namely, an older man going at Tom with a bat and another man defending him. Isaac talked to them -- Tom could barely get three words out, his head was in such a state. Henry brought out Raymond -- who did NOT want the cops in Cosette's house, upsetting her more than she already was, he said -- to confirm the story, and blamed it on his own over protectiveness and explosive temper, but he'd never done it before and would not do it again. The police officers seemed a bit skeptical, but then one of them recognized Tom as Loki and asked for an autograph for his son (and said his wife was a big fan, too), and the matter was forgotten.

His life started going into a tailspin.

He had no commitments until the following March. He'd kept all that time free because he'd wanted to be with Cosette as much as possible. He knew she'd get tense, thinking about giving birth. It was a natural tension for women, as it was a rather painful experience, and he wanted to know how she wanted to handle it.

The talk about her blood pressure irked him to no end -- mostly with himself. He should have recognized that. Things had been fine but after London she'd started to talk about it in their conversations, but he'd known she was holding back the seriousness of the situation and he'd been
too self-absorbed to pursue it. Which wasn't like him. He should have hounded her into telling him
everything, even let him talk to her doctor. He liked Dr. Ivery, and had spoken to Rachel, the
midwife, a few times during Cosette's appointments. He should have been more involved. But he'd
thought there was time -- and work for him was always such a priority, absorbing nearly all his
attention and effort. He'd wanted to savor that time before it took him away, and use it to establish
his emotional connection to Cosette.

That had worked out great.

So now his only occupation was the gigantic hole in his chest. Sure, there were still scripts to
pursue -- his agents always had things for him. He had always been an avid reader, and
cinemaphile. He had occupations, things to pursue, to practice, to perfect.

He could have cared less about any of it.

He couldn't let himself drink too much -- the knowledge that the phone could go off at any time
with a problem about the baby kept him from wanting to disappear into oblivion. He ran much
more than he usually did, just trying to keep himself in motion, keep himself from entropy, and it
was a good way to vent some of the frustration, but the second he was done, it would just come
back. Books didn't interest him. He was ambitious enough to stick with his perusal of scripts but he
felt lackluster in determining which role he wanted next. He'd already done his share of dark things
-- maybe he needed to go darker. Maybe he needed to really let himself take on that genuinely
unlikable character and see what he could do with it.

When it would get to be too much, he would drive down her street. Christina kept him apprised of
Cosette's doctor appointments, so he was careful about when he would take this little jaunt. He
wanted to time it so that he could see her when she was getting out of the car, distracted by
whatever had happened at the appointment -- how he wanted to just be able to ask her himself! But
that eagle-eyed watch-dog Isaac would always spot him and he would get a call from Henry. Henry
was nice enough about it, but very firm and clear.

It was creepy, he knew it. He started to understand how some people were driven to stalking.

He didn't have the heart to remove her security. He worried, more than ever, now that the news
was out, she would be threatened. The internet was divided in its judgment, some of them
lamenting how sad it was that it hadn't worked out, they'd been such a beautiful couple. And of
course, the crazy fangirls who insisted Cosette had never been good enough to him, done nothing
for his career, and of course couldn't withstand the lifestyle required of an "actor's SO." Then there
was the small group that suspected that maybe Tom wasn't the prince his image painted him to be,
those who smelled the truth like bloodhounds, knowing he'd done something, but they weren't
quite sure what. Although "fucking the tart in the grey hoodie" was a phrase he heard more than
once. Those were the kind who had missed their calling as detectives, and he didn't want one of
them to cross the line and try to find out the truth.

But when November started, he couldn't stand it any more. It had been a month -- four weeks of
allowing Cosette to cool off and process. This was getting ridiculous -- she was carrying his child
and near to giving birth; they had to have a bloody conversation about so many things! And unless
they could make peace with each other, it was going to make the upcoming chaos that much more
difficult, and he simply couldn't abide that thought!

So on a bright and clear November day, before the rainy season began in Los Angeles and it was
still warm, as it usually was, Tom drove to her house and parked on the curb, making no secret of
his arrival. Isaac was out on the step before Tom was fully out of the driver's seat.
"Mr. Hiddleston," he was greeted. "What brings you by, unexpected?"

"I would like to speak to Cosette," Tom declared in his most polite tone. "I'm no physical threat to her, and I do, after all, make it possible for her to be kept safe. I don't think a few minutes of her time is that much to ask, is it?"

"And the fact that speaking to you upsets her and raises her blood pressure doesn't concern you?"

"I'm not here to upset her," Tom said.

"Your presence upsets her," Isaac stressed, but still kept his tone calm, professional.

"It's been a month," Tom returned. "Surely she can manage for fifteen minutes?"

Isaac stared at him for a long moment, and then slowly turned back into the house. There was a bit of murmuring, and then the door was opened. "Come on in, Mr. Hiddleston."

He was escorted into the kitchen. Cosette was sitting at the little table, squeezing a stress ball. Her eyes were hard, her expression cold when he entered the room. Isaac walked past her and leaned against the far counter, watching the situation carefully. Tom knew he wouldn't interfere unless directly asked, and since he was no physical threat to Cosette, Tom would not give him cause to act on his own.

He was not invited to sit. He didn't think he could sit even if he was. She was so hostile to him, but he saw something else in her expression. The pain was clear, but the last month had done its work of letting time create distance. Now he felt oddly awkward, as if he were speaking to a stranger. He looked around and saw a pile of baby things on the table.

"I see you've been shopping," Tom said.

"No, there was a baby shower for me," she answered, words stiff.

He raised his eyebrows. "I didn't know you'd had your shower."

"It was from the people I worked with, at the school," she sighed, strained.

"You haven't had a shower for family and friends yet? There are people I know who have things they'd like to send--"

"What do you want, Tom?" she asked plainly, ending the extraneous conversation.

"I want to talk to you," he said after a brief pause to regroup, keeping his tone gentle, but not too pleading. Repentant, but not groveling. He'd work his way to that if he had to, but she was far too hardened for him to start that way. He had to find a crack and work his way into it.

"What I've done is awful," he started. "I make no excuse. I was wrong to do it, and wrong not to tell you. I was wrong not to confess my sin. I deceived you, that is absolutely true, and worse, I betrayed you, no matter what state our relationship was in at the time. You are right on every level and I have absolutely no defense."

"Yet you're about to make one," she said, and Tom saw amusement there. Reluctant, yes, and possibly even sarcastic, but definitely amused.

"I do ask for you to consider something, yes. Until that day, I want to know, had I ever done anything to upset you? Anything in any other way to hurt you?"
Incredulity colored her features. "Is your defense that you only did this *once?*"

"In a sense, yes," he stressed, then extended his hands as her breathing started to turn shallow, her grip on that stress ball so tight her fingers turned white. "People that are in bad relationships usually follow a pattern that leads into something big, something traumatic. But until that night in London, everything between us was fine. Everything was good. I was a good partner for you, and you for me."

"So it's my fault," she snapped.

"No, not at all. But all of those behaviors you were angry at me about were...past behaviors, Cosette. I know you were concerned about my past affecting our future, and it was a valid concern, but until then, until that day, was anything about our relationship unsatisfactory to you?"

Her teeth were pressed together tightly when she replied. "No."

He felt a tiny tremor of triumph. His lips almost quirked into a smile but he made them stay flat. "So I ask you to realize that this event, unfortunate as it is, and also entirely my fault, is not going to be repeated. Ever. I can make it up, I can do whatever you want."

"I don't want anything from you," she said. "I don't even want your damn money."

"But you need it," he said, the words jumping from his mouth on impulse and now unable to go back in it. "You've avoided touching it as much as possible but you know that once the school year begins you will need it to support yourself and Beatrice. Which is fine. And no, before you think it, I am not threatening to take it away. Regardless of our circumstances that money stays where it is. I will support you and our child no matter what. Which I should like to believe is a point in my favor. And I have not removed your security, in spite of their determination to keep me away. Another point, I desperately hope."

She just looked at him angrily for a few moments before turning her face toward the wall across the table.

Tom went on. "Reasonably, and I know you are a reasonable person, you always have been, you know that I am not some slime who is going to run you around and desert you. I know I have much to atone for. I am asking for that chance. That chance to atone and try again. I don't think it's unreasonable. Couples can and do recover from things like this. I am willing to work on it however you want, whatever you think is best. But I strongly ask you -- I beg you -- please don't chuck this into the bin. It will not happen again. I'm so sure that it won't that if by some astronomical prospect it does, I will give you whatever you want and never ask for another chance again."

She emitted a harsh sounding "Ha!" before looking back at him. "And where will we be when that happens? Ten years married, with two more children depending on you? Needing you to be a good father? You say this now, Tom, but who knows what stressors, what disappointments are in the future, things that will sway you? You cannot make that prediction."

"I will put it in writing if I need to," he said.

"And find some loophole to wiggle through when it comes." Suddenly she looked tired. The hardness vanished, the coldness melted but under a warmth that was not favorable to him. Cosette was a passionate person, but despair was as strong an emotion as joy. "I just don't trust you, Tom. I don't. I won't. I can't. One horrible mistake is enough to destroy everything and it's happened. It can't be reversed and it can't be crossed over."
Tears started to fill his eyes. Frustration, yes, but anguish as well.

"We need each other, Cosette," Tom pleaded. "I need you and you know you need me. You said you loved me and I know that sort of feeling isn't switched off easily. You and I are bound together, a bond that we cannot possibly break. Is it so much to ask for a second chance?"

"This *was* your second chance, Tom," Cosette said.

"That isn't fair!" he cried. "You were the one who pushed me out! I wanted to stay! If you had talked to me that morning instead of shoving me out the door, I would have understood we were moving too fast, and --"

"And waited a few more months before getting me into bed again," Cosette finished for him.

He shook his head. "You've painted me a villain and it's not right. It's not *just,* Cosette. For you I would do anything. I swear I'm not blaming you for what I did but when I thought we were done, that you had given up on me, when you told me I was broken, I was so lost. I was broken, then, and I acted in a broken away. Can't I be forgiven for a mistake? You yourself know how mistakes happen, things you would never, ever do under normal circumstances. You have vowed to yourself that you won't let it happen again and have taken every precaution. How can you not give me the same chance you've afforded yourself? The same opportunity to avoid an unlikely reaction?"

"Unlikely? You know you're no prude when it comes to--"

"I have never cheated on anyone before in my life, not when I was in a committed relationship. And at the time of my crime, we were not committed! Or at least, I didn't feel that we were."

She shut her eyes, letting out her breath. Her face contorted, squeezed in on itself.

He waited. Seconds ticked past as she struggled with herself. Had he found that crack? Bringing up her own fall from grace, something so out of her character, may have done it but she was still so divided, and the half against him was winning. She grimaced, letting go of the stress ball she had squeezed into distortion and finally putting her head in her hands.

"It doesn't have to be right now, today, this minute," Tom said softly after a few more moments passed. "And I'm not saying we're going to be what we were, not overnight. I'm not expecting that. But I need to be in your life again, Cosette, not just the father to your child with some stranger passing her between us like an object. I will be anything and everything your heart desires. I am yours, completely and absolutely."

"And you'll do everything I say?" she asked, voice muffled by her hands.

"Yes," he replied.

She put her hands down, eyes red from repressed tears. "Stop," she said. "Stop trying to manipulate my feelings. Stop trying to force me to give in to what you want! Yes, I chucked you out that morning, and yes, my behavior was a one-off, but I knew what caused it, and I did what I had to in order to make sure it wouldn't happen again. The fact that I was in love with you, and that I was pregnant with your child, were what made me decide to give you a second chance in my life. So yes, Tom, it was your second chance, because the first time, you didn't respect me enough to stop me from doing something you knew I shouldn't have done. No, I don't blame you for it," she stopped him when he opened his mouth, "but you knew perfectly bloody well what you wanted from me at that time. You tell me you love me, and I believe you, but I don't know what you *mean* by that word, not anymore. And now? Now that this has happened? I can't, Tom. I can't
and I won't. No. My answer is no. So please, please leave."

He stared at her, slack jawed and stunned. Then he started to flounder, stuttering, tripping over his own words.

She picked up the stress ball and threw it at him. Not to hit him, as it scattered off to the side, bouncing off a kitchen cabinet. "LEAVE!" she demanded, her voice an avalanche of stone.

Isaac stepped forward, invisible in the background until that moment. "Goodbye, Mr. Hiddleston," he said.

Tom looked from Isaac to Cosette's angry face. It was back -- that wall she had up. She'd let him speak his peace. And nothing he'd said had mattered to her one damn bit.

So he left.
Four Hours Ago

Chapter Summary

Cosette goes into labor. No more running away from the elephant in the room.

She laid in the hospital bed, staring across at the wall. Dull hospital walls, seeing so much but showing nothing. They had injected her with whatever it was that was going to make her go into labor a few hours ago, and warned her that it could happen very slow or very fast. So far, she'd dilated two centimeters, and hadn't moved at all since.

She wasn't alone. There was a nurse named Ellen with her monitoring her the entire time. Her blood pressure had gotten to levels that worried her doctor enough that even though she was still ten days away from her due date, on December 8th instead of the 18th, they said it was time for Beatrice to be born. Period.

Cosette waited. That's what it was now, a waiting game. They encouraged her to rest, but even though she felt exhausted her mind was spinning hard. The cavalry was on the way -- her mother had gotten the first call and had altered everyone else. She hadn't expected to get checked into the hospital. She'd gone for her regular appointment and then boom -- go get admitted this minute, young lady. They didn't do anything drastic such as take her in an ambulance, but they told her to have her stuff brought to her, because it might be a long night.

A change of clothes and her phone charger were really all she needed right now. She needed a distraction. Her parents, her sister, and almost-brother-in-law would all take turns providing it but it probably wouldn't be the distraction she wanted.

And then there was Tom. Tom, who had just returned from his week in London and was spending a lot of time working on his next project with Harvey Weinstein -- according to Christina. He was in the traffic jam that always happened around five o'clock and could potentially take three hours to get here, and Henry told her that Christina was getting calls from him nearly every twenty minutes. He was told to cool his jets, Cosette was barely at two centimeters and could stay that way for hours, they would call him with any drastic changes.

So in lieu of no distraction, because the nurse had to keep her attention on her equipment, Cosette only had her own thoughts to haunt her.

Those thoughts turned to the conversation she'd had with Father Francis a few weeks ago. A conversation that started with her talking for almost forty-five minutes straight.

Cosette's throat had hurt. It was raw, and when she swallowed it burned. She sipped at the bottle of water -- what was left of it -- as she glanced at the clock and realized the time. It seemed an incredible amount of time to maintain a monologue, but considering what she'd been talking about, the past eleven months of her life, from the very beginning, when Henry and Christina had announced their engagement at Christmas, and her fear and anger and hurt and worry, to meeting Tom and their affair, and all the things that had happened since -- it was a small amount of time to contain so much. Forty-five little minutes to hold all of that conflict and passion.

Father Francis had listened patiently. He rarely interrupted, except to clarify. He scribbled a few
notes, she saw, but that was just his way of keeping track of things. He didn't write anything down that wasn't a fact -- he kept her private feelings off his notepad.

It was different than when she'd gone to confession, after that morning she'd kicked Tom out. She just told the priest, blankly, what she'd done. She'd had sex with a man she wasn't married to. It was her first time ever doing such a thing. She said she spent the entire night with him and that they did multiple things, multiple times, but she didn't want to go into graphic detail -- it wasn't necessary. But this was the first time she confessed her reasons for doing so to someone who wasn't family. The first time she put the connection together, and told the story whole and entire.

Francis was an old friend. He'd come to her parish when he was just out of seminary, and was the first priest she knew who was a year younger than her. It wasn't common practice to let a brand new priest stay indefinitely at their first assignment, just long enough to cut his teeth and then he was put somewhere else. But the two had stayed in touch. He had been her spiritual advisor for a brief time, after he'd gotten settled at his second assignment, but she'd fallen out of practice going to him, so he was a bit surprised when she called him a week ago.

A week after Tom's final plea. And then he was gone. Back to London.

Cosette felt strangely sad about him leaving. Even after she rejected his appeal to be given another chance, it felt sort of like a desertion. Which was utterly ridiculous, she knew, but after all, she still carried his child, and she was due at any time. Dr. Ivery had been eyeing her during their appointments and had told her that first time pregnancies were notoriously late, but in her case, inducing labor might be a possibility they had to consider. Cosette wanted to wait as long as possible, so now her blood pressure checks were daily with Dr. Ivery's nurse, and she was instructed to turn in her own blood pressure checks she did at home in the evening through email.

She wished she could somehow shut off her feelings for him, and simply allow him to be near her again. She wished this pain and rage would recede, but it didn't. It continued to throb until she could no longer bear it, and had called Fr. Francis to help her. He hadn't been available for another week, but when Tom's mother, Diana, had attempted to call her, she pretty much camped out on Fr. Francis' door and waited for his advice before she called the woman back.

So now she sat here, at the end of her tale, thinking how absurd it all sounded, and she had lived it!

"All right," Fr. Francis sighed. "What I'm about to tell you, you aren't going to like. But I don't want you to take it as a judgment."

She looked at him expectantly, but her stomach shrank. Beatrice felt it, shifting awkwardly from where she'd made herself comfy at the very base of her belly.

"You said a lot of difficult things to Tom, a lot of brutal truths that maybe he needed to hear. And you know, from your own admission, that you didn't do it in the best way, so I don't want you to think I'm giving you a brutal truth to show you how it feels. But it is going to feel like that. Are you ready?"

She was wincing already, but she nodded.

"What you did was worse than what Tom did."

She felt her breath turn shallow. It wasn't like this was some big secret, but hearing it from a mouth she trusted was much worse. Until then, all she'd heard was defense of her actions, from her parents, from Shelly, and even from Henry. Only Christina had been at all critical of her, and it was easy to dismiss her because she was her younger sister, after all, and what did she know? But
Cosette wasn't completely self-delusional.

"Let me explain," Francis continued. "You knew better. You knew the right and wrong thing to do. Tom has, unfortunately, been programmed all his life to behave in a certain way. He was shipped off to boarding schools at a young age, which means the examples of discipline he received were more from school personnel than parents, and the example of his own parents' divorce of course would make him cynical about adult relationships. So he never had the upbringing and perspective someone like you has. He never had anyone to go against the grain like you did. So he is simply not as culpable for his actions as you are. You, however, had full knowledge. Do you understand?"

She nodded, feebly.

"Okay, so here's the good news. You remember the parable about the servant who owed his master money? He couldn't pay it so the master was going to sell him, his wife, his kids, into slavery to pay it all back. And the servant begged to be given more time, and the master felt pity and absolved his debt and let him go. So what does this guy do? He runs into a guy who owes him a fraction of what he owed, and shakes him down for his money. This does not go down well with his master."

"So I'm the first servant?"

"In a way, yes. Your offense was worse, Cosette, because of what you knew and believed. But what Tom did was a fraction of what you did. Still wrong, yes, but not on the same level."

"Which one, sleeping with me, or cheating on me?"

"In a way, they aren't different. I mean, sex is comfort for Tom. He was sharing something with you that he errantly thought was good. And when you hurt him, he needed that comfort again. He needed a way to soothe himself. And in his mind, it doesn't compute as wrong. Not the way you or I perceive wrong. Like I said, a fraction."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"You know what you're supposed to do, Cosette. You've asked forgiveness. You've fallen once but you know perfectly well you're capable of falling again. What would you do if you did? You would ask forgiveness again, and you'd receive it. It happens in this world all the time. But now you're in the position of having to give that which you've received. Don't be that first servant. You have to have more compassion for Tom."

She scowled. "I've...I've tried. But I just..." She stretched her arms out on the table before her, where she and the priest sat together in the little conference room off his office. She laid her head in her hands, feeling tears starting to burn her eyes. "I still love him," she whispered. "I love him and when I'm with him I'm just...I'm so hurt. It hurts so much, and I'm so afraid to let down my guard, and that hurts even more. Being around him is just pain because of the way I feel. I mean, I can forgive him in theory, but...but the reality is so much harder."

Francis nodded. "I know. I understand. But you've been punishing yourself for what you did for a long time, and none of it has done any good -- in fact, it's only made everything worse. This is a new way to atone. Enduring that pain, knowing what it is, and realizing the power it has over you, how you can dictate your behavior as a reaction, that may be the real penance you're called to."

She shook her head. "I don't know. I can't find it in myself to give him another chance."

"I'm not saying that," Francis corrected her. "I'm not saying give him another chance. You don't
have to return to a romantic relationship with him. You don't have to give him the opportunity to hurt you or sin again. But you do have to help him because he is the father of your child, and you have a responsibility to him."

She groaned. Tom made it damn near impossible to be around him and not at least *want* him closer. It was that clash she fought against. Push and pull, all the time. Her poor frayed nerves couldn't bear the thought.

"That's the reason you snipe at him when he is around," Francis said, as if reading her thoughts. "Because you blame him for making it impossible for you to keep him close, and yet you desperately want to. I've only heard about this guy today and I can see, quite plainly, the hold he has on you. You have to give up the fight. You have to surrender, Cosette. You'll only find peace when you do."

"But not to him," she muttered.

"Of course not. To God."

Those last words had echoed in her head many times. So many pieces of his wisdom had followed her around these last two weeks. She had to forgive Tom. She had to. What she'd been given, she had to return. God's eternal "pay it forward." Plus, the stability of Beatrice's home was at stake. Even if Cosette could never trust Tom with her heart again in a romantic sense, the friendship between them had to be restored. And she had to initiate it. It was the only way.

It sucked, but somebody had to do it. She just didn't want it to be her at the moment.

The pain of labor and the hormones they'd injected her with were causing her mind to rebel. She knew she had to surrender but there was something like a stone in her chest, something hard in her way that wouldn't give no matter how she pushed on it. Maybe it wasn't a stone, maybe it was an empty place. A vacuum. She wished she knew.

"Are you okay?"

She wasn't used to Ellen's voice and gave a little start.

"You're crying, dear," Ellen said, handing her a few tissues. "Are you in pain?"

Cosette shook her head. She was in pain but nothing more than what they'd told her to expect, the low ache of muscles wanting to contract but not being ready. She took the tissues and wiped at her cheeks, not surprised to find moisture there.

"It's normal to experience a lot of highs and lows at this time," Ellen reassured her. "Is there someone who's coming to be with you? Maybe we could call them and urge them to hurry."

Her parents were coming. "Traffic," Cosette muttered. "It'll take a while." She sniffled, the urge to sob starting to press on her chest.

She had to forgive Tom. But the very thought of him made her feel so alone. He was only in this for the child, not for her. Yet she had to forgive him. She had to be compassionate to him. She had to show him a good example.

When she had been nothing but the worst example.

Fr. Francis was right. What Cosette had done was so much worse. She understood things so much better than he did and yet she still had given in to what she wanted rather than what was right. How
could she expect anything else from him or anyone for that matter? The pleasures of the flesh, particularly Tom's flesh, were so powerful in their pull. She wished for a moment that he was here, with those strong arms of his around her, his hands caressing her, soothing her during her labor.

If she would let him, he would. He would feed her ice chips and hold her hand and massage her shoulders. He would scurry around and charm the nurses and doctors, getting them to do anything and everything to make Cosette more comfortable--

Something ripped through her and she gave a little gasp.

"Press that lever right there," Ellen instructed. "For the pain. You can control your dose."

Cosette obeyed. The contractions were still so far apart, but when they came they made themselves known. Ellen came around the bed and discreetly checked.

"You're at four centimeters," she said with interest. "Moving along!" Cosette nodded, the pain starting to fade. "But we can't go forward until you're at least eight. It's still going to be a while."

"They'll be here soon," she whispered. She laid back on the small bed, adjusting the pillow under her head.

8 8 8

Tom felt like he was going to fly apart in four different directions. The excruciating slowness of the rush hour crawl on Los Angeles' illustrious 405 was going to make him insane. He called Christina as much out of frustration as actual concern that Beatrice would be born and he wouldn't be there. Cosette was in good hands, he knew that. But he wanted to *be there.*

Although what Cosette would allow at this point, he couldn't begin to ponder.

Worse than anything, he missed her. He missed their rapport, he missed her quick wit, he missed how she used to look at him, either with her dry humor, or with the affection she had slowly, oh so slowly started to let show. The times Cosette had been soft and warm in his arms, looking at him with those gorgeous amethyst eyes with such adoration, gentleness, love. The intelligence that staggered him, her way of arguing with him, and how she had just begun to soften, to let him take care of her, not just her physical needs but those of her heart.

Every time he reminded himself of the current situation, his gut clenched. His growing state of decay had started to concern his family. It wasn't like him to crawl home to his mother. But Diana had insisted, not being satisfied with their phone conversations, and honestly worried about the condition he was in. So for a week, he moped in his mother's guest bedroom where he always stayed when he visited her, unshaven and miserable. He didn't go to the pub like he normally would have, because drink wasn't going to make anything go away. He was too depressed even to drink.

His sisters were divided on the issue. Both were sorry for him, but Sarah was definitely more sorry for Cosette. Emma, who had always been tight with her elder brother, felt that Cosette's attitude had led to the entire situation, and while Tom was an idiot, he wasn't entirely to blame for that idiocy.

But his mother. His mother was decidedly furious. Bad enough that two of her grandchildren lived on another continent, but now a third, and this one not even in a committed relationship with her son, through his own fault! Tom reminded her that Cosette had promised her that no matter what happened, she would be a part of her grandchild's life, but Diana fretted that it wouldn't be the
same, and that she would just be a distant figure in the little girl's life.

"I know you don't like talking about it," Diana said as she attempted to get her son to eat breakfast - he wasn't eating much, and he slept odd hours, only a few hours at a time until bad dreams woke him, and then there was the running, as if he were perpetually trying to escape -- "but I think what happened between me and your father is coming into play in this."

No, he didn't like talking about it. Divorce happened. He had so many friends whose parents were divorced, it wasn't even a sympathetic thing anymore. It was just a fact of life. So he hadn't felt justified ever venting his rage and sadness and disappointment and grief, and had done the British thing -- kept a stiff upper lip.

"You could see a therapist, you know," she suggested, putting a plate of sausage and eggs in front of him. He hadn't said much since he'd crawled into the kitchen and poured himself coffee. But at this suggestion he rolled his eyes to give his mother a baleful look. "There's no shame in it these days," she insisted, sitting down across from him.

"Therapy for what?" he grumbled, his first words of the day.

"Your...relationship issues," Diana said carefully. "Honestly, Thomas, you know you've had a horrible fear of commitment for so long now...not just with women, but with everything. You always find a way to sabotage yourself. Remember your girlfriend at Uni who went to France and you had an audition, but you blew it off to go see her? And then she didn't respond to your romantic gesture the way you wanted and you broke it off. I don't think you've had a relationship that's lasted longer than two years. Susannah, she was so lovely, but you let fame go to your head on that one. And what was wrong with Jane, or Lizzie? Jane adored you, you adored Lizzie...I just worry about your attitude toward women."

"I have a fine attitude toward women," Tom growled.

"Your father and I have talked about it, you know," Diana went on. "He sees it, too. Your profession offers you too many choices, and you might be partaking too freely." Then she drew a deep breath. "I love you, Tom, and I always want to think the best of you, and I'm not saying you're a...a womanizer--"

"Because I'm not." He shifted uncomfortably.

"--not by the standards of some of your peers, I'm sure. But for a 'normal' person, Thomas. I know that a person's past doesn't determine their future, but when you become entrenched in a lifestyle--"

"What do you want me to do?" Tom sighed.

"I told you. I think talking to someone might help. It would show Cosette that you truly intend to reform. And it might help you understand some of the challenges your future is going to offer and ways to deal with them."

"I don't want to sit on someone's couch and whine about my problems, Mum," Tom ground out.

"No, you'd rather sit in my kitchen and not eat, not sleep regularly, and run yourself to death while you don't talk about anything." She sighed, folded her arms. Then she yanked the plate of uneaten food away from him and took it over to the sink.

Luke was no better. He didn't offer personal advice the way his mother did, but Tom knew from the looks he was getting when Luke thought he wasn't looking, that Luke didn't have any sympathy for him at all. Instead Luke just snapped at him to make sure he shaved and dressed properly, he
had this interview and that interview. In spite of the fact that the tabloids were going a bit crazy with the news that Tom and the mother of his child were "splitsville," Tom utterly refused to answer any questions about it. He would just say that they were going through the ups and downs of a relationship and that they needed privacy and the time to work them out. That was when he deigned to say anything at all. This only led to more criticism about Tom wheeling out his girlfriend for the world to see only to slam down the iron curtain when things got embarrassing.

His agents still brought him scripts. Sometimes he could bury himself in work, but nothing called to him. Nothing felt right. Any story's attempt at romance left him with a knot in his stomach, and he knew he was too attracted to the darker stuff so he held himself at bay.

Only one thing even remotely tempted him -- a script from Harvey Weinstein's company, with Robert DeNiro's name attached, which started filming in February. He knew this was a ripe opportunity, and the script had been sent to him specially, but he could not get himself excited about it, which just led to him feeling more depressed. He should have been salivating over it but he could barely rouse his appetite.

Everyone collectively thought he was crazy. Even his own father, who usually didn't involve himself in Tom's movie career, told him he needed to snap it up as quickly as possible. He had plenty of time to prepare, since production didn't begin until the beginning of February.

But Tom hated the idea of faking it. He hated doing something just for the sake of doing it. He had to believe in it, it had to honestly speak to him. It had to fulfill some need, not just take up space.

And it required him to return to Los Angeles. Which he was going to do anyway, since Cosette's due date was inching closer. He just wanted to wait until the end of the week.

Then his cellular went off one evening. It was Christina.

"Is everything okay?" Tom asked immediately.

"Fine, we're fine," Christina answered. It was a routine between them. Whenever she called, he panicked a little bit, worried she was going to say something was wrong with Cosette. Those Braxton-Hicks contractions worried him, her blood pressure worried him, and his not being with her worried him. "I was concerned about you, since you left."

Their conversations were odd things in Tom's opinion, but he clung to them like a lifeline. Whatever made Christina talk to him after his betrayal of her sister, he didn't quite understand, but he wasn't wanting to question it too deeply. He suspected she had been guilty of something similar in her past, but she never said it. She just kept him informed of the things that Henry didn't tell him, although she was careful to respect Cosette's privacy. Every little detail pertaining to the baby, she willingly gave. About Cosette herself, though, Christina was a bit more cagey. She wouldn't talk about their shambles of a relationship. Sometimes she just asked him how he was doing, supported him, tried to help him come to terms with things.

Was today one of those days?

"Yeah, well...I've sort of been floating, actually," he said. He sat on his couch, staring up at his wall of books, at the blank television. Sometimes he would just stared into space, his brain spinning, until he got desperate to distract himself. But not even his favorite books, worn with use, could do much.

"What about jobs? You have any new scripts you're interested in?"
"Actually there is one...it's a great opportunity but...I don't know..."

"It doesn't grab you?"

"That's the thing, nothing really grabs me," he admitted.

"Well, if you know it's a golden opportunity, I say go for it. When this funk passes, you'll be glad you did."

When this funk passes...."I don't think it'll ever pass, Christina."

"Don't say that, Tom," she said.

"It's not like a bump in the road. I majorly fucked up my life."

"You had some help. But yes." She sighed. "Look, you just have to hang on a little longer. Things are going to change when Beatrice is born."

"Has she said anything?"

"No, but...I just know. I know my sister. She can't share a child with a man she's isolating from her life. You two will come to some kind of understanding--"

"But I don't want an 'understanding,'" he snapped, then calmed himself. "I want to rewind the last four months of my life and do them over."

"Well, even if such a thing were possible," and Tom could picture her wry little smile, so much like her older sister's, "even before you cheated things had gotten rather fucked up."

"You blame Cosette for that, don't you?"

"I don't like giving my opinion about your relationship, Tom. And I don't think that it's wrong to suspect a person because of a reputation. But I also don't underestimate a person's ability to change if given the right motivation, and how the right conditions can make anyone capable of anything. Good or bad. But I'm not pregnant with someone's child, and I'm not in her head, so I can't judge her."

"Do you think..." He'd never asked that before. He was so sure that he had ruined everything that he never stopped to ask himself if things had been salvageable even before that. That conversation in Cosette's kitchen, her telling him she still wanted to try, just much, much, much slower than he was currently pushing them (although he didn't *see* it as pushing) had given him some hope. It just wasn't exactly what he wanted, and he despaired over it. "Do you think that if I hadn't... I hadn't cheated, that we would have a chance? Was she really willing to try?"

"She was pretty unhappy with herself," Christina said, tone guarded. "Whether you two would have ridden off into the sunset together -- or you three, rather -- well, who knows that? But--"

"But definitely not now."

"I don't know the future, Tom."

No, she hadn't known the future -- although when she called, she seemed to be as surprised as him that Dr. Ivery had decided to induce labor.

He had been just getting out of his meeting when his cell phone went off, and having assigned Christina her own ring tone, as well as Henry, so that he knew exactly who was calling without
having to look, he usually scrambled to get to it. But this time a strange tingle had moved through his stomach and up his spine, and as he answered the phone, he knew what she was going to say before she said it.

"I'm on my way," he said. He had already programmed his map function with the hospital, and called up the route. An hour and fifteen minutes because of traffic! He almost groaned in dismay, but picked up speed on his way to his car.

His mind had started racing with all kinds of scenarios. What if they had to remove the child surgically? He'd been reading and knew that cesareans were much more simple than they used to be, but still, the thought of cutting her open...or worse, what if she ripped as Beatrice was coming out? That could be just as painful and upsetting. There were so many things... but he'd been so bloody distracted by their relationship and trying to get back into work...

But now, all he could think about was the reception he would get when he got there. He hadn't laid eyes on Cosette in a month after she'd made her feelings for him perfectly clear. He couldn't bear the thought of her sending him away again, but surely she wouldn't, as she had promised him full access to their child, right? But they'd never talked...he had planned on getting Henry to mediate for them one final time before the due date, and first time pregnancies were notoriously late.

Suddenly a lane of traffic cleared. This was the odd thing about LA. A horrible jam could suddenly shake itself loose, and soon he'd be speeding along. He hit the gas pedal, not caring if he broke the limit, just not wanting to hit anyone. He went along a good fifteen minutes, and the little female voice on his phone informed him that his route was clear, and he should reach his destination in another thirty minutes.

The phone rang. It was Christina.

"Where are you?" she asked. Her tone was calm, inquisitive.

"Another twenty five minutes away. How is she doing?"

"She's at four centimeters and stalled. She was at two forever. It'll still take a while." A deep breath. "I'm, um...going to give you to Henry, okay? We have to figure out...I mean, she might be okay for you to come into the room, but...that might be it. I mean, Mom's pretty much glued to her side right now."

Tom wanted to slam his fist into the steering wheel. The thought of having to stand there and watch her, not to be able to *hold* her...but then again, being on the other side, he could...he could actually see...

"Tom? You there?" It was Henry.

"Yeah, mate."

"Okay, when you get here, call me, I'll come right down and get you. You're the father so you have priority but if you say or do anything to upset Cosette she'll have you chucked out, and we won't be able to stop her. She's kind of...well, not really in her right mind right now, the drugs are making her loopy and she has asked about you, so--"

Tom felt a silly surge of hope. "She's asked?"

"Yeah. Wants to know when you'll be there. But I don't know what she'll say when you come into the room so be braced for anything. If you're feeling sensitive, I don't know if you--"
"My child is being born, Henry. I'm coming in."

8 8 8

Her mother was a balm, but not for very long. She'd comforted her, fluffed up her pillow. Her dad had kissed her, stroked her hair. But neither one was what she wanted. She felt vulnerable in a way she couldn't understand, let alone explain. She felt cold, empty. Depressed. Tears leaked from her eyes, which her mother interpreted to be brought on by distress, although she didn't truly know what kind. Her father insisted she be liberal with the painkillers, as they hadn't hurt either her or Christina when they were born.

Then Mom and Dad went out and Christina and Henry came in. Christina held her hand, but Cosette felt a strange kind of anger toward her sister. She was with the enemy. She had stayed friends with Tom. She had sent him videos and pictures and kept him informed of all kinds of things that maybe Cosette didn't want him to know. Her hand lay stiffly in her sister's, as Henry fiddled with his phone.

"Tom is about a half hour away," he said. "You're still okay with him coming in?"

They'd gotten there first, before Isabella and Raymond. Cosette had asked Christina about Tom, which the two had taken as eagerness to see him. Maybe they weren't wrong. She couldn't remember exactly what she said, she felt fuzzy.

"Yes," she sighed. She wanted him here and yet she thought of him made her want to cry harder. She wanted to slap him and kiss him. She wanted to throttle him for doing this to her, wanted to see him suffer for how he'd treated her...and at the same time she wanted to beg him to forgive her for being such a self-righteous bitch and please help her because she didn't know what she was going to do, how she was going to raise a child all alone. She didn't want to be alone!

"Sweetie, it's okay," Christina said, using a damp cloth to wipe Cosette's cheeks. She produced a brush and started to run it through her hair. "How far along are you?"

"Four centimeters, still," Ellen said. "We'll check again in twenty minutes."

8 8 8

Tom was ducking and weaving through traffic and if he got pulled over he was going to have to beg the cop to help him get to Cosette faster. She was only four centimeters, but he wanted to be there. He wished he could have been there from the start. Walked her around, distracted her with small talk, massaged her back or abdomen, whichever she wanted. But no, he had to take his stupid meeting instead of insisting on being there for her doctor's appointment, which he could have gotten Henry to help him negotiate with her if he'd been persistent enough.

Or maybe that was just wistful thinking. Nobody could reason with Cosette when she got into one of her moods. And in the throes of labor, who knew what mood that could be?

He'd read up on the stages of labor. Even induced labor, on the offside chance. First time pregnancies were so unpredictable. But induced labor was supposed to be slower than spontaneous labor. Cosette should still be in the early labor phase, but apparently she was speeding through that into active labor since she was already at four centimeters. He hoped that they were walking her around, letting her change positions. He wondered if she would slow down now, or if it would go just as quickly---

The hospital parking lot loomed into view. Tom found himself searching row after row for a
parking space, and the first one he found was a bit too narrow and he had to spend too much time trying to wedge himself into it. Getting out of the car would have been impossible if he'd been a few inches wider, and not for the first time he was grateful for his lean frame. He had the phone out but the parking garage had bad reception and he wasn't able to dial through until he was already in the lobby.

"Tom?"

"I'm in the lobby. Is she okay? How far along is she?"

Henry's tone was calm. "She's fine. She's still at the same stage. Right now we're just waiting. The doctor thinks it could take a while, maybe not until the middle of the night, so you're fine for time. It's okay."

"Where are you?"

"I'll come down. You're in the main lobby?"

"I think so...hospitals are all like labyrinths, I don't know where--"

"Hang on. I'm on my way."

8 8 8

"I'm not ready. I'm not ready to see him."

Cosette had had bad menstrual cramps in her day, but these were much, much worse. And much like menstrual cramps, they made her cranky and irritable, and right now, seeing Tom's face was the last thing she wanted.

"Well," Rachel said, who had arrived about twenty minutes ago, "if you don't want him here then he can't be here. Your comfort is of primary concern."

Cosette smiled at Rachel. It felt good to have someone watching out for her. Christina had been adamant that she allow Tom into the room because he was the father, and even her own mother seemed to be siding in that direction. Her father had grunted and told everyone he was going to wait in the waiting area and polish his bat (which made Cosette chuckle in spite of herself). Henry, however, had gone to deal with the situation.

"I just don't want you to regret it," Christina said. "And I don't want there to be more trouble."

"You think Tom might try to force his way in?" Isabella asked.

Rachel grimaced at the two women. "Perhaps you could take this conversation to the hallway?" she said mildly. "Cosette, did that contraction pass?"

Cosette sighed, nodded. The cramp let go, but it wouldn't be for long. She looked from between her mother and her sister. Both seemed reluctant to leave. But then Christina's phone went off and she excused herself. Her mother returned to her side and offered her some more ice chips.

"Do you want to play some cards?" Rachel asked, pulling out the Uno deck. She pulled over one of the small trays that were usually used for food. "You need a distraction for a little while. You seem to be going quickly but things could slow down right now. Mom, you play Uno?"

Isabella shook her head. "Poker."
"Mom's got a poker face that could shame John Wayne," Cosette grumbled.

"I've got regular cards, too. Want to play poker? We could use diaper changes for money. Winner gets to delegate to the losers."

8 8 8

"Security?" Tom echoed, dumfounded. "They're going to call security?"

"Rachel suggested it when she got here," Henry explained, his tone mildly apologetic. "In case you were difficult. Cosette's comfort is the top priority, and your ability to see your child being born is totally dependent on that. And right now, Cosette is not happy. Labor does not make happy women, not generally."

The elevator door opened and the two men stepped out. Tom was flabbergasted, but he struggled to redirect. "I want Cosette and the baby to be safe," he said.

"Then not distressing her is the main goal," Henry said. "If she doesn't want you in the room, you're not going in. Sorry." He sighed, ran his fingers through his hair. "Unfortunately that leaves the waiting area, and Dad's in there, and that might be worse. Look, man, I wish I had better news. But you're right here, you'll be kept in the loop. I'll make Raymond behave, I promise, as best I can."

Tom felt his anger levels starting to rise. His fingers curled and his fists wanted to clench. This was so fucking unfair...

They had reached the correct hallway. Tom started to tense, making jerky movements as he tried to figure out where exactly Cosette was. He couldn't hear anything, just the low hum of machinery, the chatter of nurses and other helpers.

"Could I," he started, hesitating, stumbling, "could I just, maybe, stick my head in? See how she reacts?"

As if on cue Christina came through a door and into the hallway. Tom caught the flash of Cosette's dark hair behind her. He made a motion to go toward that door, but as soon as Christina caught sight of him, her face curled into one of repressed anger.

"You fucking idiot," she hissed at him. "Why did you have to go and cheat? You moron! You'd be in there right now if you hadn't cheated! How could you be so stupid!"

Tom was taken aback. Christina had never come at him like this before. She seemed to be the only one sympathetic to him, the only one who was willing to forgive his crime. He knew she had a checkered past, but they'd never openly discussed it. But now her venom was a bit shocking.

Henry stepped between them. "How is Cosette?" he asked, as if she hadn't just vivisected Tom.

"In labor, how else should she be? Rachel's taking care of her." She glared at Tom.

"Maybe," Henry suggested, "you could let Cosette know that Tom is here? Or do you want me to do it?"

"Why? She won't let him in. She just said she's not ready to see him."

"She said that?" Tom asked.

"Practically verbatim. This is not the time for a reunion! We should have started planning for this
when you got back a week ago!"

"Christina," Henry said, "maybe you should go check on Raymond?" He nudged his chin toward the nurses and orderlies, who were watching them warily.

She glared at her fiancée for a long moment, then gave a little (if not resentful) nod and headed for the waiting area.

888

"You win again," Rachel chuckled at Isabella. "I guess I should have listened to Cosette."

"I told you," Cosette said, wincing a bit but feeling a bit better.

"Don't worry, dear, I won't cash in," Isabella reassured her daughter with a peck on the cheek.

It had been an hour. Cosette was aware that Tom was in the hallway, but as the minutes had ticked past, she had tried harder and harder to push this information away. It seemed, however, that this "ignore your problem until it goes away" method combined with the card game, had worked to relieve some of the tension. The contractions came and went, the epidural helped, and she was feeling calmer.

"Okay," she said to Rachel. "I think I can see him now."

Rachel gave a little nod, and put the cards back in her bag. Then she headed to the door, and Cosette heard some murmured conversation. Slowly, so slowly, Tom stepped into the room.

"Hello Cosette," he said. He had something in his hands, something golden.

She glanced at him, and winced. It was hard not to be struck by Tom's looks, by everything about him. His grace, his manners. She'd not been exposed to it in too long, it had regained its effect in the absence. Those huge hands curled around whatever kind of box he was holding, fussing with it to give his nervous energy something to do.

Cosette turned her eyes to her mother, who was watching Tom with something akin to gentleness. She'd half expected Isabella to yell at him, or at the very least give him her traditional icy greeting, but no. She patted Cosette's hand and said, "Hello, Tom."

Tom seemed to perk up at the greeting, even if it wasn't from the one he'd wanted to hear it from. "I, um...I wandered down to the gift shop. I saw some chocolates, thought you'd like them, you know...later."

"That's sweet," Isabella said, reaching for the box.

Cosette opened her mouth to agree, she was always a sucker for chocolate, but the epidural dipped because she hadn't pumped a it in a while, so the next contraction hit her a little hard and she gave out a small yelp.

Tom jumped toward her. Those long legs could cross huge distances in short spans, and he was looming over her in a matter of seconds. She looked up at him, her vision suddenly blurry, but she could see how worried he was.

"It's fine," she breathed, pressing the little pump. "I'm fine. Just caught me by surprise."

"How far along are you?" he asked. "I heard four centimeters last."
"Yes, and she hasn't budged since," Rachel informed him. "It could be a while longer."

"Well, I could...I could take over, for a bit," Tom said, glancing at Isabella. "Let you get some rest-"

Cosette wanted to tell him no. The word was on the tip of her tongue. But he looked so anxious and concerned and she could feel his emotions radiating off him like heat. He was like a puppy that knew it had been bad and was desperate to get back into his master's good graces. She felt an awful tug of pity for him.

As if sensing her conflict, Tom reached for her hand. His fingers, long and slender and yet also so large on his big damn hands, curled under her fingers, and she was reminded of their softness, the smoothness of them, interrupted by the occasional callous from his guitar.

She had a flash of what those fingers could do. And then that flash immediately jumped to how he had probably done all those things and more to lots of others. Especially a little red-headed tart in Australia.

She jerked her hand back as if stung. The movement knocked the word from her mouth. "No," she said. "No, it's...I'd rather have Mom. And Rachel is here. Mom, if you need a break it's fine, but..."

Tom looked utterly crestfallen. The emotions roiling through Cosette buckled and threatened to overflow. Tears from her frustration, from her conflict, her urge to embrace him and her urge to reject him, flooded the rim of her lower lashes and she struggled to keep them back.

"I want to be here, Cosette," he pleaded, his voice soft and low. "For you, for Beatrice."

"I'm fine, Tom," she said, struggling to regain her equilibrium.

"It's not just about you," he said, and then seemed to instantly regret the words, how he flinched at them. "I mean--"

"I know what you mean," Cosette replied, her tone harder. "If you want to be in the room, when it's time for the big push, I won't stop you. But Rachel and Mom are going to get me through it, either one or both. I don't...I don't want you too close."

8 8 8

Not too close, she said. Three little words that could do so much damage.

Tom walked back to the lobby. The attending nurse had said that three people at a time was a bit much, Rachel wasn't going anywhere and Isabella had stayed at Cosette's request, so that left him to leave until he was called back for the big event.

The reasonable part of him told him he couldn't blame her. He'd hurt her. But the emotional part of her, the one much stronger when it came to that woman, ranted and raved against this injustice. Sure, they'd hurt each other, but couldn't that be put aside for something more important? Then the machine that was watching her blood pressure had started to make little beeps that caused the attending nurse to frown at him.

Lucky him, Raymond was right there, in the most comfortable looking of chairs. And staring right at him as he came through the door. Tom almost wanted to keep walking, head right for the exit. Right now he couldn't take a verbal beating by this man. But to his surprise, when Raymond got up, he offered Tom a little smile.
"Have you eaten today?" Raymond asked him.

Tom thought about it for a moment. He'd had a bit of breakfast but not much else. He felt himself shaking his head.

"Come on. The hospital here actually has some decent food. And good coffee. They'll beep us if something changes."

Tom followed the dark haired man. He hesitated to let down his guard but something about how Raymond had looked at him...

He didn't get an apology for what happened out of Cosette's house, and when Tom thought about it later, he didn't blame him. He might have done the exact same thing. If a man who was in a relationship with Beatrice ever did anything to her that even remotely hurt her, Tom would probably use much worse than a baseball bat. But he also didn't get any reprimands, any hostility. In fact, Raymond seemed rather calm, almost comforting.

"When Cozy was born," he chuckled as he munched his salad -- the same kind Tom had ordered as his brain wouldn't allow him to make any decisions at that moment -- "I was in the waiting room. It was '83, and it was all the rage to go into the delivery room, do it together as a couple. It was all about natural birth, Lamaze, all that stuff. But Isabella was dead set against it. She didn't want me in there, she was screaming and sweaty and she wanted something for the pain. My mom, Cosette's Gram, was the one who held her hand through it. But later on, when Christina joined us, it was a bit different. Bella had altered her views a bit. Wanted me in there. I thought I was going to throw up. I had to leave before Chrissy was on this side of the womb, and Bella was so pissed at me for that." He shrugged. "She and I, we had a lot of problems. Not because of that, the problems came first. We couldn't talk to each other." He glanced at Tom. "You and Cosette seemed to at least be able to do that."

"We did," Tom murmured, picking at the lettuce leaves.

"Well. Things like being in the room don't make you a good father. Trust me, watching the baby come out -- nobody likes to tell you how gross it really is. It's all about the miracle of life, all of that. But the miracle didn't start there. It started nine months ago. And it doesn't end with a change of location, either."

Tom gave a little nod. On some level, he knew that.

"I have to give you credit," Raymond said, almost as if to himself. "You're persistent, but honorable. I expected court orders and threats of custody, but you haven't done any of that. Or are you planning to? I mean, after Beatrice is born?"

He blinked several times, as if trying to put together what Raymond was saying. Court orders? Custody? "I didn't even stop her personal security," he heard himself saying. "And they wouldn't let me near her all month."

Raymond nodded. "I know. But after the little girl is out and you can see her and you want to spend time with her, what will you do then? I mean, Cosette's made it clear you'll be in Beatrice's life but what if it isn't enough for you? Are you going to pursue legal action?"

Tom scowled. "I would never..." He suddenly had no words. He felt so completely defeated. These people didn't want his money, they didn't want his presence. Maybe he should just disappear. Maybe he should just walk away, be the absent father. It couldn't possibly do his little girl any good to have two worlds pulling her in two different directions, even though he desperately didn't
want it to be like that, he wanted one world, to surround her and protect her and nurture her.

There was a clang. He looked down at realized he had dropped his fork. And Raymond was looking at him with the first real compassion he'd ever seen from the man.

"I'm sorry," Raymond said. "This was not really the best time to have this conversation. I've seen some of your films, Tom, and while I can't claim to know you that well, I can tell when a man is acting and when he isn't." He sighed. "It's easy to forget sometimes that the people on the other side don't always have ill intentions. I've just seen so much from so many people, most of them like you, young and handsome and getting anything they wanted, everyone throwing themselves at them. And I was determined to shove you into that category because, let's be honest, you're as smooth as caramel and you managed to get Cosette into a position I'd never have ever thought her capable. But we're all in a really vulnerable place and the last thing I want is a legal battle. But you're here, even after everything. You're still taking the beating."

Tom wanted his mouth to move. He wanted to say something. And as guarded as he usually was, he felt compelled to say something, anything, to make this man change his mind about him.

"Just because we do things that hurt those we love," he said, "doesn't mean we stopped loving them."

Raymond nodded. "I never cheated on Isabella, but I've seen other men do it. I never understood how they could. Then once I was tempted. An actress took a liking to me, wanted me to come to her dressing room. She was...well...you know how actresses are. But all I could think of was how Bella would know, somehow, and she'd never forgive me. I don't quite know how I got out of it. I think it was the grace of God that saved me. But so many people think these days that being a person of faith makes you stupid or simple. We're so stuck up our own assholes, so proud of our brains, our reason. Reason and faith don't go against each other. If they do, it's either bad faith or bad reason."

"It's not easy," Tom said slowly.

"Of course not. If it was easy, everyone would do it." Raymond sighed again. "Well, keep doing the right thing. You want to do the best thing you can for your daughter, support Cosette, regardless of your relationship status. And I promise not to chase you with any more baseball bats."

Then Tom's phone went off, the same time as Raymond's. The text read: "She's at eight centimeters."

"I think it's time," Raymond said.
Chapter Summary

Beatrice's birth, and a revisit to the beginning. Tom and Cosette navigate their new circumstances.

Chapter Notes

First off, the Taylor Swift line was in the original prologue, so it was not spurred by recent events.

Second, I have decided to be consistent in my spelling of Beatrice's nickname, Bebe, pronounced Bee-bee, but that looks weird writing it so...yeah.

25 -- Now, Redux

The pushing was the hardest. The feeling of "almost..." and then having no more to push, but still feeling in there, tempered only by her exhaustion.

The pain ripped through her, worse than anything she could imagine. It came in waves, rising and crashing. Relief would come but only in brief spasms.

"You're doing so good," Rachel would comfort her, and her mother would kiss her temple and wipe away the sweat.

Tom...she glanced up at him, a matter of feet away, down toward where Dr. Ivery crouched between her legs. He was a bit blurry, as the sweat and tears had distorted her vision, but he seemed to be barely restrained from flying at her. The veins in his forehead and in his neck bulged and strained under the skin. Then she looked away. His eyes were too bright, too piercing. There was just too much there.

"Almost there," Dr. Ivery said. "I think this last one should do it."

Scream. Her voice stretched and carried and then died, but her throat was still locked open and she felt she was trying to be heard from under water. But then another sound came.

A tiny little wail.

It left her all at once, the pressure, the effort, and she collapsed backwards. Isabella leaned forward, holding Cosette even as she did so, laughing and crying at the same time.

Ivery held up the baby, little Beatrice Hiddleston. Rachel was there, taking the child, cleaning her off quickly, wrapping her and placing her in Cosette's arms.

It didn't matter. None of that pain, none of the heartache meant anything. It vanished as if it had never existed. Tears streamed down her cheek but what emotion drove them even Cosette didn't
know. That little bundle, that tiny little human who was fresh from the factory, her skin still red, although Cosette could see how pale she was underneath the blush of just being born, was the only thing that mattered in the universe.

So tiny. Fingers, toes, lips, and nose. The hair on her head was faint but what little there was, was light colored and made petite flat curls against her skull.

The eyes opened and mother and daughter gazed at each other. The eyes were hazy, blue and gray. Probably would turn the same intense blue as her father's, Cosette thought. She wanted to look up at Tom, wanted to see his reaction, but then the little girl started to shiver.

"She's on the tiny side," Dr. Ivery said, hovering over her. "She's only ten days early but I think we'd best err on the side of caution." Rachel brought over a tiny pink bonnet and placed it on Beatrice's head. "I think she needs to go under a warming lamp for a bit."

"Is she going to be okay?" Cosette asked, automatically worried.

"Oh, she'll be fine," Rachel assured her, and Dr. Ivery nodded. "She just needs a bit of help. You'll have to keep a hat on her, keep her wrapped for the next several days. Just so she can get some size and bring up her blood circulation."

They let her hold the little girl for a few minutes longer. She kissed her and whispered things to her, things she didn't remember later. She also found out that Dr. Ivery had allowed Tom to cut the cord, that he'd watched as the little one was cleaned, and then was invited to follow her down to the nursery when it was time to take Beatrice for all the things that needed to be done -- evaluation, a more thorough cleaning, and most importantly, warming under the little lamp they provided for cases like hers.

At first Cosette wanted to object -- she hadn't been without that child for months, and now she was suddenly gone? She felt momentarily bereft, but then the exhaustion hit her, so overwhelming, that she was sure if she even blinked her eyes shut for a second she would drift off.

"You need some sleep, Cozy," her mother whispered to her. They had to take care of the afterbirth, clean her up, evaluate her, make sure she was doing well as well as Beatrice.

It all passed quietly, after the drama of the labor and birth. Cosette settled back and let them do whatever they wanted. It was probably the endorphins kicking in, she realized, making her like this, but she didn't care. She just relaxed and enjoyed her mind going completely blank.

Then they brought Beatrice to her for feeding. It was the first time, and Cosette and Rachel had discussed this at length -- what to expect, how to troubleshoot. But to Cosette's enormous pleasure, it all went off without a hitch. Beatrice latched on and the colostrum flowed. As she sat there, the little newborn learning to suck, breathe, and adjust as necessary, she realized there was someone missing from the picture.

Tom.

Somewhere her mind had kept working, dealing with things that her conscious brain had pushed aside. But she would do it. She would make her peace with him.

Beatrice got tired quickly, and dozed off. Cosette wrapped her up snugly, making sure the little pink cap was firmly in place. Just as she was contemplating how to get her back into the little plastic bin that was doubling as a cradle, her mother and father came into the room.

For a while, they oohed and aahed over Beatrice, but any questions they asked Cosette were just
met with tired murmurings. She must have drifted off because the next thing she knew her parents had switched places with Christina and Henry.

"Oh, hey, you're up," Henry said, coming over to brush a kiss across her forehead. "Sorry, we didn't wake you, did we?"

"I didn't realize I'd fallen asleep," she replied.

"For a few hours," Christina said, bringing over Beatrice. "My God she's so tiny and perfect."

"And early," Cosette chuckled. "Did they put her under the lamp like they said?"

"Yeah, we have pictures if you want to see them later," Christina replied. "It was cute. She was enjoying it a lot." She still had Beatrice in her arms. "She doesn't weigh a lot, does she?"

"She's pretty light," Henry agreed. "But don't worry, they grow. She's long, though. Twenty-one inches, they told us."

"That's her father," Cosette chuckled. Both of them looked at her for a moment, guarded. She smiled at them. "Where's Tom?" she asked.

"In the lobby," Henry said. "He's been there since they brought Beatrice here."

Cosette nodded. "Can you get him for me? I need to talk to him."

"Cozy, maybe right now--" Christina started.

"No, it's not like that. I need to make my peace with him. Beatrice is more important than anything or anyone. And besides, he needs to be allowed to spend time with her."

Just then her mother came into the room. "Who?" Isabella asked.

"Tom," Christina answered.

"He's in the waiting area. I don't think I've ever seen that man so subdued."

"Mom," Cosette said, figuring she needed a practice run, "did you mean what you said, about coming to stay with me for a while?"

"Of course, honey, I've already got my stuff packed up."

"Well, I'm going to let Tom stay, too. I mean, he is the father. And I want him to have bonding time with Beatrice. She's going to need around the clock care and it's going to be exhausting and another set of hands--"

"Sweetie, you don't have to explain to me," Isabella said, although she sounded resigned. "I know nothing is going to happen. But emotionally, I do question the wisdom. You're going to be dealing with post-hormones and being that close to him in that state may cause more problems than it solves."

"Daddy will be ecstatic," Christina murmured to the little girl in her arms.

"I don't even want to hear what Dad says," Cosette groaned, rubbing her temples with her fingers.

"I meant her daddy," Christina corrected.
Cosette dropped her hands. That was the first time anyone had called Tom "Daddy" in her hearing. It felt strange.

"Well, it's official. We're now relegated to Grandma and Grandpa," Isabella chuckled. "All right, well, Cozy, I think you need a bit more time before confronting Tom, but--"

"No, I decided on this a few hours ago," Cosette insisted. "Henry, will you get him for me?"

Henry looked from Isabella and Christina to Cosette, and then nodded. "Okay," he said, and heads from the room.

Beatrice was in her arms again, and Cosette looked down at her daughter, examining her closely. She'd already done so, but it felt like the first time, every time. Beatrice's little nose, her little lips, the way they parted when she yawned. How she scowled as she stared at her, as her vision at such a young age was still terribly nearsighted, so Cosette tried to hold her as close as possible.

Everyone else must have slipped out because when she looked up again, Tom was standing in the doorway, coming into the room -- and they were alone. He approached with hesitance, but his eyes were bright and filled with love as he gazed on their little girl.

*Their* girl.

Cosette bade him to approach, smiled at him, handed Beatrice off to him. He looked down at the little girl with such open wonder, with such amazement and...was it humility? This was a far cry from the Tom who had stormed into her life, full of his own charm and determined to get what he wanted.

She felt her heart throb. She hated how much she still loved him. She hated these emotions that tangled in her mind and manipulated her into wanting to do things she knew she couldn't do. But those eyes of his, when they turned from his daughter to her, that look of love didn't cease. And it hurt.

"Maybe this isn't the right time," Cosette said, "but I think we need to talk."

Tom looked at her, puzzled. "You're exhausted, da---Cosette. You should probably sleep when she does."

"I know. But I don't know if I can, until I tell you something."

Tom stared at her a moment, as if trying to see around her words, trying to see what she actually meant by them. But he pulled up a chair dutifully and perched on it, expectant.

"Beatrice is my child, and your child. It would be wrong of me to prevent you from being her father. Provided you do actually want to be her father."

She knew the moment she said it that those words hurt. Of course Tom wanted to be in Beatrice’s life, but after a month of silence, after all that had happened between them, she felt compelled to check, at least one last time. Give him one last out.

"I do," he said. It’s enough.

She nodded. "Then this is what is going to happen. As of right now, you and I will never, ever speak of what happened. Ever again. I will no longer hold it against you, and you will never apologize or try explain it. Do you understand?"
"No," she added, trying to keep her tone as gentle as possible. "As the Taylor Swift song goes, we are never, ever, ever getting back together. You and I are completely done as...well. But as parents, we sort of have no choice now, do we? So all hostilities will cease. This isn't about you or me anymore. We cannot be hateful or mean to each other, not in any way. A child absorbs it like a sponge. I won't risk her being harmed by...by what happened."

No, Beatrice will never know. She will never know what Tom did to her because there will never be a reason to tell her.

"I will be polite, even kind to you. We will accommodate each other, work together, even enjoy each other's presence, or pretend to, when it's needed. We will never, ever speak a harsh word to or about each other, as of this moment."

No, that's not enough. In spite of herself she had to be harsher, she had to make it so clear that there could be no question.

"But you will understand that this does not mean at any point that I am over what you did," she adds. "I'm going to forgive you, Thomas, but forgiveness doesn't mean allowing you to do it again. You will not, at any time, make any appeal of me to consider renewing our relationship. I don't think that this should be that hard, as I'm pretty sure I've been nothing but a continuous source of grief for you, but I wanted us to be straight on this. I think I'm getting the harder end of the deal; I'm still very angry at you and it will take a lot of time to let that anger go. But Grams always said, as you act, so shall you be. Fake it till you make it, as they say. So I'm going to try it. But I don't want to be worrying that you're going to misunderstand or misinterpret anything I do. And I certainly don't want you worrying about it, either. So can we do this? For Beatrice?"

He stared at her, and she could see it sinking in. She begged him with her eyes, please say yes, please say you understand, please say you agree and let me get over you.

"Yes," he said, voice level and steady. "For Beatrice. I will do that."

She expected to be more relieved, but still the tension sat there. She expected another speech from Tom, another plea. She didn't want to hear it, but not hearing it made her a bit more suspicious. Still, not wanting to look this gift horse in the mouth, she said, "Thank you, Tom. There's going to be stuff to work out, schedules and what-not. And Beatrice is going to need both of us, so we're going to have to be around each other quite a lot. I just want us to be clear. I don't want any misunderstandings. I don't want to ever repeat this conversation." No, she didn't, she thought vehemently. Once is enough for...forever.

"I've got the spare room ready for you," she added, suddenly very sleepy.

"Spare room?" Tom echoed.

"Well, Beatrice is going to need around the clock care for a bit. I figured you might want to stick close, but it's entirely up to you."

"No, I do, thank you, yes, but I thought your mother--"

"She's camping out on the couch," Cosette assured him, staring at her water glass, which was too far away.

Tom observed her quietly for a moment, and then, without being asked, he approached to adjust her blanket. He picked up her water and offered it to her, then refilled it when she drained the glass.
His silence and his tenderness felt a bit…frightening. Although not quite sure what she was afraid of, Cosette felt the need to drive the point home once more. "I'm not doing this for either of us," she reminded him. "Not for me or for you. It's about her, Tom. For whatever reason, God gave her to us. We can't abuse that responsibility. We can't...we just can't."

She was choked off by her own emotions. The hormones were still in flux, she told herself. She just needed a little rest.

Then Tom spoke. "May I say one thing?"

Damn, she thought. I thought I was going to get away with it, too.

"You have made your feelings clear, and I won't forget them, I promise," he said, voice strained. "But I want to say one thing to you, before I let it go, for good. I want to make sure you know my feelings."

She looked at him, fear giving way to something much, much worse.

"I love you."

He may as well have slapped her, the way those words felt. She flinched.

"I'm not saying that to upset you," Tom said in a rush. "I just want you to know. That won't change."

She wouldn’t say them back. Not even if they were true. Her love for him had nothing to do with him anymore. It was just something she had to deal with, an obstacle to manage.

"I'm tired, Tom. If you want to stay with Beatrice for a bit more, that's fine. But I'm going to sleep. Okay?"

She pulled the sleep mask down. She could hear him in the room. He stood still for a long moment, and then stepped over to Beatrice’s make-shift cradle. He stayed there even longer, but then quietly let himself out.

For Tom Hiddleston to be silent…yes, that was a frightening thing indeed.

8 8 8

Tom watched as Cosette held Beatrice closely, wrapped as the infant was in the little onesie the hospital had given them, pale pink with little bows imprinted on the snaps. The receiving blanket, Tom had brought, picked by his mother. It was purple, a soft lavender that made him think of how pretty that color was on Cosette. There was a satin bear embroidered on the corner with a checkered purple and white belly. Cosette tucked it closely around Beatrice, keeping her warm – they’d been cautioned to keep her warm whenever possible, until she started to show discomfort.

Cosette was totally immersed in her daughter. Her eyes hadn’t left Beatrice since she was brought into the room, ready to go home. Tom had set the carrier down on the floor, waiting patiently until Cosette decided to transfer the baby into it. Maybe she would just carry Beatrice out herself, wheeled out as she would be in the standard hospital wheelchair.

Beatrice seemed to be equally entranced by her mother. She gazed up at her, and while she was not quite capable of smiling yet, her little gums were clearly visible through her parted lips.

“Ok,” Christina said as she came into the room. “Isaac got the other part of the car seat in the back of your car, Cozy.” She handed the keys to Tom.
Tom gave a little start. “You want me to drive her car?”

“Yeah, I can drive your rental home, it’s just a short trip,” Christina said with a wink. “Isaac will go with you and those two.” She motioned with her head to where Cosette looked up at them, the smile still on her face.

“You don’t mind, do you?” Cosette asked.

“No,” Tom said, taking the keys. “Um, so how--”


Tom took her eagerly. She was so small – Dr. Ivery said some of that was due to her early birth date, but not to worry, she would catch up. Her little hands flexed instinctively as he cradled her high against his chest. He always knew he had big hands but seeing how little she was, how half of her body fit the length of just one of his hands…

He looked up to see Cosette watching him. Her eyes were on his hands, or maybe they were still on Beatrice. She had handed her off so she could get her shoes on and get out of that bed. From the brief look on her face, he couldn’t help but wonder if she was marveling at the same thing he was.

An unwelcome memory flashed into his head. He shoved it away before it could materialize.

“Okay, let’s go,” she said, reaching for her bag.

“No, let me,” Tom said, handing Beatrice back to her. He scooped up the bag and the baby seat and followed her into the hallway where the wheelchair was waiting. Cosette settled Beatrice into the seat, clipping the little nylon belts for safety, and put the carrier on her lap after settling into the wheelchair. Tom slung her overnight bag over his shoulder and gripped the handles of the chair.

Isaac and Tom’s personal bodyguard, Olly, were outside, dealing with the paps. They’d gotten word somehow – someone had probably caught sight of him in the hospital the previous night, tweeted it, and hey-presto. Raymond had brought Cosette’s car up, Isabella right behind him in their car, and Henry behind them, a little makeshift parade.

Tom got Cosette and Beatrice settled into the back seat and took the driver’s place from Raymond. Isaac joined them quickly, Olly holding off the others with some additional security he’d probably gotten from the hospital. The same security got him down the hospital drive and into the main street, and when he joined traffic he knew they were finally safe from the cameras.

Then it was off to the house.

It felt strange to Tom, suddenly being welcomed in the one place that rejected him so firmly, where he had so desperately wanted to be. Cosette let him carry Beatrice in the carrier, following her where she led down the hallway into the living room. He set the little girl down, and the two stared at each other. Then, they both gave an awkward chuckle.

“Wow. So here it is,” Cosette said.

“Yeah,” Tom said. “We’re, um. We’re parents.”

She looked at him, held his gaze. He didn’t know what she was thinking. The look wasn’t tender but it was a far cry from her angry, hostile stare, or her cold disdain. She seemed thoughtful.
“I would really, really like a shower,” she said with a flutter of her eyelashes. “Can you watch her?”

“Of course. Did you…did you ever finish the nursery?”

“Oh, yeah, follow me.” She scooped Beatrice out of the carrier and took her down the hall, Tom in tow. As they reached the nursery Tom heard Isabella call from the kitchen door, announcing her presence. But as soon as he saw what Cosette had done, the rest was drowned out.

He knew what shade of purple she’d chosen, the delicate periwinkle, and had planned to paint a design around the room, using the painter’s tape to create borders. But instead, three walls were the periwinkle, and the fourth had been decorated with a vivid embossed royal purple wallpaper with a design etched into them in a shimmering metallic. The pale grey crib his mother had purchased was flush against that wall, with three panels above it, the one in the middle holding Beatrice’s initials in a flourishing print. The B was in the top left corner, and her middle initial, H for Helena (Tom’s maternal grandmother) in the lower right, with a very large “H” embellished through the middle – for Hiddleston. On either side of that was a faux-marble grey rectangle that looked like it was embedded in the middle with the relief of an angel holding a candle.

“You changed your mind a bit,” Tom said.

“I couldn’t get the borders straight,” Cosette admitted. “No matter how hard I tried, it just didn’t work. The reliefs came from one of the ladies at work, and I just fell in love with them. Christina had the middle one done, in the same shade of grey to match.” She laid Beatrice down in the crib, which had been decorated with little purple velvet bows on the outside. “Bebe loves it just the same, don’t you?”

Only a newborn, Beatrice couldn’t see much, but Tom could. There was a rocking chair in the corner he recognized from Isabella and Raymond’s house, cherry-wood modern design with plush cushions tied to it and a small footstool that also rocked with the chair placed in front. The changing table was just under the high window, the curtains carefully tied back so as not to dangle in the baby’s space. It had been well stocked with wipes and diapers. A drawer made of the same color wood as the rocking chair sat beside it, and Tom opened it find baby clothes nicely folded.

“Stuff from the baby shower, plus some things Mom and Chrissy got me,” Cosette explained, seeing what he was looking at. “Your mother sent a few things, too. Is there… I mean, did you have anything you wanted to add? Just bring it and we’ll add it to the bunch.”

Tom slid the drawer shut –a bit harder than he intended. This was getting a bit surreal for him – she’d been so angry at him, and now she was acting like nothing had ever happened. The gratitude he’d been feeling was starting to give way to a bit of confusion, and to his own surprise, not a little resentment.

And Cosette, as always, seemed to know his mood exactly. She traced her fingers along the lines of the crib, while Beatrice, interested in her new environment, lay quietly, waving her little feet and drooling a little bit.

“I’m sorry,” Cosette said softly. “I… I’m trying to just keep it light, but…”

“I’m just still a bit stunned by the turn of events,” Tom said. Admittedly, he hadn’t spoken much since their conversation in Cosette’s hospital room. His brain was still trying to process it. “More like whiplash.”

She raised her eyes to his, that gentleness replaced by a firmness that made him feel a bit more steady – her anger he was used to. But she didn’t seem angry. “I told you,” she said. “Beatrice is
more important than either of us. I’m just trying to keep the peace.”

“By pretending. Lying isn’t keeping the peace.”

“I really don’t want to talk about it anymore, Tom,” she sighed. Her hands gripped the edge of the crib rail. “I mean, it doesn’t change anything. It doesn’t change what happened. I said I forgive you. I have to live that forgiveness. And I can’t treat you with hostility. You did it, it’s done, we’re moving on. We just have to get used to each other in this new way.”

He wanted to cross the room. He wanted to wrap his arms around her, tell her he loved her, but knew that was the last thing she wanted.

“I’m thankful for that,” he said, restrained. “I just…I guess I just need time to adjust to all this. It’s…it’s hard, to feel something so strongly and not be able to act on it.”

“I know,” she sighed. “If you need some time apart, it’s fine, Mom is here—“

“No,” he said, quickly and a little too sharply. “No, I want to be here.” He looked at her, and she squirmed under that stare. All the things he couldn’t say, couldn’t ask, couldn’t do, came through that stare. He willed her to see them.

She drew a breath, and stepped closer to him. Her hands rested lightly on his shoulders. Why did it hurt more for her to do that? The closer she came the farther away she felt.

“Tom, I don’t hate you,” she said. “I…I want us to be friends. Genuinely, truly, friends. Partners. You are one of the most important people in my life. I’m here. You and I, we’ve always been in this together. This isn’t easy for me, either, though. But we have to put our disappointments aside.”

Disappointments. His and hers. His at not being allowed to love her the way he wanted. And her, with his betrayal. He wanted to ask her, do you still love me? If he knew she still loved him, on some level, maybe he could make peace with that. At least he hadn’t destroyed that.

But on some level, he knew. She did love him. He could see it in the pain in her violet eyes. He could feel it in the way her fingers twitched against his shoulders. It wouldn’t be this hard, it wouldn’t be this excruciating if she still didn’t have love for him, somewhere.

Gently, he leaned forward and pressed a light kiss to her temple. “I just…I know we want to be united for Beatrice’s sake,” he whispered against her hair. “But we can’t just ignore things.”

She winced, dropping her hands. He grasped at one of them before she could pull away.

“We’re not ignoring it,” she said, but she didn’t meet his eyes for a moment. When she did, they were cloudy. “We’re just…putting it aside for now. Because I meant what I said, Tom. We can’t be together like that. We have to work with the situation as it is, right now, and let things take their natural course.”

“Back to the beginning,” Tom said.

“Yes. That’s not a bad thing.” Suddenly Beatrice began to fuss. Cosette looked over her shoulder. “I don’t think she’s hungry, it’s not even been an hour since I fed her.”

“Probably needs changed,” Tom said. “I’ll take care of her. Go take your shower.” He gave her a little smile.

She nodded, smiling back, and went to do just that.
Cosette stood under the stream of hot water, watching the steam rise from her cool skin. It was December 9th in L.A., and while Los Angeles was rarely cold or gloomy, it had its moments, and while the sun had shown brightly for Beatrice’s trip home, the temperature was in the fifties, which native So-Cal residents found to be uncomfortably cold. Usually.

At the moment, Cosette was trying to escape into the heat and silence of her shower cubicle. She leaned against the far wall and just let the water cover her, and shut her eyes. She was still exhausted from the ordeal – hospital beds were not really made for sleeping through the night, and feeding and caring for Beatrice had interrupted her sleep cycle. Plus she knew it was only the beginning.

But Tom was here. Tom was going to help. At least for a while.

She knew about him taking on Sandman, which was going to start filming in August. From what she understood, there was a lot of CGI work involved, so he might be working regularly with the pre-production team here in L.A. in the coming months. She knew he had to promote his big blockbuster, Skull Island, in the coming summer months, probably starting as early as May and going into June. And then there was the third Thor film, which Marvel was likely to release in November (as the usually did), so most of October was also going to go for promotion. She had to ask him his schedule. She had to know how long he was going to be away. She knew, through Christina, that he was talking about a film with Harvey Weinstein’s company, and that meant big exposure for him.

Between Skull Island, Thor, and Sandman, Tom was going to be a very busy man. He could probably afford not to do the project, but with the state between them, and his primary ambition toward his career, he would be a fool not to take it. Cosette didn’t want to discourage him. But the thought of Beatrice getting all attached to Tom and then him leaving…well, it wouldn’t really be any different if they were in a committed relationship, would it? She’d just be able to use different pressures to keep him here. And she didn’t really want to do that.

She was still sore and achy from giving birth. Her belly was still very round, although she felt considerably lighter. And the lochia was in full flow, a bit heavier than her normal period. She cleaned herself gently but as thoroughly as she could, and when she got out of the shower made sure to get her underwear on as soon as possible. It was a bit irritating, she realized – her pregnancy underwear was too big but her regular underwear was too small. She chose the pregnancy underwear and pulled it up as high as she could. Thankfully her pajama bottoms had draw strings so she was able to pull them to adjust. Her pregnancy T-shirt was too big but she went with it anyway, preferring something baggy for comfort.

Her parents, Christina, and Henry had arrived while she was in the shower. Her mother was cleaning up the kitchen, washing whatever dishes she had in the sink, and Cosette saw a basket of laundry sitting on the floor by the basement door. Her father was in the living room, flipping through the channels, while Christina was on the floor, holding Beatrice while Henry showed his niece all the neat toys that had been bought for her. Beatrice was a little puzzled about the different rattles, but she seemed mesmerized nonetheless.

“Where’s Tom?” Cosette asked her mother, coming back into the kitchen.

“I suggested he go back to his place and get some clothes for overnight,” Isabella answered. “I’m going to get the guest bedroom ready for him.”

“Are you sure you’re okay on the couch? You can bunk with me if your back bothers you.”
“That’ll be fine, sweetie. Don’t worry about it. You hungry? Want something to eat?”

She’d had the hospital breakfast, not much to write home about, and it was getting on lunch. “Some pasta, maybe? I have a box in the cupboard and some sauce in the fridge.”

“I’ll take care of it. Go sit. You need to rest.”

Her mother was right but Cosette felt restless. She went into the living room and settled on the couch, watching Christina and Henry having fun being Auntie and Uncle.

“I think Henry is already in love,” Christina said.

Cosette opened her mouth to reply, but suddenly her pelvis was alight with pain, a cramp much more intense than those she experienced with her period. She’d been having them on and off all night, one of the reasons she hadn’t slept well. She groaned.

“You okay?” Christina asked in alarm. Raymond had muted the television and was watching her with concern.

“Just more cramps,” Cosette panted. “It’s passing. It’s not going to be fun these next couple of weeks. Between the lochia, the cramps, and the soreness…”

“Did you take a sitz bath?” Christina asked, handing Beatrice to Henry.

“Here, let me have her a bit,” Raymond said, and Henry complied.

“We need to get you a spray bottle for the bathroom for you to spray,” Christina started.

“Do you ladies have to discuss this here, with all of us present?” Raymond grunted. “Beatrice certainly doesn’t want to hear about her mother’s plumbing. She’s too young.”

Cosette couldn’t help but laugh. “Dad, you are…just precious. Never change.” She shifted to lie down on the couch. “She’s going to need feeding in a little bit. Wake me if I fall asleep.”

It wasn’t easy. Her levels of discomfort while she was moving were more easily dismissed, but now that she was lying still, she could feel everything. The leftover of her earlier crap, the stretch of her muscles, the bloating from all the fluid she was still holding onto, and worse, she was suddenly horribly thirsty.

“Can someone get me something to drink?” she muttered. Within a few minutes, Christina was handing her a ginger ale.

She didn’t know how much time passed, but she was wakened by a shuffling at the side door and Tom’s voice carrying into the living room. “Sorry,” he said, “but I stopped at the store on the way back. The doctor said she needs to eat some high fiber foods for a while, it will help with…”

“Constipation,” Isabella finished. “Yes, that’s pretty smart. What did you get?”

“A few different cereals. Some celery and peanut butter. And I know she likes pasta so I picked up some whole wheat stuff for her to try. Is that for her?”

“I think she’s sleeping on the couch,” Isabella replied. “You can see if she wants it.”

Tom came down the hall and Cosette watched him through the decorative trellis that made up the upper half of the wall of the hallway that separated it from the living room. When he came around
the corner she saw he had a bowl of pasta in his hands.

Beatrice had been fussing lightly but then she let out a very distinctive “waaah!” when Tom appeared. He gave a little jump.

“It’s not you, Daddy,” Raymond chuckled at him. “Cozy warned me she’d be hungry soon, maybe she smelled the food.”

Cosette sat up and stretched. Her bowls shifted uncomfortably and she had another cramp. She winced, the soreness aggravated by not moving for a little while. She stood up slowly. “I’ll take her,” she said. She scooped Beatrice up from her father’s arms, gently, a smile coming almost unbidden to her face when she looked down into her big blue eyes. “Serves me right for not wearing a button down shirt.”

Tom followed her down the back hallway into Beatrice’s room, still carrying the pasta. She wasn’t moving quickly, almost limping. “Cosette, are you all right?” he asked.

“Still recovering, Tom,” she tossed at him over her shoulder. “It’s going to be a while.”

“I know, I was reading about recovery after childbirth. Look, if you need something from me, don’t be afraid to tell me exactly what it is. I mean, even if it’s…personal. I’m not going to get all grossed out.”

Going into the nursery, Cosette settled down into the rocker. She positioned Beatrice against her chest, and reached down to pull up her shirt – and then stopped, looked up at Tom.

He was staring down at her, a strange light in his eyes. Like he was waiting, expecting, and curious.

It occurred to her that he wanted to watch. And immediately her hackles went up. Did he honestly think that she was going to pull out her breast in front of him? But then again, this was part of the deal – if they were together, if they were married, she wouldn’t have thought twice about it. But in their current situation, it was nigh unthinkable.

There was nothing lecherous in that look, she realized as she considered her options. She didn’t want to be harsh about it, but…

“Tom,” she said, her voice soft, almost sweet. “I’m still new at this. Can I…have a little privacy?”

He shifted, and then nodded, a blush starting to spread across his cheeks. He still had the bowl of pasta in his hands. “I’ll, uh…keep this warm for you. Let me know if you want it.” And he turned and left.

Cosette pulled up her shirt and pulled down the flap on the breastfeeding bra. Beatrice latched on, shifting a bit, letting go a few times as she still worked at figuring out exactly how to feed from her mommy. It wasn’t a painful process but Cosette’s nipples were a lot more sensitive this time than they had been those first couple of times. She flinched a few times before things settled, and then there was just the gentle sound of sucking.

Relaxing in the rocker, Cosette let out a low breath. Button down shirts from now on, and a towel on hand at all times, she decided. That way it might help, not having to kick Tom out every time she wanted to do this. And it was breast-feeding after all. Some women did it in pubic for everyone to see and didn’t even hesitate or feel a blush of shame. It wasn’t shameful, after all. It was what breasts were for.
26 -- Three Weeks After (First Christmas)

Chapter Summary

The family celebrates Beatrice's first Christmas.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long break. I do have plans for this story and I haven't abandoned it but as y'all know, the events of the last two months have monkey-wrenched a lot of my inspiration. Which isn't really altogether a bad thing. More drama ahead. Life gets exciting in a week so I make no promises about when the next update is coming. I wrote most of Tom's perspective before the big "news" hit and then Cosette came after in bits in pieces.

Beatrice was only three weeks old, not even quite that from December 8th to December 25th, only seventeen days. It had been a tumultuous three weeks, and the holidays didn’t promise to get any quieter.

His mother had just come in the day before Christmas Eve, and was sleeping off her jetlag at his rented flat, as he was still spending his nights at Cosette’s, helping with the late night feedings, diaper changes, and general crankiness (both on the baby and her mother’s parts) as best he could. His father was coming in that afternoon and going to a hotel, as he was only going to stay until the day after Boxing Day. Emma and her husband were going to fly in right after Christmas and stay until the New Year. As it was Beatrice’s first Christmas, and the perfect time for her to meet her paternal grandparents and family, they all decided that Cosette’s house was probably the best location for all of them to celebrate.

The last seventeen days – two and a half weeks – had started smoothly enough, but soon Cosette’s post-partum depression kicked in, and Tom felt like he was navigating a minefield. It wasn’t that she yelled at him, or snapped at him, or was in any way unkind to him – it was that he would randomly find her crying. Crying when she was changing Beatrice’s nappy. Crying when she was sitting in the living room, watching television. Wiping away tears when Tom came back from a trip to the store, or when he checked on her in the middle of the night after hearing Beatrice over the baby monitor, or when he got to Beatrice first and would hear her sniffling from her bedroom.

And every single time he heard those tears, he would feel like someone had gut-punched him. That sickening worry that he was hurting her, that he was making it worse, just rose up on him and rode around on his back like a needy koala. All the books he’d read had all talked about this, and all of them said -- take care of the mother. She's taking care of the baby, take care of her. The best way to take care was to supply her emotional needs. He wanted, desperately, to embrace her, comfort her, reassure her, but couldn’t because he was unsure if the gesture would be welcome, and his heart was in too unstable a place to take that rejection.

Dr. Ivery said it was normal. Women went through a couple of weeks of depression. If it went
longer, then they needed to be concerned. Tom wanted to be convinced but Cosette didn’t talk about it, so he had no idea what was going through her head. Isabella would pat his arm reassuringly and carry on with keeping the laundry cycle going.

He and Isabella had divided duties. She cooked and generally kept the bedrooms in order. Tom cleaned up the dishes, and made sure the living room was picked up. Isabella did the laundry, Tom made sure Cosette ate. Both of them followed in the wake of Cosette’s new motherhood with a watchful eye, catching anything that might possibly go awry before it could materialize. Isabella was more discreet, and was rewarded for her efforts by Cosette actually asking her for things. Tom was, as his nature, a bit more dominating, but she didn’t argue with him, just sighed and resigned herself as if it were an old habit.

Beatrice seemed utterly dependent on her mother, so most times Cosette sat in the living room with her baby cuddled against her, making it easier for feedings. When Beatrice would drift off Cosette would place her in the bassinette at her feet, or let Tom take her and lay her in her crib. He was pretty good about taking regular diaper duty, something Isabella was more than happy to let him do. Sometimes Cosette would sleep, sometimes she would watch television, but mostly when Beatrice was awake, Tom tried to distract both mother and daughter by playing with the various baby toys they’d been given, talking to his daughter and telling her stories. Cosette seemed to appreciate the company. As Christmas got closer, her tears seemed to come fewer and farther between.

Isabella went home most nights after the first couple of days, and this struck Tom as kind of strange. He never would have thought that Cosette’s parents would leave her alone in the house with him overnight, but he knew there was absolutely no possibility of anything happening. The first week, Cosette had been in so much discomfort that she’d taken to bathing twice a day, to soak her more tender areas. In that time, she would leave a bottle of breast milk for Tom to give Beatrice if she wasn’t out of the bath in time for a feeding. She would always thank Tom profusely when she was done, and he would just tell her not to worry; that was why he was there.

She’d gotten much more comfortable breastfeeding in front of him. He’d overheard her saying that button down shirts worked best, so when he went to the store, he would grab something in her size if he caught a color or pattern that he knew she would like. At first she’d tried to cover herself discreetly with a towel or blanket during the feedings, but soon abandoned that pretense. She would ask him, occasionally, to turn his head for a moment as she got Beatrice going, but once the girl had latched on, there was no problem. Tom had even caught her switching sides once, although she got faster at it as time passed, and seeing her lovely chest again had caused him to blush uncomfortably so he made an effort *not* to see it.

He didn’t like to dwell on how that stung. If they’d done things differently, he could have appreciated her, instead of feeling like some peeping pervert.

Cosette had been right about one thing, though – they had just needed some time to get used to the new situation. The throb in his chest was slowly replaced by the strong fatherhood urge, the desire to consume everything about his little girl. But the more he was around Beatrice, the more he found himself appreciating Cosette, who she was, what she'd gone through. It came across in everything he did -- making her meals, keeping her home organized and clutter free, and taking every opportunity to send something positive her way, something encouraging, or even affectionate without being cloying. It was a good way to vent. He couldn’t tell Cosette he loved her, couldn’t use his words to sway her heart. So instead, he just showed her.

She had an old treadmill in her furnished basement, so Tom cleaned it off and got it working again. His first excuse was that he still wanted to keep on his morning runs, but didn’t want to be away
too long, so the treadmill was a good excuse. Soon, however, she started walking on it. She’d lost a lot of her water quickly, but there were a good ten or more pounds still sticking around after the water weight. He didn’t make her walk – any talk of losing weight from a man was a kiss of death for a relationship – but he knew she would want to feel better by getting back to her original weight, or at least try.

Her hips were a bit wider now, and her breasts were definitely larger, and her hair, which had once upon a time been neatly styled for her daily school routine, now hung a bit loose and wild down her back, sometimes gathered in a hairband of some type to keep it out of her way. The glow of pregnancy had been replaced by the glow of motherhood, although she seemed constantly tired and drooped a bit when she walked. He wanted to tell her how lovely she was, but didn’t want it to sound like he was flirting, so instead he made an effort to keep pretty things around the house, some fresh flowers on her kitchen table or decorating her fridge with little word magnets he brought, spelling out flattering phrases without referencing them directly to her. Sometimes he would find cute phrases about being a mommy and hang them up where she could see them -- intermingled with occasionally hysterically funny observations about motherhood. For the cute ones, she would always give a little smile, but never commented. For the funny ones, he would often hear her snort or even occasionally give a laugh.

The worst of it, though, was the continuous gossip. He kept it away from her at every turn. He was grateful she was too tired or too busy to go on the internet. He'd been papped going to the store so many times, he started to delay going, and deliberately wore the same clothes when he did go, just to make it harder for them to tell the days apart and damage the value of what pictures they did get. The headlines were ridiculous, anything from the baby being fake and it all being a PR stunt, to how he was somehow blackmailing Cosette, or she him -- the perversions went on and on. Although he and Luke had a very hearty chuckle over them being married and Cosette being their surrogate.

He kept an ear out for it, but the only reason it didn't get to him was because he had to stay focused on being a father.

“I’m getting a little sick of purple,” Cosette sighed on Christmas Eve morning, shifting through a pile of Beatrice’s onesies.

Tom, who was changing Beatrice at the changing table, gave a little start. Truthfully, all the purple had been mostly his fault. Purple always made him think of Cosette, so everything he got for Beatrice had some purple in it. Not just one shade of purple, but every different tone. One time they’d found themselves bickering over which purples had more red in them and which had more blue, like the periwinkle paint in Beatrice’s room, compared to the raspberry of one of the blankets Christina had bought for the crib. Raymond had snorted at them in amusement from where he could hear them down the hall at the kitchen table, and Tom never argued about color again.

“Maybe some yellow?” Tom suggested. “Isn’t there something in there with sunflowers on it? I think Emma sent it.”

“Oh, you’re right!” A few seconds later, Cosette had the article of clothing in her hand. “Thank God my mother does the laundry so often.” She walked over to him, a bright smile on her face. “You want to dress her?”

Tom took the onesie and slid Beatrice into it. When he picked her up, the baby girl rested her head on his shoulder, but then started to try and hold it up.

“Oh my,” Cosette gasped. “I thought I saw her doing that the other day, but…”
Tom beamed. “She wants to see the world. Already asserting herself.”

In Cosette’s kitchen, Isabella was already getting ready for the big Christmas Eve meal that was a tradition with their family. It was meatless, usually consisting of some fish – this year it was salmon – and various side dishes, including noodles, fried potatoes, and whatever vegetable they decided upon. Usually Isabella made a green bean casserole, but Cosette had never liked it so a second vegetable was offered. Tom tried to suggest broccoli, as he still wanted Cosette to keep her fiber high, but Henry had offered to make his special roasted cauliflower dish. At her apartment, Christina was taking care of all the sweets. Various Christmas cookies and a few pies were being prepared, and Tom couldn’t help but look forward to them being brought over in a few hours.

Right now, however, Isabella was preparing the dough for her fresh baked bread. She only made bread at Christmas, one of Cosette’s absolute favorite things that she looked forward to the most at this time of year. Tom wanted to learn the recipe so perhaps he could try it himself, and Isabella didn’t seem opposed to the idea, but at the moment he was a bit concerned about getting the Christmas tree up in time.

Raymond was in the living room, assembling Cosette’s fake tree. Tom couldn’t help but shake his head – he was used to a living tree at his mother’s, and it would have been up weeks before now. But the Mitchells had a long-standing tradition of not putting up the tree until Christmas Eve, and since the big celebration was being held at Cosette’s, it was her living room that had to wait until the last minute.

“What do you think, Bebe?” Tom whispered to his daughter as he directed her gaze toward the tree. It had hundreds of fiber optic strands intertwined with the fake needles, and when Raymond plugged it in, it started to flutter with color. The little wheel in the base turned, changing the colors to nearly every shade in the spectrum. “How’s this for your first Christmas?”

Raymond sighed. “I know Cosette was nuts about this fiber optic stuff when she was in college,” he grunted as he got up, and Tom offered his spare hand to get the old man to his feet. “But I always thought this was a little much.”

“Don’t give me a hard time about my tree, Dad,” Cosette said, coming into the room. Then, she frowned at the tree. “You don’t think your family will hate it, do you?” she asked Tom.

Tom chuckled. “Don’t worry about, darling,” he said. Then he realized what he called her, but nobody commented. He continued, “They’ll be too busy cooing over this one to care. Besides, Mum will find it charming, and if Dad doesn’t like it, he’ll be too polite to say anything about it.”

The Christmas presents that had been collected were gathered into piles on the table. Even Beatrice’s presents were wrapped, as Tom had insisted, as it just wasn’t proper to have unwrapped presents under the tree. Cosette teased him that he just wanted to rip the paper off himself, and he didn’t argue. But what really stunned him, was that they didn’t buy presents for each other.

"We stopped doing that years ago," Isabella had told him one afternoon when he asked her what kinds of things they got Cosette for Christmas. "All of us are comfortable enough to get what we want when we want it."

"But it isn't about the things," Tom argued. "It's the sentiment."

She chuckled. "We're protective, but not terribly sentimental. Although I think Christina and Cosette still do a little gift exchange. Besides, Tom, your concentration should be on Beatrice. Even if she isn't old enough, this aspect of Christmas really is for children."
He had found out later than of course Christina and Henry exchanged gifts, and Cosette always got something for her sister, but was holding off this year in lieu of getting them a wedding present. She had told all her family not to buy her any presents but to concentrate solely on Beatrice.

Truthfully, this bothered him a bit. Beatrice had everything she needed, and would continue to have it. Cosette stubbornly only touched the child support fund when she absolutely had to, and even so, she didn't buy things that were expensive, but stayed frugal. Even her monthly bills were low -- car insurance, cable, utilities -- not taking more than five hundred dollars a month from the fund. But he kept his peace about it, biding his time. It would come, he told himself. Eventually.

While they finished with the tree, Tom tried to settle down with Beatrice to play but she kept fussing until she was turned to watch. She seemed mesmerized by the shifting lights.

Raymond noticed. “Well, if she approves, I guess it's fine. So you have ornaments and stuff, Cozy?”

Cosette pulled out a few small boxes from underneath the dining hutch on the far side of the room. Tom remembered a conversation from a week ago as he watched her face shift as she decided on what boxes to use. Her grandmother’s ornaments had always been enough for her, she said. Grandma Beatrice had always had a thing for making ornaments, which usually consisted of satin balls embroidered with stick pins filled with plastic jewels and pearls, and some kind of fringe hanging off the bottom. But Cosette was concerned about the pins and if they came out, so she asked Tom to pick up some safe plastic balls and other ornaments that would amuse a baby, and he’d come through with a cute assortment. His heart had given a little flutter when her face lit up with his choices.

“I have some string beads for us to use as garland,” she told her father as she handed him the boxes. “We don’t have to do a lot, the lights carry the tree, mostly.”

The rest of the morning passed in a low level bustle of activity. Cosette helped with the ornaments, strung the bead garlands, and arranged the presents under the tree – although with that last part Tom interfered enough for her to make him switch her places, and she held Beatrice while he finished arranging her presents.

“Next year she still won’t be old enough to really understand what’s going on,” Cosette cautioned him when they were done. “You’re going to have to wait a few years to really get the glee of Christmas morning.”

Tom smiled at her, wondering if she knew what she was saying. The thought of being like this, with her, for years to come…it filled him with a joy he didn’t quite understand.

“As long as we’re all together, it’ll be fine,” he said softly.

Her eyes caught his, and he saw something reflected there. But she didn’t say anything, just gave him a little smile and passed their daughter back to him at the sound of Christina coming into the house.

“I’m going to go help with the goodies,” Cosette told him as she left the room. “You and Dad keep Beatrice entertained. See if you can get her to fall asleep because it’s going to be a late night!”

Ah, and the crowning jewel. Midnight Mass. Tom had already made it clear that he was going with them, as he had slightly fallen in love with the beautiful church where Beatrice was going to be christened. Cosette hadn’t gone there much for Mass during her pregnancy, but now that Beatrice was born and Tom was there, she felt a bit more confident. After all, Christina was getting married
there in a month. The christening was set to happen immediately after Christmas, when his parents and sister was there, but it was still going to be a small affair. Tom attempted to get her to put it off until after Christina's wedding so he could make a bigger deal out of it, but Cosette wisely pointed out that he couldn't expect his family to go rushing back and forth across the ocean. On top of that, her views of baptism were rather different than his -- admittedly, in his family, it was a bit more for show rather than any deeply religious significance. Tom relented because he didn't want to get into a religious debate with an entire family -- but he made damn sure that the little party afterwards was going to be catered by the fanciest company he could get at that time of year, and that he would have a photographer to capture every single second so his mother could watch it later.

Tom went into the kitchen upon hearing the girls start to giggle, and when he turned the corner he saw why. Christina was holding out a beautiful red velvet dress with white fluffy trim, compete with a little hood. It was like a baby-sized Santa robe, to go over the green sleeper Beatrice was going to wear that night.

“You’re going to start dressing her up like a doll,” Cosette said with a shake of her head.

“I’m not the only one! I saw that dress you got her for Christmas day.”

Of course. It was one of the few times Cosette had insisted on going shopping since giving birth, when she was going to stir crazy in the house and desperately needed to get out. Tom stayed with Beatrice while Isabella and Cosette went out and when they returned, she had a beautiful baby dress of gold and white for her to wear on Christmas Day.

“I was just going to have her wear her christening dress but when I saw it I couldn’t help myself,” Cosette sighed. “Are those the chocolate shortbread cookies?” she added, pointing at the foil wrapped package on the table.

“I made extra, since you can’t have any of the Bailey’s pie this year,” Christina said.

Cosette pouted. “Dammit. I haven’t had a drink in...in months! I can’t even have any champagne on New Years!”

Christina ignored her sister’s rant and went right for her niece. “Bebe!” she squealed. “Merry Christmas!”

Tom let Christina have her. “Merry Christmas, Christina.” He pecked her cheek.

“Merry Christmas, Tom,” Christina replied, accepting the peck. “God I’m so excited. I can’t remember being so excited!”

“Because we have a kid this year,” Raymond commented from where he had settled in the living room. “Christmas is really for children.”

“So when are your parents coming?” Christina asked Tom.

“Mom’s here. Dad’s flight lands at three. I’ll scoop him up and bring him over.”

“Dinner is at seven,” Isabella reminded them from the sink, where she washed the flour from her hands. On the stove, three bread pans sat, each covered with a towel, to protecting the rising dough. “Hope he gets enough rest!”

“He’ll be fine,” he assured them. “I made sure he got one of those sleeper seats, like we used. He usually takes a valium and sleeps through the flight – Dad usually hates to fly.”
Cosette felt a slight twinge in her gut at the mention of the Hiddleston patriarch. James had been open and honest with her, something she'd appreciated in the face of all the politeness. She wondered, however, what he thought now that she and Tom were not together, and yet still together.

Quite frankly the whole thing was just confusing.

These last couple of weeks had been so smooth, and Tom had been patient and supportive. But it was going to end soon, she could feel it. Life had to return to a normal pace, and this little cocoon they’d created could not last. It simply wasn't realistic. Next year she would be working again, somewhere, and time off would be precious. Plus, it wouldn't be fair not to let Tom have time with his daughter during the holidays...

She shook off these thoughts. She couldn't let anxiety get to her. It had been hard enough, these last few weeks, battling the rollercoaster of emotions, fighting the urge to throw herself at Tom, to just hold her, comfort her, reassure her that everything was going to be okay. She couldn't ask that of him. She could not put that on him. She had to be prepared to do this on her own.

The day continued, growing in intensity. When Diana arrived, she was a bit more formal to her than she'd been before, but she was thrilled to meet her granddaughter. She was also rather pleased to meet Henry, and congratulated Christina and her fiancée on their impending nuptials. Cosette couldn't help but imagine Diana shooting a few looks at her when she started asking the couple about their relationship, their history, their plans for the future.

Of course, she thought. Of course Diana would have wanted Tom to marry her. She wondered what Diana had had to say when she found out -- if she even knew, although Cosette was pretty sure Tom would have told her and not lied about it -- about the girl in Australia.

When James arrived, he was quite gracious to her. Her dad and Tom's dad seemed to get on instantly, which surprised and relieved her. And then all of them were sitting down to dinner and James tucked in eagerly, most especially enjoying her mother's homemade bread. He patiently listened as Diana told him about Christina and Henry's upcoming wedding, and Cosette just sat back, one eye on a dozing Beatrice, listening.

Tom noticed her silence. She could have been imagining it but the talk of the wedding was coinciding with the looks he was shooting her across the table. Then again, talk of the wedding made her nervous anyway, knowing she was going to have to get into a bridesmaid's dress in a month's time. The lochia would hopefully have finished by then, and maybe these last ten pounds would be coming off her if she could find time to get into gear on that treadmill.

"You're awful quiet, luv," James said to her from where he sat at the foot of the table, her at his right, Tom at his left. Beside her were Henry and Christina, with her father at the head of the table, and Tom's mother beside him with her mother at her father's right hand. It was a good thing that James was going to be gone shortly after Emma and her husband arrived. There was no more room and Cosette had already had them put in the extra slat on the dining room table.

The thought of Emma just sent another clench of dread through her. "There's lots going on," Cosette managed. "I'm just...taking it all in."

"Holidays are quite the trial. Don't worry, it'll all pass soon enough." He glanced at the little carrier where Beatrice was sleeping, sitting right beside Cosette. "She's getting christened right after, yeah?"
"Yes. I didn't want to wait."

"Yeah, Catholics and their belief unbaptised babies go to hell." He was smirking at her.

"We don't believe that!" Cosette admonished him. "Just the Scots go to hell."

He lit up, guffawing at her return. "Good one, luv," he remarked, sipping his wine. "Better than being Irish, though."

"Oh, yes, definitely. Although I think Henry is at least half Irish."

"Ha," Henry deadpanned from his seat down the table.

"Don't start James on the Irish," Diana teased.

"Come on now, luv, it's the new millennium," James announced at the groans from his daughter and son. "We're all supposed to be acceptin' now, ain't we?"

Cosette couldn't help but smirk at James. She wondered if she spent more time in his company if she'd see more common behaviors, as Tom was always so absolutely careful with his words, and James was far more relaxed and natural.

They all went to Midnight Mass together, although Cosette had expressed concern to Tom about them having to attend another denomination on the holy day, and offered to find a good Episcopal or Anglican church nearby, but Tom said it was fine and they were perfectly satisfied with it.

Truthfully, this bugged her. Because she would not be satisfied with another denomination. She deeply believed in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic church, but she didn't want to fight with anyone so she just let them do as they pleased. Although she wanted to be sure they understood that the Catholics were not fluid with their communion, and only Catholics could receive; so she told Tom quietly and asked what he thought she should do. He said he would handle it, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze.

They filled up the entire pew. Diana sat with Christina and Henry on one side, Tom on the other, with Cosette on the others side of him with her parents, with the rest of the pew taken up by Beatrice's carrier. The girl herself, who slept on the way to Mass but woke up during the Gloria, was passed around from person to person to keep her quiet and amused, until feeding time came and then only Mommy would do. Cosette couldn't help but feel a tiny bit uncomfortable, and kept the blanket over her chest until she was sure Beatrice had latched on, but her mother patted her arm and reassured her it was fine. God had made the process to be that way, after all.

After Mass, several people came by and crooned over the new little girl -- "Fresh from the factory!" one middle-aged woman teased -- and not a single one gave her an off look. They shook Tom's hand, congratulated them, wished them Merry Christmas. It was nearly two in the morning by the time everyone went home, and Cosette was utterly exhausted when she came through her back door with Tom on her heels, carrying the carrier.

"I think she's asleep again," Cosette whispered.

Tom set the carrier down. "I can put her down," he said. "You go get cleaned up, you're ready to drop. Mum and Dad are coming at ten so you can sleep in a little bit."

Feeling a twinge of guilt for passing her maternal duty on to Tom, she let him have Beatrice and did exactly as he suggested. She'd gone a bit out of her way to be dressed up for Mass, not having been out and done anything requiring a lot of effort into her appearance in quite some time, and
rather missing it a little. She took off her make-up, took a quick shower and washed her hair, and then got into her fleece pajamas. She made a cup of hot cocoa, because it was at least in the fifties in Los Angeles on Christmas Day at two-thirty in the morning, and went to sit in the living room, suddenly more awake than she’d been when they got home. She turned on the Christmas tree lights and sat on the couch, watching them flutter.

A few minutes went by, and Tom appeared behind the metal lattice separating the living room from the hallway. "Thought you'd be in bed," he said softly.

"Just wanted a little Christmas cheer," she said.

"Do you...mind terribly...if I join you?"

For Tom to be shy...it struck her. "Of course not," she said.

"Is there more hot cocoa?"

"There's a whole box on top of the microwave. Use milk, it tastes better."

A few minutes later Tom was sitting beside her, at the other corner of the couch -- not too close -- watching the lights on the tree.

"So, I'm genuinely curious," Tom said, after a long, quiet peace, "why is it that non-Catholics can't receive communion?"

She shuffled. She felt too tired to answer that question. Tom immediately mistook her hesitation for something else and added, "I'm not trying to challenge you, I just want to know."

"Well, the bottom line is, it's what we believe about it," Cosette said. "We believe the Eucharist is the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ. That what Jesus really meant exactly what He said. Do you in the C of E believe that?"

He looked down, swirling his mug of chocolate. "No, I can't say that we do."

"The very word communion means coming into union," she explained. "And if you don't believe that the Eucharist is what we believe it is, how can we possibly come into union over it? It's not possible then, is it?"

"No, I supposed it isn't," he agreed. Then after a pause, he asked, very gently. "So you take that literally, but not the part about how you're supposed to gouge out your eye?"

She gave a little laugh. "Well, Our Lord went on a lot about how His Flesh was real food and His Blood was real drink. He didn't go on at all about how he really wanted you to tear out your eye. The Apostles were there, they heard Him themselves. You don't hear about them all being one-eyed, do you? But you hear plenty about the Real Presence. They were closer to it than we were, and knew what was what." She considered it. "You know, I have thought about that. When I feel some doubt, I remember that when Jesus said what He said about His Body and Blood, he lost a bunch of followers. He didn't stop them by saying, hey guys, I didn't mean it like that. Come back! He even asked the Apostles if they were going to leave, too, but they didn't, because they trusted him. They knew who He was -- where else could they go? So...that's my take on it, anyway."

She glanced at him, saw how he was watching her. "I did say I wasn't going to challenge you...and I kind of did, didn't I?"

"Kinda."
"You took it well."

She felt his fingers, then, on the back of her hand that was resting on the couch cushion between them.

"I hope Beatrice has strong faith like yours," he whispered.

Cosette felt a flush then. Her mind reeled a bit, wondering what kind of faith Beatrice *would* have, with a mother and father divided. But Tom had asked her, and listened. She had no idea what was really in his head about such things. Maybe one day she would.

Softly, she pulled her hand away, standing up. "Merry Christmas, Tom," she said, leaning over him and kissing his cheek, bracing her hand on his other cheek, feeling the stubble against his palm. "You want me to turn off the tree?"

"No, I'll do it," he said as she stood up. "Good night. Merry Christmas."

It was very much a Merry Christmas.

Beatrice slept through most of the night, but when Cosette heard her cry at seven a.m., Tom had a bottle of breast milk ready and was in Beatrice's room as if he'd slept in there. Unfortunately, Beatrice didn't want it -- nothing but the real deal would do for her that morning, so Tom brought Bebe into Cosette's bedroom so she could nurse, and took her back when she was done so Cosette could get a little more sleep. She managed another hour, and then got up at eight-thirty and made Tom and herself a little breakfast: scrambled eggs and bacon with some home-made bread for toast with butter and jam. Her parents arrived at nine-thirty so her mother could prepare the duck they were having for dinner, then Tom's at ten, where Diana gleefully pitched in, and Henry and Christina at ten forty-five, with Christina wearing a new pair of pink diamond earrings. Then the presents were opened.

Everyone was in a good mood. Dinner was boisterous, all of them sharing their favorite Christmas memories, and Beatrice was fascinated by all the excitement. All the potential awkwardness of the previous day vanished as Diana lavished little Beatrice with baby clothes and toys. James was a bit more pragmatic, giving Cosette several savings bonds to save for the little girl.

By the time it was over, at around five o'clock, Cosette was exhausted and dozing on and off on the couch while Tom, Christina, and Henry played with Beatrice and her toys. Isabelle brought her some ginger ale, as her stomach was bothering her slightly from all the rich food. James and Raymond were sitting at the table laughing at something only fathers understood as they sipped at their coffee and ate their Christmas pie, and Diana was off making a few international calls on her cell phone with her other two children.

In spite of the slight discomfort, Cosette was actually very, very content, watching the people she loved the most play, laugh, and talk around her. Tom glanced at her, and they exchanged a smile before he was called away by the older men to settle some debate between them.

By six o'clock Beatrice was sound asleep, worn out from all the excitement of the day. She was going to be up most of the night, Cosette knew, so she went off to bed herself to sleep until her daughter woke them both up. Cramps twinged at her as she tried to make herself comfortable, and in the process of adjusting herself she knocked her blanket off her, and was too tired to reach for it and start over again.

She heard someone step into the room. Her sleep mask was firmly in place, so she could see who it was, but thinking it was her mother, she said, "Mommy... could you cover me up?" Knowing she
was sounding a bit like a pouty little girl, but knowing also that with her mother, every now and again, it was okay.

The soft blanket was draped about her person, from her shoulders to her feet. Tender hands tucked it into all the right places, and then when they reached her feet, a deep voice said, "These are like icicles. You want a second blanket?"

Cosette almost jumped. It was Tom.

"No," she said, a bit more awake, but not much. "Just...just tuck the blanket under."

Tom slid his hand under her feet and folded the blanket over so that it surrounded her toes, cocooning them in warmth. "How’s that?"

"Good."

"Are you all cozy...Cozy?" he teased, making her chuckle; he absently ran his hand over her hair, and bent over, kissing her on her crown. "How long do you want to sleep?" he whispered.

"Get me when Bebe wakes up," she yawned.

"You want the door open or closed?"

"Mostly...mostly closed."

"Okay. Sweet dreams."
Three Weeks After pt 2 -- The Christening

Chapter Summary

As the first line says -- everything had been going so well.

Chapter Notes

It's nice that this is coming out on the same night as the Emmy's....so when Tom loses (because he will -- the OJ American Crime Story actors were just too good, nothing personal against Tom) you can have a tiny bit of consolation. Or maybe not.

What's really going to piss me off is that everyone is going to say he lost because Taylor dumped him. Which isn't true. Either one. I don't think Taylor dumped him, but oh well, we'll never really know. But the reason he lost is because he is up against just too stiff of competition. Especially Courtney B. Vance. But because I love him anyway, good luck, Tom! At least Agnes is rooting for you! (lol)

Everything had been going so well.

Tom left for LAX to pick up Emma and Jack at about nine on Boxing Day, which was the day after Christmas, and knew it would spout another round of rumors, about him potentially deserting his "baby-mama" (how he'd come to *loathe* that term!), or how his family was coming to support him in his "time of crisis." Still, he went himself, with one of the agents from the same firm Isaac came from -- he'd given Olly the holiday off to spend with his family and wasn't expecting him back until the end of the week -- and brought them back to Cosette's house. At around one, after making sure the new arrivals were fed, they all headed to the church where Fr. Francis had volunteered to perform the ceremony himself and leave his fellow priests with their day off intact.

It was a small ceremony, but all of Cosette's friends came, all the family members that Raymond and Isabella had invited, and some other friends of the family. All total it was about twenty-five people, with a nice dinner being served in the church hall by the caterers Tom had hired. There were more presents for Beatrice, none of which were expected, and Henry and Christina managed to get them packed into two different car trunks as Tom, Cosette and all the grandparents thanked everyone for coming.

It was just them in the hall, finishing up, when it happened.

Tom was handing Beatrice off to Isabella. The baby still smelled of the sweet chrism oil, but was a bit overwhelmed having been around so many people. The family had overestimated how much stimulation the infant could take, and at one point Beatrice had started shrieking, and only Cosette could seem to soothe her, taking her outside of the hall into the crisp December afternoon. Once Beatrice was calmer, she came back in, but she had not been passed around again, so Tom had made sure Cosette would be comfortable as she pretty much had to hold the little girl for the remaining two hours. Finally succumbing to her need for the bathroom, Cosette had passed Bebe to her daddy, and Bebe had been fine thus far, so they braved grandma Isabella next, as Diana was
fussing over James and making sure he was going to be ready for his flight.

Then Diana screamed.

Tom looked over and saw his father lying on the floor. Diana got on her knees, started shaking James, slapping his cheek, trying to rouse him. In a few quick strides Tom was there, sliding on the floor, ruining the knees of his good pants and not giving a single damn, only taking in the waxy complexion of his father's face, and seeing how he was very much not conscious.

"Tom!" Cosette's shout caused him to turn his head in a blind panic, and he saw her running to him, kicking off her heels as she went. "What...what happened?"

"He said something about having trouble breathing," Diana rasped, and Tom realized there were tears running down his mother's face.

"Diana, please let me get beside him, I'm CPR trained," Cosette said, her voice taking on what Tom immediately recognized as her "teacher tone." By then Henry and Raymond were there, Henry still holding on to his cell phone.

"I called an ambulance," he said.

"Is he breathing?" Raymond asked.

Cosette pressed her fingers against James' neck. "I don't feel a pulse," she said. She leaned far over, hovering her ear over James' mouth. "Not sure if he's breathing. Okay...Tom," she reached out, grasped his arm, giving him a little push. "Let Henry take your place."

"I can...let me help!" he protested.

"You should never perform CPR on a member of your family if you don't have to," Cosette said, her tone still in that resolute firmness that, under other circumstances, would have turned him on. Henry was already gently pulling him back. Cosette turned away from him, focusing entirely on James. She cradled the back of his neck in her hand, tilting his head back by pulling up on his chin, opening his windpipe as much as possible.

"I've never done this--" Henry started but Cosette cut him off.

"Here," she said, rising up on her knees, putting one hand right in the middle of James' breastbone and lacing the fingers of her other hand over it. With the heel of her hand, she started to press. "Count to thirty!" She started to press, very hard, and Henry counted out loud as she made thirty compressions.

"Tom, your mother," Raymond said, nudging him. Tom hardly dragged his eyes away from Cosette and Henry as he managed to get up and go around, putting his arm around his mother. He hadn't even noticed when Emma and Jack had joined the circle, but saw the tears running down his sister's cheeks.

At thirty, Cosette stopped pressing and pushed her fingers against James' chin again, lowering her mouth to his and breathing into it, twice. Not hard, but completely normal breaths. He hadn't heard but she must have given Henry directions because as soon as that was done, Henry's strong hands were pressing on James, keeping the process going.

"Yes, they're doing as you said," Raymond said into Henry's phone, and Tom realized that he'd been on the line with the 911 operator the whole time.
Time. There was no time. Just this strange slog, watching Henry press, watching Cosette lean over and breathe, her relieving Henry after five rounds and now Cosette pressing into James' chest. Then switching again. And then, finally, new people, telling them to please move back, they were taking over.

A few moments after the paramedics arrived, suddenly James was conscious -- but barely. Tom hardly registered it when his mother left his arms, and he could hear Cosette as if from underwater, telling her parents to take Beatrice home, please, and stay with her, they would call as soon as they knew anything.

But then she had hold of him, and was pulling him along. "I'm driving you, Emma and Jack to the hospital," she said. "Your mom is going with James in the ambulance."

He nodded. "Beatrice?" he heard himself ask; even though he already knew, it was instinct to ask, to be sure.

She didn't miss a beat. "With Mom and Dad. Don't worry. Come on." She had to open the car door for him and it took a second for him to realize he was capable of functioning. Somewhere during that drive, he got his brain functioning again. Emma was on the phone to their sister, and when they pulled up to the emergency room entrance, it was Jack who got Emma out of the car.

Tom shot Cosette a fleeting look, his hand on the door. "Go," she said. "I'll park and follow." She squeezed his arm and he found himself reaching for her hand before he took off to find out what had become of his father.

8 8 8

Cosette hadn't spent much time in hospitals, but it seemed these last few months were determined to keep her there. The intensive care ward was much less cheerful than the maternity one, but the nurses here were just as gentle and kind. Or at least most of them.

James had had some kind of blood clot. It went into his lungs, a pulmonary embolism. He dismissed the chest pain at first as too much exertion, the stress of travel, Christmas, dealing with so many people. He was elderly, he was retired, and was used to a much quieter life. He didn't think something was seriously wrong.

The clot cut off oxygen to his heart, causing the major collapse. He was fortunate to be alive, and currently on medication to dissolve the clot. Cosette was told, in the hallway after the doctor had consulted with the family, that the CRP had saved his life.

They were trying not to crowd the room James was in, so Cosette drifted in and out. While her parents were home with Beatrice for as long as needed, Henry and Christina had come to the hospital to offer support, but stayed in the hallway. Diana had taken a shine to Henry and when she came out to go to the bathroom or get some water, or talk to the nurse, she gave him a little hug and patted Christina on the cheek.

The hours passed. The sun had long since set and visiting hours were only until 9, and it was getting closer. The intensive care unit was flexible, however. The doctor was reassuring, telling them that James' chances were good, but the next few days would be critical. They had to dissolve the clot, and keep his oxygen levels up. He wore a mask but was breathing on his own. He was hooked up to IVs that kept him hydrated as well as provided his medicine.

Cosette came into the room. It was at least her fifth or sixth visit, checking on everyone, making sure they didn't need anything. If anything was required from home, Henry was quick to dash off
and get it. He'd even brought her breast pump, and Cosette made a few visits to the bathroom
during the course of events, sending back bottles of breast milk with Henry. Christina mostly just
held her hand when she sat in the hallway, both of them fretting and mostly over Tom.

She'd never seen him like this.

The normally energetic man was replaced with a ghost. He was pale, and his hands trembled
slightly as he attempted to clasp them together, keep them under control. Sometimes he would sit
with his head in his hand, rubbing his forehead in a nearly compulsive gesture. His eyes were
unfocused, glassy. It was to be expected; seeing a parent in such a condition was a shock. But she
expected a bit more movement from him. Tom was always moving, somehow, even when he was
still. His fidgeting had all but ceased. Even the movements he did make seemed sluggish.

By ten o'clock, it was clear nobody had any intentions to leave. Emma wanted her mother to go lie
down somewhere, but Diana wouldn't go, insisting she would stay all night until she was sure
James was going to be okay. Nobody had eaten since the baptism dinner, and it wasn't until
Emma's stomach started to grumble that Jack insisted she go down to the cafeteria with him for
something small. The hot food stations were closed, but there were some cold things, sandwiches,
candy bars, chips, some fruit, and they returned with some stuff for the rest of the crew. Diana
munched on a container of strawberries.

Tom didn't eat anything. He grunted out a soft "no," even when Cosette dangled a Snickers bar in
front of him. "Want me to check if the cafeteria has a cheesecake?" she asked, one last desperate
attempt; he gave her a look much like his character had in The Night Manager when Roper asked
him if he was the traitor, and she backed off.

At midnight, Henry found a recliner in a nearby waiting lounge and dragged it into the room for
Diana. They got her comfortable, but it took up most of the extra space. Jack and Emma were told
by their mother, in no uncertain terms, to return to their hotel room; they could return first thing in
the morning, but Diana was going to spend the night.

Their dismissal roused Tom from his self-imposed coma. "I don't want to leave," he declared, his
voice still very soft and reserved.

"You don't have to," Cosette said. She took his hand, rubbing it reassuringly. "That room we got
the recliner from, there's a big couch in there, and there's nobody else in there. You could probably
sleep on that."

He gave an absent nod, let her show him where it was.

"Tom, talk to me," she whispered as they sat down on the couch. He was in the middle section, her
on the end. She reached up, still holding his hand in one of hers, rubbing his shoulder with the
other. "You've been so quiet."

"Not much to say," he murmured, trance-like. "Just...worried."

"I know. But he's doing okay. His vitals are good. He probably hasn't suffered any damage from
oxygen deprivation--"

"Because of you," Tom said, cutting her off, his eyes flicking up to her with the first signs of
intensity he'd shown all night. "You saved him."

She shook her head. "I just did the right thing. The doctors saved him."

He shook his head back. "I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't been there. I don't
know what's going to happen next."

"We'll figure it out," she reassured him.

"I keep thinking about my mother, seeing her..." He took a great heaving breath, the heels of both hands going to his eyes, pressing there. "I just...I just never really realized how...how important he still is to her...even after all this time."

"They seem to be on good terms," she agreed.

He gave a little laugh, his hands dropping with a slap into his thighs. "Wasn't always that way. Time was, he couldn't set foot in the house without her having a right fit. Don't know when that changed, exactly. I think when my niece was born. I don't know, maybe age and mortality make you realize what's important."

Cosette realized, as she watched his face, that he had probably been reliving a lot of painful memories this night. And the way his eyes flicked to her...was he worried they would be the same way? End up like this, sitting in a hospital, crying over time lost?

She dismissed these thoughts. Her relationship with Tom was not Diana and James' marriage. And she was here for him, right now. She reached out, sliding her arm around his shoulders, massaging his back. "Tom, you need to rest."

"You need to rest," he shot back, a bit more life in his tone. "You've been --"

"No," she cut him off, using the same tone she'd used before, but not quite realizing it. Also not realizing the look in Tom's eye was the same he'd had then. "Right now we're taking care of you. You've been through the wringer, Tom, you need to lie down. You're over-wrought and I want you to get some sleep."

He considered her, then gave a soft sigh. "Will you stay with me a little bit?" he asked.

"Of course," she said. She pulled one of the pillows from the corner of the couch and tucked it against her thighs. "Come on."

He rested his head on the pillow, and she continued to stroke his back, and her other hand ran through his hair, massaging his scalp. It took some time, maybe a half hour, but eventually his breathing deepened, and he was asleep.

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When Tom woke up, he knew instantly where he was. He hadn't really fallen into a heavy sleep, too stressed out to really go under. The white walls and the white furniture was very bleak, and he wondered if he'd fallen asleep at all, it all seemed so much the same.

But there was something wrong. Cosette wasn't there.

He'd fallen asleep to the feel of her hands on him. Soothing, comforting. Her soft voice, her reassuring nature, her way of making him feel like everything was under control...that was probably the teacher in her, coming to the surface in the time of crisis. Had he ever let her be that way while they were together? He'd been so focused on taking care of her, that...

No. Now wasn't the time for this. His father was still here, he had to check on him.

The door to the little lounge was pushed mostly shut, and Tom heard voices getting gradually
louder as he sat up, trying to shake some life back into his body. The door was pushed opened, and Cosette was standing there, holding a familiar little body in one arm and a cup of coffee in the other. The hallway behind her was very, very bright, the sun reflecting off of white, white surfaces. Tom flinched under the glare, and she hastily shoved the door mostly shut behind her.

"Good morning," she said, mild but cheerful. "Your dad is doing great, he's even starting to talk a little bit. Your mom is with him, and in a bit you should go in and see him."

Tom's entire face lifted. "He's conscious?"

"In and out." She offered him the coffee. "You want either of these?" she teased, jostling the coffee and their baby daughter.

"Both," Tom said, extending his hands. Cosette giggled and handed him Beatrice first, and once she was tucked into the crook of his long arm, he took the coffee.

"James' vitals are good," Cosette continued as she sat in the recliner perpendicular to the couch, so she could watch them. "They want him to get healthy, natural sleep, not drugged sleep. The clot is still dissolving but it could take time."

"What about Jack and Emma?" he asked.

"They were by a few hours ago. They've been spending time with Christina and Henry, I think they went to get some lunch."

"Lunch?" Tom asked, alarmed. "What time is it?"

"It's almost eleven," she replied. At his look, she explained, "You didn't fall asleep until almost two in the morning! My parents came by to check on things and brought me the good news that James was doing better, so I decided to let you sleep until you woke up on your own. I just finished feeding Bebe when I came back here and found you up. I was bringing you coffee just in case."

It was on the tip of Tom's tongue to remind Cosette that she wasn't to drink any coffee or anything else with caffeine in it, because she was breast feeding, but Beatrice's little coos at seeing her daddy totally distracted him. Cosette took the coffee cup from him almost without him noticing so he could attend to his little girl.

"She's happy to see you," Cosette told him gently.

"I didn't realize how much I missed her until I saw her." He sighed. "And it was only one very long evening. How am I going to last when I have to leave for filming?"

"I'll send you pictures and video every day," Cosette promised. Tom saw she was holding the coffee cup very close to her mouth and shot her a look. "I'm just smelling it! God I miss coffee. And alcohol." She tugged at Beatrice's toe. "I adore you, my daughter, but you are seriously cramping my lifestyle!"

Tom gave a little bark of laughter. He glanced at Cosette, and felt a lurch. A surge of something, and he knew what it was.

He loved her even more in that moment.

The bright hallway flashed and then was dimmed by someone standing in the doorway. Isabella was there, looking as put together as she always did. "Tom, you want to see your dad? He's awake."
Tom stood, and Isabella took Beatrice from him. He glanced back at Cosette, suddenly wanting her to come with him, but she made a shooing gesture. "I'll follow in a minute, Tom, go ahead."

He didn't watch to see what Isabella and Cosette were going to do. Maybe change Bebe, maybe burp her. He strode down the hallway to the room where his father lay in his hospital bed, and found his mother sitting beside him, holding his hand.

The oxygen mask was gone. James looked much thinner, slightly skeletal, but his eyes were bright. Tom had always been told he had his father's eyes. His mother was sitting beside him, holding his hand tightly. Upon seeing Tom, she gave a little laugh.

"I told Cosette to let you sleep a little bit longer," she said, almost apologetically.

"Hi, Da," Tom said, reverting to the old Scottish greeting he'd used when he was much, much younger.

James gave him a very weak smile. He said something softly, and Diana translated with a rueful laugh. "He says he's not up for your puppy-like energy right now, so if you could just not bite his arm off, he'd appreciate it."

Tom shook his head and sighed, also laughing, and had to respond to the teasing. "Someone woke up in a nark."

"Well....not being able...to breathe...is a bitch," his dad grunted, a bit louder than before.

"Should you still have the mask on?" his mother asked.

"If I need it...I'll say. Don't want to...stone the crows. Need to get...better...get out of here."

James spoke clearly, but very soft, not using much air. He took pauses, not as if he couldn't breathe, but as if he were being very, very careful.

"Da, take it easy," Tom said, his tone very serious. "You can stay as long as you like. It doesn't matter."

"Hate...hospitals." His eyes fluttered shut.

Tom looked at his mother and his father, hands on his hips, feeling very much in that moment like he was thirteen again, and his fate was at the mercy of these two people. It was a feeling he'd never liked much, that kind of low-level frustration of having to wait.

Deciding he wasn't going to stand for it, he said, "Mum, have you had anything to eat today?"


Tom watched her go, and then turned back to his father, giving a little start when he saw how seriously the older man was regarding him. He felt very, very young in that moment, and almost a bit like he'd done something wrong.

"Sit down, Thomas," his father said, still in that soft, careful voice.

Tom obeyed instantly, his long legs filling the little space between the edge of the recliner and the bed. "Yes sir?"

"Keep your hair on, boy," his father said, clearing his throat and getting a bit more volume. "Your
mum told me what's been going on. Something I want to say while I still got breath to say it." His brogue was getting a bit more pronounced. "That girl...Cosette. Not a girl, hardly a girl. You managed to fall into a rosebush, you careless lad. Of all the women in the universe you've been with, and I know you've sown your wild oats all over both continents. You managed to get her. And I don't care how bad the thorns scratch you, you don't let go, you understand me? I don't care how long you have to wait for her to forgive you. And you keep it in your fucking pants, you stupid git. You wait as long as it takes."

Just then his mother returned, and James instantly stopped his declaration. Of course, it seemed as if it were already done. Tom could hardly drag his gaze away from those intense eyes, but he managed a glance over his shoulder and offered to return her the recliner.

8 8 8

The prognosis was good. James was going to need a bit of extended care and he was not free to fly back to London, but within a week he was going to be discharged. Tom and his mother discussed where he was going to stay, as the thought of a nursing home just made James extremely irritable and uncooperative.

Cosette wanted to let James stay at her home, but having a month-old in the same house as a man recovering from a serious medical incident didn't seem like a plan for success. Tom found a very good recovery center, which was in effect a high-class nursing home, but they had programs for rehabilitation and they planned for James to stay for only a few weeks, with an option to extend it to a month. Jack had to return to the UK for work, and Emma stayed behind. She and Diana stayed at Tom's rented house while Tom continued to stay with Cosette. They worked out a plan to visit James an a daily basis, and as soon as he was able, James wanted to return to his own home across the pond. Tom knew it was extremely inconvenient for Emma and his mother to stay in America and take care of James, but he was reluctant for them go to, because he couldn't really follow.

Cosette felt a mild pang of guilt at this point. If she and Tom were married, she might have been willing to pack them up and go over for a bit. But in this current situation, they were all sort of pinned into their places and it was hard to maneuver. Plus, she knew it was a matter of time before Tom would need to go back to London, even if he wasn't filming -- it was his home, after all.

The first night he, Cosette, and Beatrice were all together at her house, only a few days after the initial "attack," as Cosette referred to it in her mind, and only once Tom had settled his father's immediate future in medical care, the three of them were in her living room. The tree was still up, and would be until Epiphany. She already had the three wise men scattered throughout the living room, making their journey toward the stable -- a papier-mâché cave instead of the wooden barn in which most people mistakenly thought the Nativity took place.

Tom of course asked about this. She had to educate him that night, yet again, on some little-known facts.

"It's New Years Eve," Tom declared suddenly, glancing at the clock.

"Is it?" Cosette followed his gaze. "I didn't even think about it."

"No wonder, with everything that's been going on." They both spoke in hushed tones, as Cosette was trying to get Beatrice to go to sleep. The baby had taken a long nap that evening and Cosette was doubtful she would sleep much that night. Even an extra feeding hadn't managed to make her drowsy.

"Here, let me have her," Tom said, coming over and bending down. Cosette had already slipped
her bra's flap back into place and was buttoning her blouse, but Tom, if he stared, didn't do it noticeably. He removed the blanket and scooped Beatrice under her arms, his long fingers stretching behind her head to support her, although she was getting better with that by the day. She could already hold her own head up, and was looking around more and more. At the moment, however, she was cooing at her daddy. It would be another two weeks before the sounds would coagulate into something more understandable, but she was already developing particular sounds, and Cosette always recognized Beatrice's "daddy" look.

Tom rested her upright against his chest, his arm pressing her firmly to him, and his other hand holding her little one as if they were dancing. It was more of an upright cradle than a dance hold, but it was adorable anyway. Cosette slipped out her phone and took a few pictures.

"You need some music," she said, docking her iPod and finding something slow and sweet. "Dream A Little Dream" by Mama Cass came on. To her surprise, Tom knew some of the words.

"Stars fading, but I linger on, dear... Still craving your kiss I'm longing to linger till dawn, dear... Just saying this.... Sweet dreams till sunbeams find you Sweet dreams that leave all worries far behind you But in your dreams, whatever they be, Dream a little dream of me..."

"She's going to be a heartbreaker," Cosette sighed. "Those eyes..." Even at only a month Beatrice's eyes were a clear blue that wasn't going to change. They were her father's eyes. While she didn't have much hair, the wisps she did have curled around her little ears. Shining gold.

"Because she has her mother's beautiful mouth, and no doubt will have her smile, too." Tom said, looking at Beatrice as he said it.

"Not so sure," Cosette returned. "Your mom showed me pictures of you when you were little."

"And I've seen that picture your parents have at their house," Tom countered. "She's your spitting image, with blonde hair."

Cosette shook her head. She was too tired suddenly to argue. She opened her mouth but a yawn came out. Tom glanced over at her.

"Mommy's getting tired, Bebe. You need to go to sleep so she can."

"Not with Daddy waltzing her around the room."

"Oh, a waltz!" Tom teased. He immediately began to do the three-step rhythm, but Cosette just laughed.

"You need the right music, silly." She got up and changed the song. It was Sarah MacLachlin's version of "Rainbow Connection." The beat was perfect. Tom even spun a few times, much to Beatrice's delight by the way her smile widened.

"See? Mommy's smile," Tom pointed out when they stopped. And just at that moment, Beatrice gave a yawn. "Mommy's yawn, too." He set her in the carrier, and put the carrier on the coffee table, facing the space in front, away from the couch. Then he extended his hand to Cosette. "Shall we?"
She looked at him a moment. She and Tom hadn't danced since their date in London.

"Come on, it's New Years," Tom said, borderline pleading. "And you know how I feel about dancing."

She let him take her hand, and putting the song on repeat, they waltzed around the living room. "Is dancing a big New Year's tradition for you?" she asked.

"Dancing is a big tradition for me, period, you know that," he winked at her. Cosette couldn't help but blush a little. Tom was being very gentlemanly, his hand on the exact right spot on her back, his other holding her hand. Their bodies were close but not touching. Sometimes it was easy to forget how strong the gravity was around this man, and Cosette realized how much she'd been floating in it this past month.

"You'll get to dance again in a few weeks at the wedding," Cosette reminded him.

"Can't wait," Tom murmured. Something flashed across his face but it disappeared quickly. "Do you have your bridesmaid's dress already? I haven't seen it."

"They're taking me on Monday," Cosette said. "Although I still hope to lose a few pounds before the big event."

She felt Tom's fingers twitch against her back. "The important thing is how you feel," he said.

"Don't start," she sighed.

"Don't start what?"

She bit her tongue. Where the sudden urge to tell him to take his statements about how her self-image was more important than her outer one and shove them up his fine English countryside had come from, she wasn't sure, but they surprised her. She knew Tom hadn't been initially attracted to her personality. It was her breasts and ass that usually got men's attention. And her legs in heels. Sure, she had gained some weight with Beatrice, and yes, she did feel better, walking on that treadmill regularly -- which she knew Tom had gone through trouble to clean up and get working. Gratitude for his help and resentment against him still being such a strong source of her frustrationwarred against each other.

So she did the smart thing. She changed the subject.

"The dress is pink, of course. Not too bright, although she wanted it that hot pink that was so popular in the 80's."

"Should I get a pink tie to go with the theme?" Tom asked, going along, apparently, with her subject change. The music had switched from the waltz to something more casual, and they were just slow dancing now, gently swaying to the beat.

She gave a little shrug. "Probably. If I know Christine she'll want you in the wedding photos and it'll tickle her if we match."

"Then I'll have to know what shade of pink," Tom said.

"We can go shopping next week and I'll help you pick something out." The yawn hit again, and Tom stopped dancing.

"You're exhausted, Cosette. You can go to bed if you want, I'll stay up with Beatrice."
"No, I'm okay," Cosette insisted, but Tom still let go and they walked over to the couch, turning Beatrice to face them. Sitting a person apart, they relaxed there, talking softly.

The talk of the wedding brought up some family stuff that Cosette shared with Tom -- which cousins hated each other, the uncle her father never spoke to, the various friends of Christine that would be there that Cosette looked forward to seeing and which ones she wanted to avoid. This led to Tom talking a lot more about his family than he ever had before. A few hours passed before either of them realized that Beatrice had dozed off.

"I can put her to bed," Tom offered.

"All right." Cosette preceded him down the hallway and turned on the lamp in Beatrice's room so Tom could get her into the crib, although the little nightlight provided enough light to easily see. She turned it off again as they left the room, going to their own bedrooms.

"Goodnight, Cosette," Tom said as she slipped behind her door.

"G'night, John Boy," Cosette quipped, feeling a strange tension and desperate to break it. He gave her a puzzled look. "Oh, that's right, you're British, you don't know the Waltons. Sorry, old joke."

"No, I think I know it," Tom said. "That was the show with the...Richard Earl Thomas, right? The mole?"

Cosette almost laughed. "God, even I don't know his real name!"

Tom shrugged. "I'm pretty good with names. G'night, Mary Ellen."

Cosette could only shake her head as she shut the door. The only thing that kept her from laughing is knowing it might wake Beatrice.
Chapter Summary

Christina and Henry finally tie the knot.

Chapter Notes

Graphics! Special thanks to Lettalady for making these for me. There is one in chapter 1 as well, and I'll post it again for the next chapter. I am going to go back and post a graphic for another chapter, too, but I'm not sure where I'm gonna put it yet. I know tonight sucks for many of us, and here's a little pick me up. Or maybe not.
The next three weeks until the wedding proceeded with caution.

Tom’s father slowly made progress, but progress he did make. He was determined to get out of the nursing home, as he called it, in spite of the fact that his care was stellar and he had visitors every day. Tom brought him whatever books he wanted, whatever food he wanted. This made James decidedly less grumpy, but it was Diana's company, really, that kept him soothed.

Which struck Tom as strange. He knew his parents had always gotten along, but this was much different.

When he wasn't with his parents, he was with Cosette and Beatrice. Getting ready for the wedding seemed to bring a new level of intensity to Cosette's daily routine. The lochia ended, and her body was healing, and she started to have more energy. Beatrice began to sleep longer through the night, her size reaching a point where she could ingest enough food and stay asleep longer, so both parents were sleeping better at night. Tom found himself having to walk the floor with Beatrice less and less. To a certain extent, he missed it.

Beatrice grew and developed. She was able to move her head more, and soon they were giving her supervised tummy time. Because she was only five weeks, Tom lay down on the floor and placed Beatrice on his chest face down, so she was looking at him. Cosette also took her turn, but on the couch, with a pillow for support as her breasts were still occasionally sore. Beatrice didn't like it at first, so they kept her first sessions very brief, but slowly stretched them out as the little girl got stronger and stronger, until she was on the floor on a pillow or a blanket, slowly learning to lift her head.

Tom, being the naturally more talkative one, interacted more verbally with Beatrice, telling her all sorts of things as they went through their daily routines, changing her, bathing her, dressing her. It was to the point where Cosette insisted on driving when they went out together to shop -- taking Beatrice out in public was always so much fun, as she gaped at the world around her in open wonder -- because Tom would turn to talk to her all the time. She would smile and coo at him, and their communication became very obvious to all around them. Isaac had to tolerate quite a bit, shoved between the baby seat and the car door in the back seat as he was during these outings. But he was invisible, as his job required, and watched out the window, and Tom was eventually able to ignore him.

That took a while. Considering Isaac had been present during one of the most humiliating moments of his life.
The bond between Cosette and Beatrice, however, was something altogether different. Usually Beatrice enjoyed interacting with her daddy, but more and more she would fuss for Mommy. Once she was on Tom's lap, propped up to be able to look around, she began to cry. At one point Christina came and picked her up, and the fussing instantly stopped when Beatrice was pressed against Christina's chest -- then Tom realized what it was.

He didn't have breasts.

It happened occasionally, not enough to really interfere with the bond between him and his daughter, but he couldn't help but feel a little jealous when he could see so obviously how non-verbal the communication between Cosette and Beatrice was. Cosette could take one look at her daughter and know if it was time for a feeding or a change or she had gas or was just plain fussy.

His many efforts at practicing his facial expressions started to come in handy. He made more faces at his daughter than he could count. He played with toys in front of her, made noises, tracked her vision, read books to her, and got to practice his many, many voices. But in the end, he was not Mommy.

Strangely, though, Cosette was far more comfortable with him staying nearby when she fed Beatrice than she'd ever been. One time he even sat at her feet in Beatrice's room while Cosette fed her, watching how they communicated silently. Those violet eyes that had ensnared him from moment one turned to him, meeting his eyes, when Beatrice finished and was ready for burping. As if part of a routine, Cosette passed Beatrice over, and Tom lay her against his shoulder, giving her several firm pats before she let out the air in a soft burp.

"She loves your voice," Cosette reassured him. A light blush colored her cheeks. "Like most of us do. Typical girl, a sucker for a British accent."

Tom had to smile. Somehow the women -- at least the American women -- did all seem to enjoy his voice. Usually the words associated with it were "chocolate," "velvet," and "sexy."

Certainly the women who were fitting Cosette into her bridesmaids dress -- a floor-length, deep rose-colored gown that twirled in a layered skirt with a layer of red underneath to make it even deeper -- did not refrain from flirting with him. The lack of a ring on either his or Cosette's hand clearly signaled that they weren't "together," so he was fair game. He tried not to respond to it, but some of them were particularly attractive and he was rather used to being flirted with and his responses were more reflexive than anything.

In addition to his two brothers, Henry had twin sisters. Both of them were college age and living
away from home, but came home for Christmas and were present at Beatrice's christening. They were taking an extended weekend, from Wednesday to Sunday, to come to their oldest brother's wedding. They had perfect twin names -- Madison and Morgan. Both of them were dark-haired and blue-eyed like their brother, and Tom had a hard time telling them apart. Cosette admitted even she had trouble with it, until she realized that Morgan had a bit more acne than her sister. Not the kindest way to tell the different, but one nonetheless.

There were cousins -- a half dozen of them, four of them women. Tom couldn't keep track of them, but all of them were dark haired, some curvy, some more slender; then there were friends, mostly Christina's, from school, and they came in all shapes and shades. Cosette's best friend from grade school also came, Katherine, called Kate, but she was married, and was very wary of Tom the entire time she was in his presence.

The morning of the wedding, Tom dressed Beatrice in the outfit Christina had picked out for her -- soft and pink and frilly. It was almost like a little tutu, with a knit hat to keep her warm with a big flower right over Beatrice's forehead. Tom couldn't help but smile to himself -- the sisters were pink and purple. But today was Christina's special day, so it was pink all the way.

The wedding mass was set at two o'clock, with an hour or more for pictures at three-thirty, and the reception to start at five. The reception was at the Ritz Carlton Hotel, where Christina and Henry planned to spend a few days before leaving for their honeymoon, which was in Greece, where Christina had always wanted to go. Henry had booked them a Mediterranean cruise. They'd be gone for a week, and then come back where Christina and Henry had already set up an apartment for them to share. Tom had spent a few afternoons helping Henry move boxes to the new place.

One thing Tom had noticed about Henry and Christina in the time he'd known them was how they had been preparing for living their life together. Instead of dating, they did regular, everyday things together -- shopping, yard work, cleaning, cooking, not to mention taking care of Beatrice and being with her parents. Henry's lived in Nevada, and Tom knew they'd taken a few trips out there to spend time.

Which made it mildly amusing how nervous Christina was when she came to the house to pick Cosette up for their hair appointments. Sometimes it was easy to forget that she and Henry weren't already married.

"Oh you look so beautiful!" Christina cooed over Beatrice, who gurgled at her aunt. "So you're on baby duty for the whole day? By yourself?" she asked Tom as he prepared his supplies.

"I can handle it," Tom chuckled as he continued to pack Beatrice's bag with all the things he'd need. "Besides, we have mixtures of breast milk and formula, she'll make it for at least one day. Cosette can't get in and out of her dress easily, but she'll still be around. And your parents will help, too."
Besides, I'm sure she'll be the life of the party later on today."

"I'm sure too," Christina said with a smile, bouncing her niece. "Where is your mommy?" she huffed at Bebe. "Cozy! Come on! We've gotta go!"

As in on cue Cosette rounded the corner, in jeans and a button-down shirt, so she wouldn't have to pull anything over her head after she got her hair done. Beatrice let out a little squeal as her mommy scooped her up, kissing her cheeks repeatedly.

"Okay, Bebe, you gotta be a good girl today for Daddy!" she told her, walking her over to Tom, handing her over. She kissed her again, and then settled her into Tom's waiting arms. "You ready?"

"It'll be fine, Cosette," Tom assured her, even as Beatrice started to make little fussing noises. "I'll get your mother to help if I get in over my head."

She nodded. "Okay. See you at the church!"

And Tom felt, even though he knew it wasn't intentional, a sting in those words.

8     8     8

Dress, check.

Make-up, check.

Hairstyle, check.

Cosette stood in her mother's living room, staring at her reflection in the full length mirror. She had to admit, without being vain, that she looked quite stunning. Not as stunning as Christina, in her pink-accented wedding gown. But still, pretty up there.

The thing that did it, though, was the bright glittering amethyst at her throat. The amethyst Tom had given her.
Why was she wearing it? Because he had asked her to.

A few days after the fitting for the bridesmaid's dress, he had come to her, hesitant and shy. It was more like he was afraid.

"Can I ask you...do you still have that choker that I gave you? The one with the purple stone?"

She realized then she'd never told him. Not that she'd gotten rid of the dress. Not what she planned to do with the jewelry. So now was the time.

"I put it away. I plan to give it to Beatrice when she's old enough."

Tom nodded. "I was looking at you in your dress the other day, and I think...I really think that the choker would go very well with your gown."

She hadn't even thought about it. Not even considered it. But now that she did, she realized he was right. But...it felt off. Almost wrong.

"You want me to wear it," she said.

He nodded.

"Is there a particular reason?"

He drew a heavy breath, let it out slowly. "I just feel...I mean, it's a shame to waste it, on such an occasion. And you and I...we've come pretty far, these last few months, haven't we? I mean, we're...we're good, aren't we?"

She wanted to say that even if they were, they were certainly not there. But then again, after dealing with James, and how close they had gotten since that night in the hospital... something did feel different.
"I don't know," Tom said, taking her silence for reticence. "I...I don't want to upset you, make you uncomfortable, I promise. I just can't stop thinking about it, so I thought I would ask. I figured the worst you could say was no."

"I'm not saying no," she said softly, and fell silent for a few seconds more. Searching for the right words. "I think...I think the choker would look very pretty. As long as you realize, Tom...I mean, you and I are good, we're...we're friends. We're getting along. But it won't mean..."

She didn't want to say it.

"I know," he said, so softly she almost didn't hear it. Then, a bit louder, "I don't want you to feel like you can't...like you can't use it. I mean, it was a gift. I wanted you to have it, to enjoy it. And this is a perfect opportunity."

"Okay," she said, very calm. "I will wear it. It's a good idea."

And as soon as the rest of her outfit was in place, she had fastened the large heart-shaped gem against her throat. It was perfect.

The weight, however, instantly took her back to earlier days.

These thoughts, however, had no time to be dwelled upon. The family was soon in the limo, the one Henry had rented for Christina, and all four of them took it to the church. The rest of the bridesmaids, Henry's twin sisters and Christina's very dear friend Laney, waited in the private room in the back of the church. The photographer had started early with the groom's side of the family, and would soon get started with the bride's side, and then here would be a half-hour lull where they would wait for the guests to arrive before the mass started and the procession began.

So Cosette didn't think about it again until Tom came into the church, looking sharp as hell in his three piece slate-gray suit and pink tie, carrying Beatrice, who was to be in some of the pictures. He took one look at her and the smile on his face made her heart flutter in a way it hadn't in months.

Still, there was too much to do.

Taking pictures was so horribly tedious, Cosette realized. How Tom did it again and again and
again, she had no idea. Although it seemed that Tom was aware of her boredom, and would do silly things with Beatrice to make her smile. Or maybe it was just coincidental and she was imagining things.

Everything was going rather well. Once the pictures were done and they were sitting quietly, Tom came down so Beatrice could see her mother. Cosette cradled her and Beatrice did attempt to root, but Tom was quick to pass her a bottle.

"No, wait...I think we have time. I'm going to sneak to the toilet."

"Cosette, you can't, you won't be able to...reassemble yourself."

She wanted to glare up at Tom, but had to concede that the dress was not really manageable. She would have to take the entire top down to feed Beatrice and it was only a half hour to the ceremony starting. So she gave Beatrice the bottle, although her daughter almost didn't take it, but hunger must have won out in the end because she slurped for a few minutes before calming down.

"You look gorgeous," Tom said when she passed Beatrice back.

"Yes, the amethyst does look rather stunning, doesn't it?" she agreed, wiping the little dribbles on Beatrice's chin.

"No, just you," Tom said softly. They exchanged a glance but then someone was calling down for them to take position and then it was a flurry of pink and white before the church doors opened and the music began to blare.

Henry was a very handsome man, but in his patterned groom's suit, he even overshadowed Tom that day. Clean shaven with his hair neatly styled, he practically glowed. They exchanged a wink and a grin as Cosette took her place in the sanctuary, having been escorted down the aisle by one of Henry's friends and groomsmen.

Then Christina started to walk down the aisle, and Cosette honestly thought she was going to cry.

Christina was so happy -- she glowed, not just from the reflection of the sequins and pearls embroidered into her dress, but from an inner light that Cosette found herself envying. She tired to banish it. This wasn't about her, she told herself. This was Christina's day and Cosette would do
anything and everything to celebrate it.

The ceremony was a full Mass, so it was a full hour plus the vows. Father Francis kept the homily to a minimum, but talked about marriage as something people in our current society often failed to understand. A marriage was not a wedding. A marriage was not two people just deciding to live together. It was a whole other level of being. And it was so important for the two to be “evenly yoked.”

The longer she listened, the harder it became not to fixate on her own problems. But did she really have any? Beatrice was healthy, Cosette herself was doing well, her check-up had gone well, everything had healed nicely. Tom hadn't put any pressure on her but she could still feel his attachment to her so strongly. He would be leaving at the beginning of March, a little more than a month, and that thought made her tense. And sad. And worse, lonely.

But it wasn't fair to him. It wasn't fair to string him along. But was she doing that? She had been so sure, four months ago, that it was completely over. Two months ago, she had determined to shut her heart to him. But it wouldn't listen. And she couldn't, not to the man who took care of her and her child. It was...inhuman.

Would she and Tom ever be "evenly-yoked?" Could he begin to understand what a marriage cost? He was devoted to her and Beatrice, but sooner or later the ambitious actor was going to be on full display and his decisions would be driven by what made him popular, by what sold tickets, by what pleased the masses.

Then again, Tom was more devoted to the art than the dollar. Sure, it crushed him when his movies flopped but it didn't stop him from making the choices he made. He had told her once, and had said it in interviews as well, that he was a part of this industry to bring people together, to give them shared experiences. He was not a famewhore. Not completely. But yes, she knew, and she had seen it, how he lapped up the attention, how he basked in the lights, how he preened for the cameras.

His heart was divided. Every person's heart was, she told herself. But perhaps Tom more than most. And it affected her. Could she trust him to put her first, above all else? Could she trust him to be her partner and walk beside her on the path God laid before them? What if that division made him choose between his career and her?

She was jarred from these thoughts by the rush of attention from being in the reception line. So many people passed through, kissing Christina, kissing her, so many hands to shake, hugs to receive. Toward the end, Tom came through, holding Beatrice upright in front of him, as if she were the one giving congratulations instead of him. Christina gushed again over Bebe's pretty dress; Tom gave Henry a hearty handshake and manly hug, slapping each other on the back with
thousand-watt smiles on their faces. He kissed Christina's cheek as Cosette scooped up her baby girl who needed a dose of Mommy.

This was all that mattered, Cosette told herself. What was best for Beatrice. Wouldn't it be best if she had both her parents? Couldn't Cosette at least try? Even if it did end up in divorce, which Cosette was almost sure it would, at least she couldn't ask herself about the path not taken. Either way, she'd end up in the same place. Wasn't it worth a try?

These were dangerous thoughts, she realized, as she was told several times to smile during the full bridal party pictures. Even Tom asked her if she was feeling all right, and she reassured him, distractedly, that she just had a lot on her mind. He looked like he wanted to drag it out of her, but couldn't, really, in the current situation.

Two hours of pictures later, they were on their way to the reception, and Cosette was nearly faint from hunger. She had been too nervous to eat much that morning, and if she was starving she could only imagine what Christina and Henry were feeling. But as soon as they entered the banquet hall at the hotel, where guests had been munching on appetizers and drinking cocktails as they waited, dinner was served, and Cosette's steak was set down in front of her, steaming and delicious.

Tom was sitting with her parents and Henry's parents, at the second table just down from the bridal party's table. She watched as people approached them, the familiar ones wanting to meet Beatrice, but Tom was careful not to let too many people handle her, as she was prone to overstimulation. The unfamiliar ones, well...it didn't take long to realize that they wanted to meet Tom. Some were much more brazen than others. And pretty soon he had his little flock of admirers around him. Henry's twin sisters being the most prominent, along with a collection of cousins and friends, all of which were single women.

When everyone was made to sit down for the speeches and the cutting of the cake, Tom's entourage dispersed, albeit highly reluctant to do so. He glanced at her, and she caught herself staring at him, and he gave her what could only be described as an apologetic smile.

Which she ignored. Making it look like she was anticipating when it was her turn to speak, or paying attention to the other speakers. The best man went first, going on and on about his friendship with Henry, and people laughed, but Cosette was genuinely distracted by knowing she was going next.

Public speaking didn't really bother her. After all, adults at their worst were just like middle schoolers, and she faced down classrooms of them on a daily basis. They were the most judgmental of any group, and if she could get their attention, she felt she could handle anything. But in light of what she wanted to say, she worried how it would make her look. After all, she was the single mom.
"In my family," Cosette began, once the transitions and introductions had been made, "marriage has always been held in a sacred regard."

Yes. It was why her parents didn't divorce, even though they'd badly wanted to. It had taken years for her mother and father to figure themselves out, and their over-protectiveness for their children came purely from not wanting their mistakes repeated.

"But let's face it, it's the sacrament that acts the least sacred, right? I mean, our dad always said that there are seven sacraments, five of them help you get to heaven, and the other two actively work against it -- marriage and priest hood. Sorry, Francis!"

The laugh from her friend was hearty. The laugh from the rest of the crowd almost drowned him out, but she heard it. Waiting for it to subside, she went on.

"My sister...has one of the best hearts of anyone I know. We're supposed to be merciful and forgiving, but she actually means it. It's not an effort for her -- or at least she never makes it look like one. So I'm pretty confident that when Henry screws up, and he will, because no man is perfect... (the couple ducked their heads toward each other and exchanged smiles) ...she'll be ready to try again. Henry, you know her maybe even better than I do." She met his eyes. "So you know that when she screws up, because no woman is perfect either, you'll show her that same forgiveness and mercy. And if she doesn't, let me know, I'll kick her butt for you."

More laughter.

"The truth is, though," and she drew a heavy breath, "I was...I was kind of jealous. I mean, I'm the big sister. Tradition had it the older sister had to be married first! But, well, so much for tradition." She gave a little embarrassed chuckle which earned her a murmur of well-meaning laughter. "And I'm not jealous. I'm...inspired. Because you two make it look so easy, even though we all know it isn't. You know that a marriage is more than this day, than the cake and the dress and the bitchy bridesmaids." More laughter. "It's things we can't begin to talk about here. Truthfully, they should give you this big party when you're still married in twenty years, not when you're just starting out! Then you'll have really earned it!"

Christina shook her head ruefully at her sister, but she was smiling and there were tears in her eyes.

"My little sister...you're an inspiration to me. You've done more for me than I can say, more than I can honor you for. You get to go ahead of me, but I'm not worried. I know you'll have more to
teach me down the way. And in the meantime, I'll keep the wine and the Ben & Jerry's in the fridge for the nights when you have to get out before you strangle him!"

Everyone clapped. Cosette went to hug Christina, who grasped her hard. Sweaty, make-up and tear-streaked cheeks smooshed together and they were laughing.

8          8          8

Dancing.

It had to be one of Tom's favorite things in the whole world.

It seemed, at times, that he just couldn't move enough. His fidgeting, and how the fans bemoaned the ways he touched himself, and how he always talked with his hands, these were tiny little outlets. Tiny.

Dancing was a huge outlet. When he danced he could move how he wanted to as long as he wanted to, change as often as he desired, and really cut loose.

But now he had a little girl to watch, and the lure of dancing seemed like a forbidden temptation.

Of course, the dancing started out tame enough. The newly married couple started, and the other married couples started to join, beginning with the oldest and working their way down. That dance switched to a father-daughter dance, where the DJ played Bobby Darrin's "Beyond the Sea," and Henry danced with his mother. At this point, Tom could not resist entering the dance floor with Beatrice on his shoulder, making little twirling motions with her as she let out little hiccupy giggles. The guests loved that. It encouraged other younger fathers to bring out their little girls.

Once these traditions were observed, the dancing really got started. Tom saw Cosette sitting at her table, munching her cake, as the bridal party had gotten theirs last because they'd spent the time passing it out to the guests. Christina and Henry had done the usual shoving-cake-into-each-other's-faces without choking each other or making a huge mess, plus the top tier of the five tier cake had been designated for them to keep. Cosette managed to snag a piece of the thick, dark chocolate, and was enjoying it...

...but he really wanted to go over there and ask her to dance.
"Oh for goodness sake, give her to me!" Isabella teased him as she approached. "You look like a lost puppy gazing at that dance floor. I'm sure you're not wanting for partners--"

Morgan (Tom recognized her from the few foundation-covered blemishes on her chin) approached with a wide grin. "Oh, Tom, that's a brilliant idea! Come on!"

She was a beautiful woman, and dancing with her was hardly a chore. But he couldn't help but glance toward the main table, wondering if Cosette was going to come down with a partner...maybe he could get her after this dance was over.

Sure enough, Henry grabbed his new sister-in-law and brought her down to the dance floor. Tom maneuvered his partner (who was talking rather animatedly) toward them, and then was pleasantly surprised to suddenly have Henry bringing Cosette closer. As the song ended, Henry turned to them. "Trade you for my sister," he said.

Cosette gave a chuckle even as Morgan glared at her brother. "I think you're getting swindled, Tom," she said, but Tom had grasped her hand as quickly as he could and gracefully twirled Morgan into her brother.

"What did you do with our daughter?" Cosette asked him as he placed his hand on the small of her back, pulling her closer.

"Your mother stole her," Tom said.

"Ah." She seemed to shift in his arms, as if suddenly uncomfortable. Maybe it was the fact that his thumb was resting against the naked skin of her back, moving gently back and forth -- he lowered it. Her eyes drifted over his shoulder and her smile turned a little dark. "Looks like they're lining up for you."

Tom glanced -- and saw the little line of them, and how they all smiled at him at once, one of them giving him a little wave. Well, they were all rather lovely. His original admirers were there (without the twins there were four left), and they had picked up a few friends. He gave them a return smile and a little nudge of his chin before looking back down at Cosette...who was watching him.

"Um...so what should I do?"
She arched her eyebrows. "You're asking me?"

"Yes. I am on baby duty. Even though I think your mother is busy showing her off to some of the relatives and it'll be a while before I can get her back."

"That was really cute what you did before...you insufferable show-off," Cosette huffed, a smirk on her lips.

He smiled down at her. "When it comes to my daughter? Absolutely." He twirled her then, the skirt flaring out. But just then, Raymond approached them, dancing with the other twin, Madison, who was giving Tom the side-eye.

"I found this lovely young lady wandering about by herself," he said, "and thought maybe I could offer a trade for my daughter."

Tom opened his mouth to object, but Cosette had already traded places. Still, Madison was much more pleasant company than her sister -- quieter and with a much deeper intelligence. So he couldn't really complain.

Except he wanted to.

He danced with each of them in turn. There had to be at least ten of them. Each of them with their own charms, each of them wanting his attention. Truthfully, of all of them, Madison was the one who kept his attention the longest, as she had the right balance of fire to match him but none of the obnoxiousness that came with those trying to impress him. And he had to be charming, had to be gracious, it was ingrained in him, almost his primary nature, his default. So even though he glanced in Cosette's direction from time to time, convinced he was catching her looking away just as he did, his attention was getting more and more absorbed.

It didn't help that they found him absolutely adorable with Beatrice, whom Isabella brought back for a feeding and a nappy change. They cooed over her, even though none asked to hold her, and they kept a proper distance when the baby started to fuss and Isabella whisked her away again. The possible nail in the coffin was the dancing he did with the younger girls, who maybe knew him as Loki, but really only saw him as a tall, handsome man who was gentle enough to guide them through a proper dance.
When the faster music started, he was leading his own small army. He tried not to get too close to any of them but the lure of the music, the sweetness of being able to move unhindered...soon he was sweaty in his rolled up shirt-sleeves, laughing and light-headed.

It seemed that every single American wedding he'd ever attended had to have the Chicken Dance. He heard the familiar strains and the girls gave happy little shrieks, getting in a circle. His hands were captured, but as he was yanked into position he caught the bride and groom forming their own little circle with Cosette and a man...a man he didn't recognize.

Why this man was privileged enough to join the golden trio, he had no idea. He strained his neck trying to get a good look at the guy but the distractions were too many, and when they started to dance in the circle it was impossible. Plus, as the traditional chicken dance went, it went faster every time until they were nearly spinning out of control.

After that it was the Cha Cha Slide. Cosette had her back to him, but she was wiggling said backside in a manner that was extremely distracting. Thankfully, it was Christina who was beside her and the two sisters were giggling madly as they followed the little dance.

He wanted to get closer to her, but he started to realize he was in a bit of a hostage situation. They'd surrounded him, and some of them had their phones out, taking brief videos of him doing the moves. The show-off could not resist giving them what they wanted, the performer that lived and breathed in his skin always willing to give a show. He knew they'd end up on Instagram and the like and he would be run through the tabloids, so he made a mental note to call Luke that night and leave him a message.

The music turned slow again. Henry and Christina took to the dance floor, danced once, and then it was time for the bride to throw the bouquet. Tom looked at his watch and realized it was ten o'clock.

Where had the time gone?

Henry had not opted for the traditional garter belt. Tom had asked him about it earlier and he said he just didn't want to do it -- exposing Christina like that, while others may think nothing of it, was mildly offensive to him. But as for the bouquet, well, that was a tradition that had to be honored.

All the girls gathered into a thick crowd for that bouquet. Tom looked over and realized that Cosette was not among them. She was talking to that man from before, whoever he was. But then Henry was there, seizing her hand and dragging her over to the crowd. She argued with him, whatever it was she said was drowned out by the noise of the crowd, but she didn't look happy and
Tom didn't have to hear it to know.

She stood there, fists clenched. She had that familiar set to her jaw, the look in her eyes Tom had seen many times, telling him she wasn't going to budge. Then her arms folded, and a defiant smirk graced her features. She glanced at him, and he didn't look away, just gave her a little, apologetic shrug.

Christina turned, tossed the bouquet of roses that were the same deep pink as the bridesmaids dresses were, and it flew through the air --

Cosette reached up, and as the bouquet approached her, she gave it a little smack--

And it landed in the arms of Madison, who seemed stunned she had caught it.

Cosette just smiled at her. "Oops," Tom saw her say.

Tom shook his head. He would never understand her. Ever.

He would have gone to her to ask her why she had done that. To ask her what her problem was, in general, as she seemed to have lapsed into one of her bad moods that he hadn't seen since right after Beatrice's birth and her hormones were going a little crazy as they readjusted themselves. But it was clear that the bride and groom were leaving, and Cosette went to her sister to kiss her goodbye, and got lost in the flock of people who were giving their last congratulations and farewells.

Tom adjusted and went to Henry, who looked a little pale. He had taken the room key from his pocket -- it was the bridal suite, Tom had sprung for it for their wedding present -- and was fussing with it nervously, hardly noticing the shoulder slaps from his well-wishers.

He had gotten to know Henry a bit, mostly especially after his...falling out with Cosette. Now, standing here looking at him, Tom realized something.

All those things Cosette had admired in Henry, those things she had envied in the man Christina chose to spend the rest of her life with, the things Cosette wanted to find herself in her future husband...of all of them, chastity had been on the top of that list.
Henry was a virgin.

It hit him a bit like a shockwave, passing through him. Why had he never realized it until now? Because Henry was attractive, and moved with confidence, and an ease that Tom didn't associate with someone who "couldn't get laid." It wasn't that Henry couldn't -- it was that he chose not to.

At that moment, Tom felt a kind of...shame? Maybe not quite. But it was definitely a kind of inferiority. He wasn't sure of it, but it made him admire the man even more. Something else, though, lingered in his brain...jealousy? Henry was going to give possibly the most important piece of himself to the woman he chose to marry. He was going to commit his body as well as his heart to Christina.

Perhaps in other circumstances, Tom would have given him some kind of pep talk. The first time would be clumsy, it would be unsure, and it would take practice to get it right. But he and Christina had all the time in the world for that practice. And better than that, they had something so precious -- it didn't matter if the first time was messy, or awkward. It wasn't even about that. It was about them expressing their love.

Cosette had tried to explain it to him once. He hadn't gotten it until that moment.

Feeling a strange kind of humility, Tom went up to him. Henry caught his movement out of the corner of his eye and shot Tom a shaky little grin.

"You okay?" Tom asked.

Henry shrugged. It was more of a twitch. "Yes. Not really, but yes."

He was nervous. It was understandable. And Tom felt a sort of indignation at this.

"It's going to be fine," Tom said. "She loves you. Just remember that."

Henry drew a heavy breath and let it out slowly. "I know. I know it's silly to...I mean, there are so many things...I have no idea what I'm trying to say." He gave a little embarrassed laugh.
While Tom knew Henry somewhat, he knew Christina better. And he knew she had some experience, but...he also knew she regretted all of it. Every moment of it.

It hit him then...the full impact of what he'd done. He almost couldn't process it. The fact that he'd done it unknowingly didn't seem to make any difference.

He wished he could be Henry, at that moment. The sweet anticipation. The nerves. The future. Knowing things were as they should be, not twisted and out of order.

It was that moment that he wanted it. Truly wanted it. What they had.

Gently, Tom put his hand on Henry's shoulder and squeezed. "Let it happen, Henry. Don't script anything, don't make any plans. Just let it happen as it does. She'll go easy on you, I know she will. It doesn't matter to her, you know. In fact, it's inspired her. You know that."

Henry nodded, seeming to calm a bit at Tom's words. "It's hard, though," he said, not looking at him. "It's hard to go from having to resist for so long, and then...I mean, one night it all reverses."

"No, it hasn't, not really. It's just...an extension of what you already have. Look, I'll tell you the exact opposite of what I was told -- talk to her. No matter what you're doing, even if you're worried about spoiling the moment, trust me, you won't. Just tell her what you feel, and listen to her. Okay?"

Henry frowned. "What were you told?"

"No, because then you'll think it and I'm not going to risk screwing that up for you," Tom chuckled. He didn't even remember much, except being told not to think, to just go with what "felt good." It was utter crap.

Then Christina was there, smiling at her husband, and Henry forgot him, and took her hand, and the crowd cheered and everyone waved and made noises that were more supposed to be encouraging but came off as facetious. Christina kissed her husband and people clapped, and they disappeared into the elevator in the lobby.

"Thank God that's over," Cosette sighed from beside him. He looked at her, and she met his eyes, and then turned to head back into the banquet hall.
Tom reached out, grasping her wrist. She spun toward him, startled.

"Dance with me," he said. "Please."

She seemed to hesitate, and then nodded. "Okay," she said.

8 8 8

After giving the speech, Cosette had managed to unclench a bit. Then the dancing started, and if she didn't wake up tomorrow with a splitting headache, it was going to be a small miracle.

It wasn't that she didn't like dancing. What she didn't like was having to watch Tom dance with nearly every single available woman in the place. Admittedly, he had danced with her first, thanks to Henry, although she was convinced he would have rather stayed with his current date. She didn't get a good look but she was pretty sure Tom had been returned to his proper partner after her father rescued her.

He certainly gave her enough attention.

Her rational voice reminded her that this wasn't Tom's fault. He was a celebrity, after all, and he was going to be surrounded by admirers because he cut a damn fine figure in a suit and it was kryptonite to any woman with a working pair of ovaries -- and maybe a few without. It was so sweet to see him dancing with the younger girls, and she had a flash of Tom dancing with a Beatrice as a young girl. Then Tom dancing with his daughter at her own wedding.

It was too much. She had to find a distraction.

"You aren't going to believe this," a familiar voice said from just off her shoulder. "Cosette!" This time a bit louder, to get her attention. She turned, and saw Henry. Henry seemed to be everywhere. She gave a bit of a frown.

"Shouldn't you be dancing with your bride?"
"I can't get within five feet from her!" Henry protested, pointing.

"They keep passing her around like a bong," the young man beside him laughed.

"Cosette, this is Shayne," Henry said. "Shayne says he knows you."

Cosette looked at the man. He had sandy blond hair, brown eyes. A bit of scruff around his chin, but not too bad. He was slightly pudgy but not so much so that he could be called fat. And something about the set of his eyes was familiar...wait...Shayne?

"We went to elementary school together," Shayne said. "You don't remember, Cozy?"

Oh hell. Everyone had called her Cozy in her primary days. "Shayne Bismark?"

"Yes!" the man cheered. "You do remember! Sixth grade at Our Lady of the Angels."

She stood, stunned. She had had the worst, absolutely worst crush on Shayne until sixth grade, when her father switched jobs and she had to change schools.

"But how? I mean, how do you--"

"Shayne and I went to college together," Henry explained, beaming. "I was a freshman and he was a senior. He showed me the ropes. We kept in touch these years, not much but enough for him to get an invite to the wedding."

"Where are you living now?" Cosette asked.

"Nevada, actually," Shayne said, grinning at her. "I manage one of the casinos, not one you heard of, I'm sure. Wow, Cozy, you sure turned into a knockout!"

She did a little double take. In sixth grade, she had been a bit pudgy, like most girls at that age, with the worst crush on Shayne, who was nice enough to her, but had his eyes on the other girls who all seemed prettier than her. Although, if she remembered correctly, she always seemed to be
getting herself involved in Shayne's mischief -- he had been the resident bad boy, although the school was in a rather conservative neighborhood and as bad boys went he was pretty milk toast. She remembered most clearly the blond waves on top of his head. Waves that were much thinner now.

How times had changed!

Still, it gave her a little thrill to hear him call her that, even though she really didn't put much stock in being attractive.

"So what are you doing now?" Shayne asked.

"Uh, well," what the hell did she say? *I'm living off my baby-daddy's money until I figure out if I'm going to resume my career at the school I love or start somewhere new?* "I'm teaching, eight grade right now, but I'm sort of in a bit of a shift. It's...complicated."

"Yeah, I know, being between jobs sucks," Shayne said, his tone kind.

The music switched, going from the slow songs to dance music. Henry gave a little jump. "Good! I'm going to see if I can steal Christina!" He nudged Cosette as he passed her, heading for the dance floor.

"Sixth grade is a long time ago," Cosette sighed. "I'm surprised you remember me."

Shayne smiled. For a moment, they were both twelve and completely innocent. "I know. We're not even the same people. But I couldn't forget you, Cozy. My partner in crime. You remember that time we got our teacher into trouble with another teacher?"

"Oh, yeah," she snapped her fingers, "Mr. Beech! Or Son-of-a-Beech, you called him. God, what was that about again?"

"I think we were bitching to our typing teacher, you remember Mrs. Kinley, she was our third grade teacher?"
Cosette softened, smiled. She sat down in a nearby chair and patted the seat at the table beside her. "My God, yes. She's the reason I became a teacher! But weren't we complaining to her about how weird Mr. Beech was?"

"How he would always rap on the chalkboard behind him, and talked in a monotone," Shayne launched into a rather bad impression but it made Cosette giggle anyway with nostalgia. "And she told on us! And he said something to the class the next day!"

"We were so pissed," Cosette sniggered. "I remember we were waiting for her at different parts in the hallway, that was your idea!"

"Yeah, like we were gonna sneak up on her!" Shayne snorted.

"And then we were all around her desk, complaining at once! And typing that day turned into her writing Mr. Beech a really nasty letter. Oh my God I'd forgotten all of that!"

"So you're on the other side now," Shayne said. "Is it like that? Do you guys get on each other?"

"Oh, she probably had words with him in the lounge about how he got her in trouble with us. They laughed about it. I know we do. Unless it's really bad and then we get all passive aggressive on each other." She sighed, shook her head. "Damn. I miss it." And at that moment she really did.

They chatted for a bit until the Chicken Dance came on and Shayne insisted they go join the fun, and Cosette could have sworn she caught Tom glaring at her once or twice but decided to ignore him. If he could have fun, so could she.

Thank God her mother had taken Beatrice. At about eight, Isabella came to her and said that Beatrice was about to fall asleep, so she took her into one of the small rooms shooting off from the banquet hall, quieter places for guests to catch their breaths with overstuffed love seats and let her doze off. Cosette wasn't surprised. Big parties like this were not really her mother's scene. Her father was off mingling and talking to a few people whose company he didn't mind. Neither were party people. She was sure they were only waiting for Henry and Christina to leave before they left too.

At ten o'clock, Christina and Henry were ready to leave. Cosette didn't want to be in the crowd to catch the bouquet, but Henry practically dragged her out.
"You're not funny," Cosette huffed.

"Come on, you're the maid of honor, how will it look if you don't at least try to catch the bouquet?" Henry lectured.

"It's a stupid tradition!" she whined. "Can't we just forget it like you decided to do with the garter belt?"

"Because this is just good fun, not some sexual ceremony designed to exploit the bride," Henry countered.

"You sound like a feminist."

"I'm a Trad, but sometimes we sound the same." He winked at her and left the circle as Christina made ready to throw.

Cosette caught someone looking at her out of the corner of her eye. She turned and saw one of the twins -- at this distance she couldn't quite tell which sister it was. Both of them were pretty, slender like Henry, with the same eyes and the fine dark hair. Both beautiful when they smiled. But the look this one was giving, though...it was cool disdain.

A smirk found its way to her lips. If this chika thought she was going to steal Tom away from her...well, quite frankly, she was welcome to him. She felt a tingle on the back of her neck and saw Tom watching her from the edge of the crowd. Or was he looking at Henry's sister? Cosette couldn't tell.

Then the bouquet came flying --

--and it almost landed on her. Except she smacked it out of the way and let Tom's chosen object of attention have it. She caught his eye and grinned at him, playing innocent, but Tom wasn't fooled. However, she was too busy to wait around for him to start a fight over it, and instead went to catch up to her sister and say their final farewells, for at least a few weeks.

Christina's cheeks were flushed from exertion and excitement, and she'd obviously been sweating from all the dancing. Her eyes were absolutely glittering with joy.
"I swear to God I know what Madonna was singing about in 'Like A Virgin,'" Christina joked.

"You're ready to just float on out of here, aren't you?" Cosette teased.

Christina grasped her hand. "You be good while I'm away, you understand?"

"Only if you bring me back a really good souvenir." They hugged, kissed each other's cheeks, and Cosette trailed behind as Christina went to claim her husband, who was talking to Tom. The men seemed to be in some deep conversation, but the second Henry saw her, it was forgotten.

That strange jealousy clawed at her insides. She had a compulsion to drag herself away and go lick her wounds. That kind of self-pity fed on being dwelled upon, alone, with no one to contradict it, and she was gearing up for a nice pity-party. But then Tom grabbed her wrist.

A flush ran through her. She glanced over Tom's shoulder to see whichever twin it was shoot them a death glare, then walk away for selfies with the bouquet of passion-pink roses dotted with little light pink flowers.

"Dance with me," he said.

She wanted to say no. But the self-pity that had been doggedly jealous of the fact that Tom was preferring the attention of others to her was suddenly purring under the thought that he did prefer her company to theirs, and suddenly she had no reason to say no.

"I'm surprised you have time for me, what with all your admirers," she said as they started to sway to some slow music.

"I always have time for you, Cozy," he said coyly, as if trying to deflect her comment rather than react to it.

"Your dance card was pretty full."

"Was. Everyone is leaving now that the bride and groom are gone." Then something caught his
eye over her shoulder and she turned to see her parents approaching. Her dad stayed on the edge of the dance floor, holding Beatrice, while her mother came up to them.

"We're going to take Beatrice back to our house," Isabella said. "She's sound asleep. You can come get her in the morning if it's too late when you leave."

"No, Mom, I can take her--" Cosette started, attempting to disengage from Tom, but he kept his hand on her waist.

"Are you sure, Isabella?" Tom asked. "It won't be any trouble?"

"The DJ is booked until midnight," Isabella said, a tone of reluctance in her voice. "Partying is for the young. Besides, she's completely asleep, if you come by tomorrow morning it should be fine."

"Shame to waste the DJ," Tom said, giving Cosette a little tug.

Cosette eyed the other young women who were watching them with not a little hostility. "You've got plenty of choices, Tom. You can stay and enjoy it, I'll take Beatrice--"

But when Cosette turned her mother had already walked away and both her parents were headed out of the banquet hall. Her jaw nearly dropped open.

"I don't want any of them," Tom said, his hand sliding under her chin and bringing her back to face him. "Of course, maybe you had other plans. That...gentleman...you were talking with so animatedly before. Is he still here?"

Cosette had lost track of Shayne after bidding Christina farewell. "I don't know," she said, realizing Tom's expression had narrowed on her, almost suspiciously. "I'm surprised you even noticed us with your flock of admirers."

Damn. That was the second time she'd said that. He was going to... "Were you jealous?"

It was spoken very softly, so that she only heard it because he'd leaned in a bit, a smirk on his face that made her both want to claw it off and kiss it away.
"Were you?"

"Yes," he replied without hesitation. His fingers flexed on her lower back, pulling her closer.

"Well that's silly," she said. "He was someone I went to school with a long, long time ago. Turns out he and Henry went to college together."

Tom looked puzzled. "How is that possible?"

"He was a senior in college when Henry was a freshman. Kind of a big brother thing for a bit."

"And how young were you when you went to school together?"

"Sixth grade."

A sparkle started in his eyes. "Was it a Catholic school?"

"If you're picturing me in a uniform I'm going to step on your instep so hard you won't be able to dance for the rest of the night."

He backed away, sobering but still with a lingering hint of mischief. "I'm even more jealous that he didn't have to imagine it."

"Maybe you should be jealous, I did have a huge crush on him."

Tom chuckled. "You didn't answer me when I asked if you were jealous."

Cosette wanted to glare at him. More to the point, she wanted to say she hadn't been jealous. But watching Tom with other women...it had stirred something in her. Something primal.

What would it be like, when he started dating other women? How many "aunts" was Beatrice
going to have? Would Cosette get along with them?

But she could tell by how amused he was at the thought of her being jealous that he still wanted her. If he was still in love with her...would it be such a bad thing to marry him? They got along. People in arranged marriages usually had much less going for them -- was this so different? She could adjust to the situation. Sexually, they had a lot of energy. She could keep him happy, satisfied. And he was generous with her, both financially as well as with her space. And if it didn't work, if they *did* end up divorcing, she would get a good settlement, she would be comfortable. And it wouldn't be her fault because she would have tried. What did it matter if she couldn't try again with someone else after all that? She doubted she could anyway.

Because even after all of this, she was still in love with him. Damn it.

He was waiting for her to speak, the way he was watching her. She felt tired all of a sudden, and stepped closer to him, resting her head against his chest and shoulder. At first Tom seemed to tense, as if surprised by her action, but then both arms went around her, pressing her closer. She shut her eyes, let herself just fall into him. She could feel his lips press against her crown.

"Just hold me, Tom," she whispered.

And he did. He held her for several dances, and then the music picked up a little, and Tom entertained her with his dancing for several minutes. She tried to keep up but her feet were throbbing and she grasped him by his jacket and pulled him close to speak into his ear.

"I'm going to go sit in one of the sitting rooms."

"Are you feeling okay?" he asked, stopping what he was doing.

"Just tired," she admitted.

"Want me to bring you something to drink?"

"Sure," she sighed. "I'm going to go sit where Mom had Beatrice, okay?"
She managed to waddle her way to the sitting room and plop herself down on the loveseat. Her shoes were immediately kicked off and she lay her head back and shut her eyes.

Something was wrong. An impulse, a thought was starting to travel through her brain. It would have normally been banished as absurd, but the feel of Tom's fingers on her chin from before, when he'd made her look at him, and the way his eyes stared her down, and the feel of his body against hers...

She squirmed. She had to be strong. She couldn't let this happen.

But was it so wrong? If she was going to have a future with him? They had a child together already. It was what she wanted, wasn't that the most important thing? Shouldn't she have a little fun now and again?

These thoughts were ridiculous. Ludicrous, even. But they floated around her brain like a cloud of gnats. She'd wave one away and another would take its place, with a new reason why it wouldn't really be a bad idea.

When Tom entered the room, holding an ice cold bottle of water, she realized how utterly gorgeous he was. Slightly sweaty, with his sleeves rolled up. He'd loosened his tie earlier but now it was gone. His waistcoat was still on, but the shirt underneath was unbuttoned almost all the way down to the V of the waistcoat. He walked over to her and sat down on the other end of the loveseat, a respectable distance between them. He opened the water and handed it to her, and she drank greedily, gulping it down, not realizing how thirsty she really was.

When she stopped, there was a little left. She offered it to Tom, who took it and finished it. They sat there for several long moments, just relishing the quiet.

"Videos of your dancing might end up on Instagram tomorrow," she whispered.

He gave a playful little snort. "I'm used to it. But I'm sorry if your privacy gets invaded." He had rested his head on the back of the loveseat and now turned to look at her. Cosette had a distinct memory of his head on a pillow, lying beside her, giving her sweet smiles as she watched the way his mouth would move. His mouth fascinated her.

"I'm not worried. As long as nobody took pictures of Beatrice. I'm sure Mom had her tucked away safely."
"Nobody did while I was watching. The best they'll get is a picture of me leaning over the baby seat." His eyes held hers. "They might have pictures of us."

Cosette just gave a little "I don't care" shrug. Her eyes would not leave his mouth. "We're old news."

He smiled a little wider. "Actually, we're driving everyone crazy, not knowing if we're together or not."

"What, Luke didn't put it out there?"

Tom rocked his head a bit from side to side. His expression was tired but cheerful. "After Beatrice was born, I wouldn't let him release anything. He's only allowed to deny rumors. Of which there are plenty."

She scoffed. "I don't want to talk about that."

"Me neither." Still smiling, he went on. "How are your feet? They have to be aching from those heels."

She yanked her skirt up a bit, exposing her legs to mid-shin, and she lifted her feet, wiggling her toes at him. The nailpolish was a perfect match to that on her fingernails. "What about you? Aren't those shoes leather?"

"Oh, I'm not taking off my shoes," he snorted. "The smell alone---"

"Gross," she interrupted him. They both laughed softly. Then they locked eyes, and Cosette could not look away.

Damn him for being so beautiful. He smelled good, he looked good, he sounded good, and he felt so damn good that she wanted to touch him.

She found herself scooting closer to him. He watched her, not warily, but with a pleasant
drowsiness, as if he thought he were dreaming. She managed to hitch her skirt up around her knee so she could raise herself up on the cushions and then she was kissing him. Gently. Running her mouth along his, re-familiarizing herself with the feel of his lips. Her hand rested on his other shoulder, and she could feel his fingers tentatively being to drift along her arm, caressing, unsure.

She settled her mouth over his and kissed him with more intensity. He responded, eagerly. It felt dreamy, unreal. But the beautiful close-up blue of his eyes, so many shades mingled with some greens and even golden flecks, reminded her that it was real. He let her do what she wanted, as her fingers began to trace the lines of his face and her lips pulled on his, the palms of her hands tingling with the scrape of his cheeks, as it was late and his daily facial hair was starting to need shaving.

The tip of her tongue slid against his bottom lip and he opened for her, and she could taste no whiskey. He hadn't been drinking. He was sober, as sober as she was.

Yet this was still happening.

Kissing him was a pleasure she had denied herself for so long. He was such a good kisser, molding his mouth to hers, pliant and yet strong, sweet and gentle. She felt his fingers tracing the lines of her neck and jaw, and then one strong, soft hand settled along her throat.

She pressed harder. He responded.

Somehow she'd ended up on his lap. His arms went around her waist and she felt herself being turned and then pushed down against the cushions, him hovering over her. Cosette slid her arms around his neck and she felt him moan into her mouth -- it was more like a little whimper, and it seemed tinted with relief.

Her hand slid down and yanked at his shirt tail, which was half out of his trousers anyway, and her fingers slid under, seeking his warm flesh. She felt a muscle tremble under her touch, and then, abruptly, she was pulled upright, Tom tears her lips from his. They were sitting, although a bit awkwardly, both panting.

"Cosette, stop."

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That she was kissing him, tentative and seeking at first, was a pleasant and utterly unexpected surprise. A surprise he welcomed. After all this time, for her to finally break, was a victory so sweet he had to savor it.

He was so intent on savoring it that he didn't even want to speak of it. He didn't want to stop her and ask her what she was doing. What it meant.

Until he felt her pushing harder, and old memories laid themselves over current events and he realized what was happening.

Passion grabbed him and he grabbed her, falling into that maw, the one that sought the comfort, the escape. She wanted him, he could tell by the steady beat of her pulse. She wasn't nervous, wasn't desperate. She knew what she was doing, and her heartbeat was getting stronger with exertion and excitement.

Then the memory, the awful memory of that morning, her standing in the kitchen, that closed face, the distance, the pain, the loss...

He couldn't go through that again. He had to---

"Cosette, stop."

"Why?" she looked up at him, her eyes hazy, shimmering. God she was so beautiful. Her lips were swollen from their kissing. And it was the hardest damn thing he ever had to do.

But he did it. He placed his hands on her shoulders and gave a slight push.

"Because this isn't what you want."

"Isn't it?"

"I know you. I didn't the first time but I do now. And you can't throw me out again in the morning when you realize that."
He wished he hadn't said the last part, but a part of him was angry. Did she still think him so shallow and driven by his urges that she thought she could just use him?

Apparently, she did, and apparently, she wasn't wrong.

But clearer heads had to prevail, and while it utterly stunned him that it was his head that was clear and not being driven by other parts of him, too much was at stake. Especially when it came to her.

She was too important.

His words, however, had their desired effect. She pulled away slightly, that lovely, full lower lip pushed out into a slight pout. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised you're not interested. Not when you've got the pick of the crop."

Tom drew a breath, reeling himself in. She was reacting to his comment. He wasn't going to perpetuate this cycle. Things would go well between them and one of them would do something stupid and then they would explode at each other and rip each other to tiny shreds and send them back to square one -- or even farther back.

This was a test, he realized. God was testing him.

"I don't want any of them," he said, his voice completely smooth, full of truth.

She flashed her eyes at him. "Then what do you want?"

"To marry you."

Even he wasn't quite sure where that had come from, but the words were out and they were true. Her stunned expression was subtle, but at least it made her drop that maddening pout.

"To have a future with you," he went on. "To have a home, a family, more children. To get you to forgive me and to do this right, for once." Then, unable to take her silence, he asked, "What do you
Her mouth started to open, but nothing came out. She closed it promptly. "I don't know," she whispered. Her chin dropped, her hands on her lap where she sat askew in her corner of the loveseat where he'd shoved her. Her hair was hanging a bit loose from its fancy design above the back of her head, having held up until his hands had crushed it in their tussle.

"I know," he said, his tone very gentle, reaching out, covering her fidgeting fingers with one half. "I know what you're going through, at any rate. I've been there. You're looking at your sister and her future and you're worried about your own. I know because I felt the same way. You're comparing yourself to what you think you should be, or you're lonely and looking for a distraction, or both. Sex is a great distraction. It gives you a feeling of being close to someone, it's comforting...for a little bit. But you know what happens after."

She glanced up at him, her gaze mildly suspicious. "Yeah."

"I know because that was why I did what I did," he confessed. Why he was telling her this, now, of all times, he wasn't sure, but the words seemed to have a will of their own. "I was depressed and miserable. And it cost me almost everything. It isn't worth it."

She blinked, then softened. She fidgeted with her hands, drawing them back from under the weight of his warm palm, pretending to examine her immaculate manicure, uncomfortable under the weight of such truth and trying to process it, but appreciating it nonetheless.

She seemed to look at him as if she hadn't seen him before. He certainly didn't feel like the same man she met a year ago. That Tom had been much more arrogant and maybe he still was, but certainly That Tom would never have done this, confessing to her in the most empathetic way possible. She glanced at him, looking up into his eyes, seeing his patient expression. He felt so vulnerable, but warned himself not expect anything; just watch her and wait, he told himself.

"I'm...I'm sorry," she finally stammered. "Are you...are you mad at me?"

"Not really, no." He gave her a tiny little smile. "Although I really want to ask you something right now."

"What?"
"Do you still love me?"

The words startled her. She had to know exactly what he meant but instead she stalled. "Tom, you're the father of my child, of course I love you."

"No, that isn't what I mean," he said, still serene. His hands lifted and gently rested on her bare shoulders. "Please tell me, Cosette."

She stared at him, her mouth almost hanging open. Suddenly overwhelmed, she extracted herself from him and her corner of the couch, walking across the room. For a moment Tom was sure she was going to fly out the door, but she stopped, her head down, back turned to him.

Obviously she was struggling. He could tell by how she moved, the fussing of her hands, how she shoulders twitched, and the occasionally shake of her head. Finally, after what felt like forever, she turned back to him.

"Tom, I...." she flailed, then shut her eyes, letting out a long breath. "Two months ago," she managed, tone ginger, "two months ago I said that...that I never wanted...to have this conversation again. A lot has happened in those two months."

He felt mildly disappointed, but not destroyed. He stood up, taking a few steps closer to her, slow and meditative so as not to charge her. "Have you forgiven me?" he whispered.

"Yes. I have now." She gave him a little smile, her voice much stronger. "Thank you. Thank you for protecting me from myself." Then her eyes darkened, just a touch. "But there's something I have to know."

"Anything."

"You stopped me. Stopped us," she corrected. "Because you knew it wasn't what I really wanted."

"I told you that I wouldn't let what happened between us happen again."

"Why?"
Her question startled him. Why? Why would she..."Because that isn't who you are, Cosette. I know that now."

"And it is who you are?" She seemed to find her equilibrium, her shoulders ceasing their shifting from nerves.

"I don't...I don't follow..."

"If I wasn't the way I am. If I was the kind of person who wouldn't regret being with you. Having sex with you. Would you have shoved me away then? Would you have stopped me?"

Ah. There it was. The final test.

He couldn't lie to her.

"Probably not."

She nodded, looking down at her hands, which had found each other, one gripping the other. "It's not an easy attitude to change," she admitted. "Something you've been doing your whole life. I'm probably the only woman you'd ever have to..." She stopped, letting it hang.

Then he understood.

He finally understood.

"We aren't going to work, are we?" he whispered.

The smile she gave him was so soft, so sad. "I don't think so. But that doesn't mean...Tom..." She came closer to him, her hands grasping his upper arms just above the elbow. "Tom, as of right now...you've probably become my best friend. You've been a friend to me in...in ways nobody else could ever be. And I do love you."
"But it isn't enough." Somehow, this made a strange sort of sense to him. Finally.

"I'm sorry I hurt you," she said. "I'm sorry I judged you. I'm not judging you now, Tom. It's just...it's fundamental, you know?"

He nodded. In a way, he did know.

"We're just different," he whispered.

"In a very critical way. But you're a good father, and you've been good to me. I don't want us to start fighting again. I just want there to be peace between us."

Tom nodded, letting her hug him. The last two months of his life, since she'd allowed him back into hers, rolled before him. All the work they'd done, the reconciliation, the deepening of their friendship --

It wasn't for nothing.

It would have to be enough. For a very long time.
Three to Four Months Later

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the wedding. A few conclusions, decisions, and a new start.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a rare day that he had two hours free.

Tom was supposed to meet that day with the director of his upcoming film -- Sandman. It was going to consume his entire summer, filming this movie, and then Marvel was snatching him up again in the fall for his part in the Avengers: Infinity War. But as soon as Tom had gotten to the restaurant, the director was arguing with someone on his phone, and then had to leave in a flurry of apologies to go deal with some emergency.

After catching himself a quick, quiet meal, he headed back to Cosette's house. While he spent most of his days there, helping take care of their daughter, since his father had finally returned to the UK under the care of his mother and sister, he had been sleeping in his own rented flat. In a few weeks he was going to follow his family back to London, touching base at home before his life became a whirlwind of work.

Something he genuinely was looking forward to.

It wasn't that he didn't like being such an everyday part of Beatrice's life, but...ever since the wedding, it was like something inside him had died. Not an agonizing, painful death, but quietly, gently, like going to sleep. Something had finally accepted the inevitable.

He and Cosette were over.

Few things had changed between them. They still talked, they still read each other as clearly as a book. They still worked together as effortlessly as breathing. But a certain warmth had definitely cooled. Or maybe it was the underlying tension had finally broken. At first it felt relaxing, like a muscle he was finally letting unclench. But now, in all seriousness, he wanted some space.
A lot of it.

He wasn't angry at her. Nor was he berating himself. One could only do so much, and he had done all he felt he could. It simply wasn't meant to be. They'd made a beautiful baby girl, so their connection had a purpose. They were still friends, friends on a level he'd never been friends with anyone before in his life, and her well-being meant everything to him.

But he was done waiting for it to be more.

Still, the thought of being away from them, particularly being away from Beatrice, clutched at him like a cold hand on his back. Beatrice was thriving -- these last three months had seen her be able to push herself up on her hands while on her tummy, reach for objects, and was making noises that were distinct for what she needed -- or wanted. Tom took the lead on her tummy time, and their "smile conversations," as they were called, were the highlight of his day. What was he going to miss, when he left? His new thing was holding her upright so she could push down with her feet and strengthen her leg muscles, and while it was too early to think about walking, this was important to develop the ability to crawl and sit upright without support. Would he miss it when she started to crawl? Would he miss her first steps?

These thoughts broke his heart. Even Cosette's promise to record it if she could didn't soothe him. He already had to deal with the fact that she would be starting to introduce baby food at four months and he would be talking about a giant Gorilla. Sure, he loved his work, and this movie had fulfilled one of the things on his bucket list, but...he didn't want to miss Beatrice covered with sweet potato puree. A picture would be fine, but it wouldn't be like the real thing.

Their decision -- although it felt more like a realization, as they hadn't really said out loud that it was done between them -- had brought more changes, as well. Cosette's parents seemed much warmer to him. Isabella had made him a fantastic dinner the night of his birthday, and he'd spent the evening talking and laughing with all of them, Raymond, Christina and Henry, Cosette, and he couldn't help but think that as little as a few years ago he would have been dying for a big party, playing it up as much as he could, and was surprised that this quiet, sweet little celebration made him happy on a level he'd never quite considered before.

On one level, it made him sadder that he and Cosette hadn't worked out. But now, looking at the future...was there someone out there who could match him? Accept these changes in him, and be as steady and supportive as Cosette...or as she might have been?

These thoughts were buzzing around his head as he headed up the steps into Cosette's house. He hadn't noticed the car parked at the curb, wouldn't have known whose it was even if he had. So when he walked into the kitchen, he almost jumped as Cosette's guest gave an inadvertent yelp of surprise.
"Shelly, right?" Tom said to the older, plump woman who sat with her and over her mouth, looking as pink as Christina's wedding bouquet.

Cosette was almost glaring at him. "I thought you had a lunch appointment," she said, tone borderline accusatory.

"Last minute cancellation, I grabbed something quick and then came back...am I interrupting?"

"No, I'm sorry, you just...surprised me," Shelly said quickly, hand lowering. She averted her eyes back to the various papers on the table that she and Cosette had apparently been going through. She started to stack things. "Was there anything else, Cosette? I think we covered it."

"Just the pancakes," Cosette said. "Were you going to stay?"

"I have to be somewhere pretty soon, so I probably shouldn't," Shelly said apologetically. Tom swore Cosette shot him a brief, frustrated look, but it passed so fast he couldn't be sure. "Besides, gotta watch the carbs!" She smiled, cheerfully, and started to rise. "Nice to see you, Mr. Hiddleston--"

"Tom," Tom quickly corrected her, having the oddest feeling that she was leaving because of him.

But then he realized...he remembered. She had overheard him. That day he was in his trailer, getting some "stress relief."

Tom hadn't thought about that afternoon in a long time. Truthfully, he couldn't even remember the details of it, or quite recall the face of the woman he had been with. And in the year that had passed, he was acutely aware of some change. The idea that he would have done that -- so casually, with no thought for any consequences -- repulsed him.

He was repulsed by his own behavior. Only a year ago? Was he so different now?

It might have been his last sexual encounter before getting involved with Cosette. He hadn't slept with anyone else while he was seeing her, and he hadn't been able to have sex with anyone else since, until that business in Australia.
Which also repulsed him.

He realized he was standing there, mute, as the two women were getting Shelly out the door. She seemed to slip around him as if she were afraid of touching him. He gave her a little smile, and Cosette gave him another queer little glance.

"I'm going to check on Beatrice, she's napping," Cosette said, suddenly seeming awkward. "Are you...are you okay?"

He shook himself, internally. "Fine. Um, I think I left something in the car. I'll be back."

She almost seemed like she wanted to stall him, but he turned and left, sliding the door shut behind him. He saw Shelly walking down to the curb, where her car was parked, and he called out to her.

She seemed to stiffen. She turned, very slowly. Her face was a mask -- forced pleasantness, but Tom could see she really wanted to get away.

Now he was positive she had left because of him.

"I want to apologize to you," he said, getting straight to the point.

Now she looked very embarrassed. "Whatever for, T...Tom?"

His returning look was bashful, but knowing. "I know you don't want me to know it, but I do know you overheard me, some time ago, before I became involved with Cosette, engaging in some very...inappropriate behavior."

It was a chilly day, but her cheeks didn't turn pink from the cold. Not really pink, either, but a full red flush. "I...I don't know...I mean, you have no reason to apologize to me, Tom. I shouldn't have even been there."

"Yes, but I know you used to be...well...a fan, I guess is the world. And now you couldn't get out of Cosette's house fast enough when I came in, and I totally understand why." She got even redder,
and Tom realized what he'd just said. It wasn't like him to call someone out like that, especially when he was trying to apologize, but he wanted to be explicitly clear. "I know being around me makes you uncomfortable, and I'm sorry for that. I'm sorry for my behavior. I'm sorry for you having to witness that behavior."

She shook her head. "You really do apologize too much," she said with a little laugh.

"Usually that's just me being British, but this is a sincere apology," he said, sensing her tension was easing a bit. He gave her a hopeful little smile.

She considered him. "I know that things go on, on movie sets," she said. "And I'm not shocked or scandalized by you...doing whatever you were doing...in your trailer," she added with a dismissive wave of your hand. "I mean, that's what happens in Hollywood. I'm not naive. I think what upset me was the fact that it was across from the church. It felt... disrespectful. Sacrilegious, even."

Tom scowled. It wasn't him having sex that upset her, but his blatant disregard for his surroundings. Somehow, that bugged him. Almost as if she expected him to be a cad.

He had never thought of himself using that word before. He never had thought of himself as a cad. Until this moment. Right now.

She was mistaking his scowl for being directed at her, not himself, Tom could tell by how she shifted away from him, looking for an escape. "But it isn't any of my business," she said hastily.

"No," he said quickly. "No, please. It...it wasn't right. I do want you to know that I am genuinely and sincerely...sorry. For everything."

She wouldn't look at him now. "You know, I'm the one who told her. That something was wrong in Australia. I'm the one who told her about how PR covers things up and that something didn't add up. So maybe you really shouldn't apologize to me."

He reached out, touched her arm. He had suspected it was her, thought Cosette had mentioned Shelly during that rambling conversation, but he hadn't been sure. But he had never been angry at her.

She gave a little jump, and flinch, at his touch. He almost pulled his hand away, but didn't. "Shelly,
please. I'm not angry at you. You were looking out for Cosette. It was the right thing. What I did was wrong. I know you've been a good friend to Cosette. She needs friends, being away from work and her sister being newly married, it's been a rough time for her. So please, don't stay away because of me. And I hope, in time, you won't be uncomfortable around me.

She hadn't quite looked at him yet, but slowly, she glanced toward him, eyebrows raised in hesitation. Uncertainty. "O...okay," she said softly. He removed his hand, giving a little nod. It was the best he could do.

Cosette watched at the window. Whatever the hell Tom and Shelly were talking about, Shelly looked like she wanted to bolt.

Beatrice gave a little whimper and Cosette shifted, moving her to the other breast. She had woken up hungry and started rooting right away, but Cosette had wanted to see if Tom and Shelly wound up running into each other. She knew that Shelly wanted as little to do with Tom as possible. That was the price one paid for having your hero-worship destroyed. Shelly had been a Hiddlestoner, and all that was left of it was a lingering suspicion and a healthy dose of skepticism when it came to her former crush. She wouldn't come over unless she knew there was no chance of running into Tom, and Cosette had really thought Tom would be gone for hours.

Finally, Tom came into the house. There hadn't been any raised voices or crying, so she couldn't assume the worst. "What was that about?" she asked, realizing she sounded very demanding.

Tom gave her a look she couldn't quite quantify -- somewhere between annoyed and amused. "Don't worry about it," he said, then looked down and realized she was breast feeding. "Shouldn't you be sitting? She's getting heavy."

That was all she could get out of him. Or Shelly, later, who simply told her not to worry about it. Whatever they said to each other, it wasn't for her ears, and she had to accept it. Even if it drove her nuts.

After Beatrice was fed and changed, Tom suggested they go for a walk.

"A walk?" Cosette echoed, unsure. It was a cold day for California, even at the end of February.
"Cosette...." Tom seemed to hesitate. "I just think some fresh air might be a good idea. You need to get out a bit. You've been a bit cooped up since Christina and Henry got married, even though they've been back for a week now."

"They're getting their home set up, I don't want to interfere with them getting their new rhythm," she muttered, but it was true. Cosette had felt like she needed to leave her sister alone as much as possible now that she was a new wife. Having Shelly over was a breath of fresh air, and now that she was gone, she felt a little...bereft. A walk was a good idea.

"We'll wrap Bebe up tight, she'll be fine."

"And if the paps come along and see you pushing a pram, like they did Benedict?"

"I'm not entirely comfortable with your level of knowledge about my friends and the various scandals attached to them," he teased. "Right, Bebe? Mommy needs to find better things to do with her time."

"Okay, fine, we'll use the pretty stroller your sister bought us. At least the trim isn't just purple." In fact it was a lovely shade of turquoise, but it had little pink and yellow butterflies floating along, as if in a wide sky, with purple rolling hills underneath.

Tom did push the stroller, as Cosette had teased him, and it was a nice walk through the neighborhood. Cosette couldn't help but remember when she was little and her mother brought her to her grandmother's house, and she and her grandmother would always go for walks. When Christina came along, they would push her in the stroller, and Cosette always wanted to push, to show she was a big girl.

"Are you with me?" Tom asked softly. She gave a little jump and turned to him. "You were somewhere else for a while."

"Was it that long? I was just thinking about walking with my grandmother. And Chrissy in the stroller. The more things change, the more they stay the same."

"I wish I could have met her. Your grandmother," Tom said as they rounded the corner.

"I do too. She probably would have liked you. Or at least she would have thought you were hot."
Tom gave an incredulous laugh. "Grandma always said she was old, not dead. She was always pointing out some young man to me, at Mass, of course, because she wanted me to marry a Catholic. You're not Catholic so she would have tried to convert you. She loved challenges like that." Cosette paused. "Sometimes I wish I was more like her."

"I thought you couldn't convert to please someone else," Tom reminded her.

"Of course not. She'd just convert you, period. She was good at it. She had a way with people. My friend Kate, that you met the wedding?"

Tom gave a little grunt.

"When we were in college, she thought about leaving the church. Figured her parents had been pushing this religion on her for years that she wasn't sure she even believe in. When she would come over, Grams would talk to her. By the time she graduated she'd even decided she was only going to marry a Catholic guy. Grams wound up introducing her to her husband." Cosette sighed. "I just can't help but think...she'd be disappointed in me."

"She wouldn't," Tom said, pausing with the stroller. He reached over and grasped Cosette's hand, pulling it to his chest. "Because she taught you to do what was right, even if it was hard. And you have."

She looked at him. There was nothing in his expression to make her think he was trying to butter her up. Since the wedding, there had been a kind of distance between them, a cooling of the emotions, even though she could still feel that they were close. Absolutely nothing Tom said or did gave her any indication that he was holding out hope, or resented her for what happened between them at the reception. In return, she tried to make it absolutely clear that she truly and honestly forgave him for his infidelity.

They were back on their block now, and about five houses down from Cosette, there was a little sign in the yard that made Tom pause.

"One of your neighbors is moving?" he noticed.

"Oh, Mrs. Braxton! She must have...oh, goodness," Cosette realized she hadn't been keeping up with the neighborhood, what with all her preoccupations lately. "I hope she's okay. Maybe she's
moving in with her children, or a good senior home?"

"I can find out," Tom said, a strange look floating across his face. "Cosette, what would you think of me...uh, I don't know, maybe it's a bad idea."

"What is it, Tom?" Cosette asked. "You're thinking of...of buying that house?"

He looked at her, hesitation and hope warring in his eyes. "I should probably think about it more before we talk about it, but...well, I'm going to be here every chance I get, and I need something more permanent than my rented flat."

"Here? On this block?" The thought of Tom so close...but at the same time, she realized how easy it would make things. They would be within shouting distance of each other. Tom could stay as late as he needed to and walk home. It would even be possible for him to take Beatrice to his house if...

Yes, it would come. The time would come when she and Tom would have such separate lives that she couldn't expect him to come to her whenever he wanted time with his daughter. He would have visitation rights and he would be entitled to have his child under his own roof. It may be a bit in the future, but it was coming, even if the thought of it gave her a pang in her heart...and gut. And it was better to have it here than for him to take Beatrice away to London.

"What about your house in London?" she asked softly.

"It's not so uncommon for someone of means to have...well...that is..."

She couldn't help it. She chuckled. "Celebrities often have two houses, or more."

"I don't like to think of myself as a celebrity. I'm an actor. And yes, they sometimes have more than once house. And it's not like either is a mansion."

"I wouldn't want you to give up your house in London," she said warmly. "I know that's your home. I can't tell you how much I appreciate your patience in staying here."
"Well, I will expect you to bring Beatrice for a visit," Tom said. "Maybe this summer, before you decide about school?"

Cosette shook her head and laughed. "Of course." Even though that was a decision she didn't want to make yet.

"What would you think, though? Of me buying this house?" Tom asked. He walked up the little walk a bit. The house was lovely, smallish but not too small. It was made of a deep green brick with white trim. There was a gate, also white, and lining the inside were rose bushes that Mrs. Braxton used to adore. There was a curved bay window overlooking the yard, and a small porch where a swing hung. It was pretty and well-kept.

"I think...I think I need to think it over a bit, but I can't see why it's a bad idea."

She would think of the bad ideas later. Of Tom bringing women back here, and Cosette having to lie awake thinking of what was going on down here. But she knew Tom wouldn't have Bebe when those things happened.

Or maybe her having a date, and Tom being right down the street, and worrying about what he thought, or what he was going to do.

Tom was taking down the realtor's information on his phone. "I'll talk to my accountant," he said. "It might come to nothing, but...I think it's something we need to consider."

The trial run of Tom going back to London was difficult. Cosette felt nervous the entire time he was gone, but didn't tell him. The last time they'd been parted for a long period of time, he had cheated on her, but since they weren't in a relationship now, she didn't have anything to lose. Tom was free to do as he wished, and she had no hold on him.

She should have felt relieved. She felt the opposite.

Beatrice continued to grow and develop. Almost all of Cosette's time and energy went into caring for her little girl, to the point of isolation from everything else. Christina and Henry asked to take Bebe at times, for an afternoon or an evening, and Cosette knew they were practicing for their own
child -- which she was sure was going to be announced at any time, the way the two seemed to be continuously glowing.

It made her feel more alone than ever.

Even when Tom came back from London, he was so busy, promoting his movie, that he had little time to spend with her. He would pop in for maybe twenty minutes a day, an hour at most, and Cosette felt it best to let him have as much of that time as possible with his baby daughter. She took pictures and video of just about everything she did with Beatrice and sent them to him, and he always seemed so happy to get them. He would ask her how she was doing, on the phone, over video chat, and even when he was at the house, and she would give him blanket answers, nothing too specific, unless it pertained to Beatrice. She could tell by the set of his brow that he was concerned about her, but she knew he had no time to pursue it, so she didn't worry.

She wouldn't have known what to tell him, anyway.

The night of her own birthday, they were all gathered at her parents' house. Just like for Tom's. And she realized how alone she felt.

It startled her, this feeling. Being surrounded by those she loved most in the world, and she felt as if she were alone? It was unsettling. Cosette had never been one to feel this way, to let things like others around her having their own lives get to her. She told herself that this was just part of motherhood, part of the adjustment. She just had to wait it out.

So she made her decision, and announced it that night. She was going back to work in the fall. She was going to talk to Richard about it as soon as possible. Being around others, keeping herself busy...these would help.

And how could she be depressed when she saw Beatrice's face light up with a smile, when she came to feed her before they all sat down to Cosette's favorite meal, baked rigatoni with meatballs? It was one of the few times she didn't feel lonely, she realized, when she was connecting with her daughter.

So she dismissed it. Pushed it away.

After dinner, there were a few presents. A beautiful pea-coat from Christina and Henry, which they'd picked up while shopping on their honeymoon. A few books from her father, the three piece
set written by Pope Benedict XVI before he'd retired, which Cosette knew she'd never have the
time (or concentration) to read. And from Tom...a pair of brilliant amethyst earrings that dangled
from her earlobes. And an invitation to attend the premiere of his movie in Los Angeles with him.

"Are you kidding?" she said without thinking, looking at him, dumbfounded.

"Not as if we were together," Tom reassured her.

"I know, of course," she said, "but everyone will think we are!"

"No," he shook his head, "you don't have to walk the red carpet with me, you can go around and
inside and then after you can come to the after party with me. I thought you could use a good
evening out, but if you're too tired--"

"But people will still talk," she said, looking at the earrings. They were...huge. "When did you get
these?"

"I bought them for you a long while ago, actually," he said, and there was a touch of something in
his voice, almost downtrodden. "Over the summer, I was going to give them to you for Christmas,
but...well, things changed. But I still wanted you to have them. And I thought you could wear them
for the premiere. I think you might find it fun. Just as friends, Cosette, just as my guest."

"I know that, I'm just worried about how it will look."

"It'll look like you're on good terms," Christina said, shoving a forkful of chocolate cake into her
mouth.

"We can babysit Beatrice, at your house if you'd prefer," Henry offered.

Cosette cast a glance at her parents. Neither looked disapproving -- in fact, they seemed like they
wanted her to say yes. Had her pain been so obvious? Did they really think this would ...fix it? Or
even help?

"O...okay," she agreed. "Sounds like fun."
Tom beamed at her. She gave him a little grin back.

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Tom knew this was part of the job. It wasn't his favorite, not by a long shot...but in moments like this, having that rush of everyone getting to see the work, their excitement, their energy, it fed into him and gave him a strange kind of high.

The flashes upon flashes of the camera nearly blinded him, but he was used to it by now. The continuous calling of his name was something he was able to tune out at this point. The reporters and their questions, smiling so much his cheeks ached, and telling them pretty much the same thing over and over...he would never have been able to endure it if not for that buzzing feeling that moved through him, over him.

It was almost a kind of...worship.

The intoxicating feeling of being....wanted on such a level. The sheer volume of their desire for him was an electricity all its own. But as he moved through it, something felt...off. Hollow. As he finally reached the theater, after nearly two hours of shaking hands, answering questions, posing for pictures, the darkness momentarily swallowed him as his eyes adjusted.

Cosette was standing in the lobby, gazing around her with a detached look on her face. A spectator look. He had left her over two hours ago, with one of Luke's assistants to escort her inside and get her seated. Apparently she'd gotten restless and went exploring.

Tom carefully looked around him before he went over to her. Luke wasn't too far behind -- he would go sit in another section with other publicists during the movie, if he even watched it at all -- and Tom was grateful. He had handled getting Cosette in without any fuss. Nobody had asked about her -- only congratulated him on becoming a dad. A few had asked some questions about Beatrice but he quickly deflected. He knew he had a tendency to ramble and most especially about his daughter; he was sure something would slip, and he just couldn't have it. He wanted to protect her as long as possible and keep as much information to himself as he could. He felt fortunate that paps hadn't camped out in Cosette's bushes to get pictures. Of course, Isaac and the other bodyguards were probably largely responsible for that.

"Sorry," was the first word from his mouth when he reached Cosette. She blinked, looked at him. She was stunning, truly, in an evening gown that was understated, letting the amethyst choker and earrings take center stage without being overwhelming. The skirt was longer in the back than the front, showing off her lovely legs. Her hair was pulled back, the deep shimmering curls styled to
drape gently down her neck to show off her jewelry, and Tom knew that several people had eyed her curiously, wondering who she was.

"Why?" Cosette answered, her traditional red-violet lips quirking into a grin. "You were working. I know it's a job."

"Hope you've been sufficiently occupied?"

"Oh, yeah, been people watching inside. Most of your co-stars had come inside already and I was getting curious about you, and figured I'd use the restroom, then I got caught up in the Kong stuff out here." She pointed at many of the old, vintage posters that had been displayed in honor of the occasion. "I always liked the Jessica Lange version myself."

She seemed to be enjoying herself. Tom had come up with this half-assed plan to bring her to his premiere only a few weeks ago, having to get a stylist for her at last minute, adding a few more gray hairs to Luke's head. But she had lost something in the last month...a sparkle she used to have. Tom didn't know what to make of if, her distance, her silence...and he couldn't press because he didn't feel he had a right. Or maybe he was afraid of what it would turn out to be.

"At the party I'll introduce you to Sam," Tom said, referring to Samuel Jackson. "He's not nearly so scary as he is in the movies, I promise."

"I'd like to meet Brie, too, if I could. Room was such an amazing movie." She let him take her arm and they went back into the theater, toward their seats. "Although Goodman scares the crap out of me."

"He's a teddy bear," Tom reassured her as they found their aisle.

While he had seen the movie himself -- a couple of times, actually -- it was a lot of fun to watch it again with Cosette. She laughed, she nudged him several times, gave him a few knowing looks, and seemed to really enjoy it. When it was over, he had to do a bit more press, and spent some time with the fans, but not too much, as he wanted to join everyone else at the afterparty. Cosette waited in the hired car they were all sharing, and when he finally joined them, she was on the phone.

"What?" he asked when he saw what she was doing.
"Just checking up on Beatrice," Cosette said.

"She's fine, she's with your family," Tom assured her.

"I know, I just...wanted to be sure." That strange look that was on her face so often these days settled over her features again, and she gazed out the window.

He reached for her hand, which she let him take, although she didn't turn to look back at him. She did, however, squeeze his fingers reassuringly.

"Tom?" she said after a few moments of companionable silence. "May I ask you a favor?"

"Anything," he said as she turned to him. Her expression was troubled.

"When the time comes, and you...you know, meet someone..."

Instantly every muscle in his body went rigid. He felt something burning, high in his cheeks. He was sure the blush was forming in his ears, was going to make its way down his neck, and he had absolutely no idea why---

She went on. "I mean, I just want to ask you, as a courtesy, if there's anything that's going to happen that the..." she let out a breath, slapped her hands on her legs. "This isn't coming out right at all."

"It's okay," Tom heard himself saying, but it sounded distant. Like someone else was saying it.

Her hands balled into fists and she seemed determined to press on. "I just want to ask you, if you would please, tell me about the important relationships that come into your life, so that I don't have to read about them in the tabloids. I know you meet people, I know you're going to want to date, and what you do isn't any of my business, none at all. I just...I don't want to be blind sided by it, you know? Just let me know. Especially if something seems serious."

He opened his mouth, not knowing what to say.
"I'm not saying you have to tell me about every little date you go on," she went on, turning back to look out the window. "Or...or whatever else you do with a...with lady friend...just don't let me find out from someone else, okay." Back to him, her eyes wide and pleading. "Is that too much to ask?"

Her voice, in that last sentence, had turned small and soft. His throat clenched, and he had to clear it. He forced himself to relax. "No, it isn't," he said.

He wanted to tell her that he wouldn't do that to her. But...he had once, and he couldn't make any promises. They weren't like that anymore.

 Abruptly, his brain shifted -- trying to save him from this moment where he was utterly lost. "There is something I'd like to ask you, too."

She gave him a little smile. "Of course I'd tell you if I met someone," she said, dismissively.

"No, actually, it was about...I was wanting to talk to you about getting a nanny."

She frowned. "A nanny?"

He nodded. "You're going to be on your own for a while, Cosette, and if you want to go back to work, we need to think about reliable child care. I don't mean we have to talk about it now, not tonight, but I think it's a good idea."

"It would be nice to have someone consistent, but I've heard nightmare stories about nannies," Cosette murmured.

"I had a nanny," Tom said. "And trust me when I say I will be damn sure to get the best one out there. And make sure you like her."

"Or him," she mused.

Tom shrugged. "Either way. You'll be grateful for the help, in my absence." His muscles were
releasing, his body relaxing. "We can talk about it. I will call regularly, video chat." He reached for her hand again. "You know you can talk to me, about things other than just our daughter." Her eyes darted up to his. "I mean, we are friends, right?"

"Right," she agreed, although that strange look descended on her face again. Inscrutable. She gave him a tight little smile. "I think we're here."

The car stopped, the entrance very close. Tom hopped out, going around to the other side for Cosette's door.

Inside, the party had already started. Drinks were served, food was hot and waiting, and they were starved. Tom sat with Cosette at a large table, where everyone was talking and laughing and celebrating. He shoved a plate full of food at her, knowing she hadn't eaten since before the movie, and it had been hours. She smiled at him and tucked in.

There were lots of finger foods to enjoy, and Cosette was ravenous.

The conversation in the car had shaken her. But she knew, from watching Tom, from seeing how he so easily charmed everyone, how much everyone loved him...it would be a matter of time before he would meet someone, and want to start again. That was Tom. It was a part of his nature. And she knew for certain that his abstinence had a time limit. He would want female companionship, even if not in a committed relationship. He seemed to need that attention, and since there was no hope for them any longer, she could feel him withdrawing from her, moving on.

It hurt. She didn't like to think how it hurt. But she'd made the choice -- it had probably been more her choice than his. Why was she letting it affect her like this? This was what she wanted. It wasn't fair nor was it right to change her mind now.

Tom was a good date -- he didn't ignore or neglect her, even though he was surrounded by friends and well wishers. He kept her included, made sure she was comfortable, and as a result, Cosette had a really good time. Her mind was taken off the bleakness that seemed before her, being alone, being half a family with her and her daughter.

She struggled to shake it off. It wasn't until she caught a familiar face as they were getting ready to leave that her mind was sufficiently distracted.
"Joseph?"

He turned. Dressed in a sharp suit, it was apparent he was working. She shouldn't be surprised, she told herself; Joseph worked all kinds of different security jobs, and was probably part of a security team for one of the many people at the party. Fans still drifted on the street outside, looking for their opportunity. One never knew what was around the corner.

They were outside, waiting for their car to come up. There were paps being held back, having stuck it out to the very last minute, wanting the last shot of the celebrity of the hour -- which seemed to be Tom, in this case. She stepped away from Tom, where Joseph was hovering around the entrance, and he gave her a welcoming smile.

"How are you?" she asked, suddenly feeling shy, wondering what she was thinking, coming over to him like this. After all, he'd been removed from her security detail because he'd developed feelings for her.

"Great," he said. "You look lovely."

"Thank you. Who are you with?"

"Ms. Larson, actually," Joseph said. "One of a few. Just helping out a friend tonight, they were short so he asked me to sub. This isn't my regular shift."

"Oh. Are you still with the same company?"

"I was, but...well, another opportunity arose," he replied, looking over her shoulder toward Tom, who had been signing a few things for a few fans, and had realized that Cosette wasn't with him anymore. "How have you been? Beatrice must be--"

"Three months, just a few nights ago," Cosette said. She fumbled for her phone, immediately pulling up pictures and handing the device to Joseph.

"She got her father's eyes," Joseph said with a tight little smile. "But your nose."
Cosette couldn't help but smile. She knew Beatrice favored Tom, but her contributions were still there.

"Cosette?" Tom called, and she gave a little start. She turned and saw that he was at the door of their hired car.

"Just a minute!" she called back. She turned back to Joseph. "If you're not working for the company..." Oh hell, what had she wanted to say? She missed him. He'd been a comfort and a friend in a difficult time. "Would it be a problem if we had coffee some time?"

Joseph's dark eyes darted up toward Tom.

"We're not together," she said. "I mean, not romantically. Not anymore."

"Well, that's....I mean...I'm not sure it's the best idea."

"Just coffee, Joseph," she pressed.

He smiled at her. "I know where you are. I still have your number. I'll call you."

Famous last words. She knew he wouldn't call.

She reached out, grasped his hand. "It was nice to see you, even if just for a minute." She flashed him a smile and went to join Tom.

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Time passed.

Tom bought the house. It was a good price. While he was away, he asked Cosette to supervise those he paid to decorate it, and to personally oversee setting up Beatrice's room. Cosette liked the idea. It gave her something to occupy her mind while caring for Beatrice. Yet she wasn't crazy about the thought of Beatrice being away from her for a long period of time, but thought she had
some room before that became a serious threat.

They talked more about the nanny situation. Tom started to send her files on candidates he thought might be acceptable, both men and women. When he was on his promotional tour the files came to her directly from his team. She talked to him about the ones she liked. They agreed that the nanny needed to be in place by the summer, so it could be seen if she was the correct choice before Cosette went back to work.

Cosette went to see Richard. He was more than willing to let her resume reaching in the fall. That had been the original plan.

Tom went on his promotional tour, and eventually went off to work. That brought problems of its own. His tunnel vision when he was working made it difficult to keep in touch. Sometimes he barely managed a call a week. Cosette never hassled him. In fact, she stopped talking to him about much else other that Beatrice.

The nanny they selected was named Giselle. She was older than either her or Tom, had excellent references, was short, stocky, dark-haired, and an all around gem of a person. Cosette came to rely on her enormously, especially when school started. And most especially when Tom's trips back to L.A. became delayed, cancelled, or shortened.

And all in all, it was a nice little powder keg that was getting ready to explode.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so here's the deal.

This story has gotten away from me. Just totally away. I've been struggling with it because there is going to be a massive time jump, at least a year if not two. I've started to see this as a trilogy. But quite frankly I'm not sure anybody cares, lol. So I wanted to either end this part here, and then start a sequel (title undecided), or keep it all one big story, and break it into volumes. I'm on the fence. Opinions are welcome.
One Year Later

Chapter Summary

Time marches on, and tensions are stretched thin.

The three weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas were fast, and hectic, and Cosette could never get anything done. But this year was just a little worse, because she had a life, dammit. And that specific Life was going to turn one year old in two weeks.

Cosette sat at her desk, gazing out the window into the twilight. The time change had caught her by surprise like it always did every year and she hated getting home after dark. It was getting on four and she wasn't accomplishing much, her head was too full, thinking of her upcoming plans -- and how they were going to be ruined.

Returning to work had been much harder than she thought. It took her longer than she expected to get back into her routines, and found herself forgetting things she'd done throughout her entire career. The students seemed happy to see her, though, and cooed over the pictures of Beatrice...and Tom. Yes, the girls were still seeing stars in their eyes when it came to Tom, and he was the source of many questions.

Until Cosette made it clear that she wasn't with Tom anymore. Then they seemed to respect her enough not to press. It was bad form to pester a girl about her ex-boyfriend, and somehow Cosette seemed to be assimilated into the girl-code, even though she was many years their senior.

Thank God for Giselle.

Cosette knew that Giselle was acting as a bit more than a nanny. Tom told her that he paid her extra for her extra work, such as watching his house, making sure it stayed clean when he was gone, and most importantly, supporting Cosette beyond just taking care of Beatrice.

Sometimes, however, Cosette felt a bit like the woman was a spy.

She liked Giselle immensely -- she wouldn't have kept her around for this long if she hadn't. And
better than that, Beatrice seemed to like her, preferring her second only to Mommy. But she knew that she told Tom things. Like how stressed she was, how tired. How her life seemed to have become a revolving door of getting up, going to work, coming home, taking care of Bebe, putting her to bed, going to bed herself, rinse, repeat.

But her mind was getting too numb to care much.

And why was Tom so concerned? It wasn't like he was around much to do anything about it. First he was away with promotion. Then he came back to sixteen hours a day on set, surrounded by green screen. Then there were some location shoots. One filmed ended and another began. The man was sucked into the storm that was his career and even when he surfaced, that was where his head was planted.

He would attempt to talk to her in their video chats, but she always changed the subject. It was always about Beatrice. She put their baby front and center so she could see Daddy. Most especially lately, as Beatrice was anxious to stop crawling and begin walking, toddling around the apartment on the various furniture, grasping the edge of the coffee table or the footrest of the armchair. Sometimes entire conversations were just her following Beatrice around with the phone so Tom could watch.

On the brief weekend where Daddy would be in town, she would pack Giselle off with Beatrice's overnight gear and give him as much time as he was present by making herself scarce. She would either then sleep or catch up on work, where she always seemed to be behind. Occasionally she let Shelly convince her to come out to lunch. She used to get manicures every other week -- having a baby made that impractical. She used to buy sharp clothes to be dressed, now she wore whatever was clean and didn't make her look like a used-up mommy. Sometimes the latter was hard to accomplish.

Henry and Christina were settling into their new life together, and Cosette found out that they had agreed to one year, and then start trying for a baby. They were doing Natural Family Planning (NPF), which meant that Christina knew which six days of the month she could get pregnant. They liked to play aunt and uncle, and were happy to take Beatrice when Grandma and Grandpa were too tired to do so.

But Cosette always protected her special time with Beatrice. Immediately after she came home, it was dinner time, and Beatrice was already using lots of words, although she didn't quite have two word sentences down. Her babbling was making more sense by the day. Cosette spent most of their play time feeding that little brain with as much information as it could take. She wanted to help Beatrice's development as much as possible.

Dinner time was about exploring food. More than one video chat with Tom had been dinner alone,
and she took a strange kind of pleasure in seeing him realize what he was missing.

Because he was missing quite a lot.

He was working, she knew. And Tom went into some strange kind of mode when he was working. Like little else existed. She knew it was an effort for him to detach enough to participate in their calls, but she was getting tired of him putting her off (which he did, at least twice a week if not more) and not coming home more than once a month.

So now it was time to plan Beatrice's first birthday. She threatened Tom's life if he missed it. She swore she wouldn't share a single video with him again if he wasn't there. He wouldn't even get to see it later on recording.

He was supposed to come home the week of Thanksgiving. While Brits didn't celebrate the American holiday, most of the rest of the crew of his latest movie did, so he needed something to do, she thought bitterly. Why not come home and spend some time with his daughter? Besides, they were having a huge dinner at her parents' house, and Tom did love her mother's cooking.

Cosette glanced up at the clock. It was four-thirty now, she wasn't getting anywhere, there was no way she was going to stay after the noon dismissal on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, and she should just give up and head home. She shoved the ungraded papers into her bag and closed up her room. Just as she was locking the door, she heard her phone beep.

It was a text from Tom.

T: Filming running late. They are extending until Wednesday so we can get done with a set before the holiday. I will be there mid-day on Thursday. What time is dinner?

Cosette gritted her teeth as she headed down the stairs, breathing through her nose in an attempt to be calm before she replied.

C: We were planning on dinner at 2 but I can push until 3. Will that work?

T: Perfect. Thanks. XO
Oh, his silly little kiss and hug. She rolled her eyes and shoved her phone back into her purse. A few kids from the after school program called their greetings as she headed out the door, and she forced a smile for them.

Something was going to go horribly wrong. Her gut knew it.

Was this what her daughter was doomed to? A negligent father who cared more about work than about her? No wonder Tom couldn't keep a relationship going. If they had been together, she would have wanted a break from him because of things like this.

By the time she was in her car, she felt her cheeks getting hot. She turned on the air conditioner and focused the vents on her face. She needed to be calm. Her blood pressure was still an issue, even after Beatrice had been born, and her doctor warned her to be careful.

Giselle was cooking dinner when Cosette walked through the door. Simple fare, spaghetti and meatballs, but Giselle made the meatballs herself and they were fantastic. Beatrice was nearby, munching on a few strands of spaghetti, her face smeared with pasta sauce. This brought the first real smile to Cosette's face all day. She gave her baby a kiss before cleaning her up, in the midst of Beatrice's joyous squeals at seeing her mommy.

There were times Cosette was afraid Giselle was raising her daughter for her, but at moments like this, she knew Beatrice was her daughter. Even with Tom's blue eyes in blonde curls, Beatrice was hers, was attached to her, adored her, wanted her to the near exclusion of anyone else nearby. At times, this made Cosette feel guilty -- that Beatrice was so mommy-deprived that she binged on her when she was there. But at the moment, Cosette just wanted her daughter in her arms. She unlatched her from the high chair and found a cookie for her to chew on as Giselle prepared her a plate.

"Do you want me to take her while you eat?"

Cosette had little energy to talk, so she just shook her head as she sat down. She was good at eating one handed. She sliced the meatball into quarters and rolled some pasta over a section on her fork before shoving the whole thing into her mouth.

"Good," she managed through the bite. Beatrice raised a chubby finger and poked Cosette's full cheek, giggling.
After getting enough food in her to restore enough energy to speak, Cosette said, "I'm picking Beatrice up right after school and we're going to spend the night at my parents' house for Thanksgiving. So you have a half day Wednesday as well as Thursday. Tom should be here so if he is, you can have Friday, too, go shopping and get yourself some Black Friday deals, get some Christmas shopping done."

Giselle's short bob swished around her shoulders as she turned her head sharply to look at Cosette. "If?" she said.

Cosette managed a shrug. "I never know anymore when it comes to him."

After dinner, Giselle packed up to go home for the night, and Cosette and Beatrice settled in the living room to play with some toys. Beatrice had had her nap like a good girl that day, Giselle informed her, so she would be ready for bed by eight, like usual. In the precious two hours before then, they played, and watched a little television, and Cosette gave Beatrice a bath in a few inches of soapy water in the bathtub. Beatrice was too big to use the kitchen sink anymore -- Giselle had used to keep the kitchen sink crystal clean for this purpose, but now Beatrice liked too much to move around and splash and play with her various bath toys. She had a massive thing for rubber duckies, so Christina and her parents and occasionally Tom sent rubber ducks of all shapes, sizes and colors. There was always one in Beatrice's mouth if her teeth were bothering her that day. There was one set in particular that was adorable, a mother duck with a dish-like back that held three small ducklings, and it was currently floating in the tub with one baby duck on its back, one in Beatrice's mouth and the other in her hand.

After the bath, Beatrice was sleepy, and Cosette rocked her to sleep by singing to her whatever songs were playing in her head. One of her favorites was a very old song her grandmother had loved, "A Nightingale Sang in Barkley Square." It took a good twenty to thirty minutes, but Beatrice dropped off. After waiting another ten to make sure the sleep had taken hold, Cosette put her in her crib and then grabbed up the baby monitor to keep it near her for the rest of the night.

She took a very long, hot shower to unclench her muscles, and then curled up in bed with a book. It was the only quiet time of the day she got to read. She was on an old favorite, Jane Eyre, even though she probably had the whole damn thing memorized. By ten, she was ready to sleep.

Right as she reached to turn off the light, her phone beeped with another message from Tom.

T: I'll be there by 1:30, promise.

Which was not a good sign.
The next day passed without a sound from him. There wasn't much to do at school, as the students were too wired for any real work. Cosette kept them occupied as much as possible but when noon came, she was as anxious to leave as the rest of them. Giselle had Beatrice packed up and ready to go, and even Cosette's own overnight bag sitting by the door.

"You're not my maid," Cosette scolded her through a smile. "You don't have to do that."

"I knew you laid out clothes," Giselle said. "And I know your toiletries. I just put it in the bag for you. It wasn't a bother."

Giselle was maybe ten years older than her, but she felt more like her favorite aunt. This was why Cosette tolerated her keeping Tom updated on her current state. Because Giselle did it because she cared. And in a strange way, it reassured Cosette that Tom cared, too. Even though he seemed to be caring in permanent absence.

It was a sweet relief, however, to be at her mother's. It had been a very long time since Cosette was a little girl, and even longer since she felt safe thinking someone else was going to take care of things, but the warm smells of things cooking and the sounds of family laughing and arguing filled her heart with comfort. Beatrice was scooped up by her favorite aunt and uncle, and Cosette went to work in the kitchen, helping her mother.

And for a while, forgot about Tom.

Until the next day, when one o'clock came and went, and there was no Tom.

And then one thirty.

Then two.

By three, awkward looks were being exchanged. By three thirty, Cosette said they should start, but Christina insisted they could wait at least until four.

By five, they were done eating. And still no Tom.
"You could stay another night, if you wanted," Isabella told her daughter, concerned at the pinched look on her face as they made ready to leave at around eight o'clock. Felix, her evening/night security, was waiting outside, ready to follow her back home and make sure she was inside and secure.

"It's okay, Mom. Giselle is coming back in tomorrow. I'll be fine."

But she was not fine.

Not one damn bit fine.

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Cosette was going to kill him.

It was ten o'clock at night when his car finally pulled up to his house, and he practically shoved his bags through the front door before taking off at a dead run down to Cosette's house. He doubted she was awake, but he just needed to see that they were home safe. He wasn't going to go in, he was going to just make sure the car was in the drive and talk to the security people, briefly, before heading back to get some sleep. He would come by in the morning with a full breakfast, or stuff to make a full breakfast, and begin the apology.

It wasn't entirely his fault. Airlines were utter nightmares on Thanksgiving. There were last minute things to do on Thursday morning, and he put his flight off by a few hours, but the one he was barely able to change to was hopelessly delayed because of a storm system somewhere else that was affecting in the incoming plane. By the time the traffic in LA got sorted -- weren't these people supposed to be in their homes at dinner, anyway?? -- it was far too late.

He hadn't had the courage to text her and tell her what was going on. He had thought he would only be a few hours late. Not so late it wasn't worth bothering. He knew he needed to call, but knew how furious she would be. She deserved to see him, face to face, and he couldn't take the forced politeness that would come from her lips, or worse, the scream she would unleash on him.

But when he approached the house, he saw the kitchen light was on. Felix was in his car across the street, reading the news headlines on his tablet.
"She's still up," the bodyguard told him. "Maybe you should go in, man. Give her an explanation. She was really upset before."

"Cursing me, I'll bet," Tom said, feeling his ears burn.

"Worse than that," Felix said. "She was pretty calm. Which means I have no idea what you're walking into. But I know if she's still up, she's stewing. You want to let her do that?"

Tom didn't know what to expect when he slipped his key in the door and walked into the kitchen. It certainly wasn't her sitting at the kitchen table...crying.

He was brought up short by the look on her face. Her violet eyes were so bright, piercing ...and defeated. Her cheeks were flushed, her hair was mussed, and she looked so damn beautiful that he felt that same twinge in his heart he had the first time he ever saw her.

"Cosette," he said, softly, walking closer to the table. "I'm so, so sorry. The flight was delayed--"

"Your original flight wasn't. You moved it this morning. To a flight that was delayed. Then didn't call me."

Her voice stunned him. It was flat. No emotion. Nothing, not a hint.

She sighed, closing her eyes. "After I called your assistant, I'd been thinking for the last...three hours? I mean, just sitting here, thinking. I didn't know how long until I looked at the clock when I heard you outside. And I want you to know, I get it, okay?"

Get what?

"I mean, you need to detach from me. We're not together, I know that wasn't easy for you, and now you're independent, and you need to be independent. I get that. I know your first love has always been, will always be, your work. I know that. I understand that. And if you need space from me, to avoid me, to stay way from me, if that's what you need, I'm okay with that."
Then she stood up, and that was when he saw it. Saw her hand balled into a fist, trembling. Saw the sheer fury she was holding back.

"But that little girl in there," she said, pointing down the hall toward Beatrice's bedroom, "she doesn't get it. She can't get it. All she knows is that Daddy isn't around. That's all she knows. And maybe now it's not such a big deal because she isn't aware of the passing time, so maybe now you're getting away with it, but soon enough, she's going to be old enough to ask. And what am I supposed to tell her? What excuses will I use, Tom? Nothing will work. Because as she gets older, and older, she's going to start to think that it isn't me you want to stay away from, but her."

His jaw had dropped open at some point, and he almost couldn't process her words. Stay way from her? Avoid her? "I'm not---I don't---Cosette, I'm not avoiding you--"

She made a dismissive gesture with her hand, but her face was crumbling, tears flowing freely. "It's fine, I'm not offended for me. None of this is about me. Not one bit of it. But I can't bear to see Beatrice be neglected. I can't face a future where she wonders why her daddy doesn't love her enough to make time for her." As Cosette spoke, her lip started to make that sneering curl, where she was struggling to form words without screeching.

"I love her! How can you say that I don't?" Tom finally found his voice, and it was loud, so much louder than he intended. Cosette barred her teeth at him and hissed, it was meant to make him be quiet, but it came out nearly feral.

"I only know what I see, Tom. I can count the number of days you've been here on my fingers and have some left over. These years never come back. None of them do. And while I'm thrilled to have her all to myself, I know it isn't good for her. She needs you. If you want me to have Giselle bring her to you, to your house so that you don't even have to come here, fine, I'm happy to do that--"

"Cosette, please, stop! That isn't it at all!"

She just shook her head. "I mean, if you were a doctor doing research to cure cancer, or part of the military, I would understand, there would be a reason...but when I turn on my computer I see you sipping champagne and smiling and partying with your costars, and I just wonder what the fuck is wrong? What is wrong with this picture? So whatever your feelings are for me, you have to put them aside, you have to. Because it is going to cost you your daughter, and trust me when I say that is a loss you will never recover, no matter how many awards you win, how many honors you receive, however much fucking money any of your movies ever make. But honestly, I don't even give a fuck about that. I don't give a fuck about you, or me. I only care about her. I care about my daughter, who needs her daddy. So you turn that over in your head on your flight back to wherever you're going."
"I was going to tell you," he said, nearly weeping himself and barely holding it back, her words cut so deep, as they always did, always hitting him where he was weakest. "I did it because I wanted the next few weeks free. So I could be here for her birthday, spend some time with her, with you, as a fam--"

"Well thank fuck for that," she growled at him, cutting him off. "For now, you can go fuck yourself and when you come back in the morning you'd better be prepared to spend every fucking waking second you have with her. If she means anything to you. Because I am fucking sick of it, Tom, I can't stand it anymore. But I guess I don't expect you to give a fuck about me, why should you if you can't even be there for your daughter!"

"Cos...Cosette, I...you're so completely, totally wrong--"

"I don't want to fucking hear it." She had spun on her heel and was heading down the hallway. "Lock the fucking door behind you when you get the fuck out." And she was gone.

Tom stood there, and realized he was trembling. He wound up sitting down in the chair she had vacated, shaking so badly he wondered if he would ever stop. She honestly thought he didn't care about them? Maybe about Beatrice, but not about her? She thought he was staying away on purpose? What the hell had happened to her? Why would she....?

But no. He could see it. He had been so awful these last months. So totally self absorbed, forgetting he had other responsibilities now. Other people who needed him. He couldn't just throw himself into work and forget about everything else.

He must have been there long enough because he heard the back door open and Felix was there. Usually, the one who covered the night shift was the one they spoke to the least, but Tom had been speaking to him more and more often, when he came by too late to visit, when he missed important things. Felix was older, maybe in his late forties, graying short brown hair, with a face like a government agent. His tone was always low, level, and he kept his words simple.

"Thought I'd check. I heard most of that exchange, I heard her voice get high once or twice and I wanted to be sure I wasn't needed. Didn't mean to spy but it's my job, you know?" He sighed, shook his head. "I can walk you home, man. That was brutal."

"She thinks I don't care."
Felix gave a little shrug. "Well." He didn't counter anything. Didn't offer any reassurance. Tom wasn't sure if it was because that was just who Felix was, or if there just wasn't any to give.

The night walk back to his house, with Felix silent beside him, helped him shake off the shock. But he couldn't sleep that night. His brain just kept turning Cosette's words over in his mind, again and again.

The news he brought wasn't going to make any of this any easier.

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Cosette packed Beatrice's bag for a full day. Giselle made all of this look easy, and Cosette cursed herself for being too dependent on her daughter's nanny. Nevertheless, she was able to get baby food, diapers, and a few changes of clothes packed into Beatrice's bag. She enclosed a list of the foods Beatrice liked to eat by wrapping it around one of the sippy cups Beatrice used for juice and taping it so he would see it. She also put in some formula and two bottles, because Beatrice still needed the extra nutrients. Baby wipes and teething rings rounded out the package, although Cosette was sure she forgot something. But Giselle kept Tom's house well stocked, so she was sure he'd figure it out.

Part of her felt guilty for shoving her daughter out the door, but this had to happen. Tom had to realize that he only had so long with his daughter at this age.

For her part, Cosette called up the Burke Williams Spa and made an appointment for an hour long massage. She planned to spend the entire morning there, and even a bit of the afternoon. The quiet, peaceful environment of the spa gave her a real chance to relax. She even considered treating herself to a manicure, and see how long it might last. She'd used to keep her nails a little bit long, but they'd all broken or been filed down, one by one. Most of it had happened when she set up her classroom for the year -- starting from ground zero had been hard, but not impossible.

Tom looked like a whipped puppy when he arrived, but instead of exchanging more than a few words with him, she had instead told Beatrice that Daddy was here, and had gotten the toddler worked up with excitement that Tom had no choice but to put all his attention there.

"I'll be back here by three o'clock. You can also call my mom, or Christina, if things get to be too much for you. I'm sure they'll help."
Father and daughter were exchanging kisses as she spoke, and she slipped the bag over Tom’s shoulder.

"Are you sure we can't have breakfast together or something?" he asked, as Cosette turned to leave the room and get dressed -- she was still in her robe, having hardly slept the night before, she'd been so worked up. Cosette tossed him a dismissive smile over her shoulder.

"No. Have fun."

"But I wanted to talk--"

"No," Cosette said again, colder this time. "Today you pay attention to your daughter. That's all I need from you, Tom." And she went back to her room.

She lay in bed for a few hours more before heading to the spa. She'd laid awake, listening for Tom's exit, and only heard it after a good fifteen minutes of softly murmured words in Tom's tone that she didn't make out and didn't want to. Then she dozed for an hour, and then got up to get herself ready for her appointment.

It felt like forever since she'd had a massage. Maybe it would take some of this awful tension from her.

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"She hates me," Tom said.

Henry looked at him, from where he was sitting across him on the canvas chairs set up on his back porch. Tom had come by for lunch at Christina's invitation, and confided in Henry what had happened the night before. Christina was off putting Bebe down for a nap, so she wouldn't overhear. Tom didn't want her to know, quite frankly, as it would probably cause a row between the sisters, and he couldn't have that.

"She doesn't hate you," Henry said with a sigh. "Although you're not doing yourself any favors, staying away so long."
"I know. I thought so long about what she said last night." Tom stared upward at the clear blue sky. Even in November, when the rest of the world was drizzly and cold and miserable, California was beautiful and warm.

"Was she wrong?" Henry asked.

Tom wished he could answer with a resounding, "Yes!" but he couldn't. Was he avoiding Cosette? Their decision not to get back together had not come as a surprise to him, at first, and he thought he was okay with it, but the more he thought about it, the more he turned their final conversation over in his head, the more he realized he was not okay with it.

Maybe he was avoiding her. Maybe he was subconsciously protecting himself from that pain. He didn't mean to do it on purpose.

"I have to say, I see the problem," Henry said. "I mean, daughters and wives come together. Cosette isn't your wife, but she and Beatrice are still a package deal. That's gotta be really difficult."

"Well, that's not all the story," Tom said, his stomach knotting up when he realized what he was about to confess. He drew a breath and willed himself to say it. "I've...I've met someone."

Henry raised an eyebrow at him. Over these last months, Henry had been a lifeline. Tom knew he probably relied on the man a bit too much, but Henry had been a source of wisdom and counsel that had become invaluable. His opinion, Tom realized, meant too much, and he was terrified he was not going to like this story.

"My co-star from the Sandman movie, the woman who plays my character's sister, Death. She and I were friendly during the shoot, but she had a boyfriend and I thought it was serious. But they broke up, and we've been talking more and more, and I think it's starting to become something serious."

Henry listened, face impassive. "She just broke up with a boyfriend?" he questioned.

"Yeah."

"How long ago?"
"A month."

"And how long before you two started..."talking?"

Tom wanted to roll his eyes, but another part of him understood. "It really is just talking. We haven't wanted to go out in public because I know it will get out and I promised Cosette I would tell her about anything before she found out from gossip. So I've been holding back."

Henry nodded. "Well," he said after a pregnant pause, "as your friend I feel the need to warn you on two fronts. The first is, a woman only a month out of a serious relationship is not really ready for a new one. Make sure this isn't a rebound. And the second, well, is that when you do tell Cosette, she's going to think that you've been neglecting Beatrice in favor of this new woman...what's her name?"

"Ashley. Ashley Berkwell."

"Didn't she win an Academy Award last year?"

"Yes," Tom said. "It was an independent film and she was the supporting actress."

"Ah. Okay, so when you do tell Cosette, you have to make it supremely clear that you haven't been running around with Ashley when you should have been coming home to spend time with your daughter. Or rather, that you and Ashley have just been..."talking."

"Quit saying it like that. I mean we've only been talking. Only talking."

"Nothing else?"

"Not yet, no." Tom sighed. He hadn't been intimate with anyone in months and it was wearing on his mood. Maybe that was part of the reason he'd been obsessed with work, because nothing else felt as satisfying. "Look, Cosette made it clear that we weren't going to be together, it's not fair if I get punished for moving on."
"Of course not," Henry agreed. "But Cosette isn't talking about herself, she's worried about Beatrice."

"Oh? And you're sure that's all?" Tom couldn't help himself. His resentment at being dressed down so horribly by Cosette last night...in spite of the truth that it rang with, it also chafed him that still, even now, she could reduce him so utterly, demolish him so completely. She was still cutting him down with that blade she called a tongue. Would it ever not be so?

"You think she's making it about herself, too?"

"She says she isn't, but...but I know how she's been lately, how listless. How lost. She could be taking that out on me. And it isn't fair."

Henry shrugged a shoulder. "Her frustration with herself was what probably drove most of her words."

"Yes. And if I think I'm going to get an apology, I'm crazy." He took a hard pull of the beer he'd been nursing. When it was down, his brain shifted. "I'm not saying I deserve one, but she was just...brutal. Cruel."

"Mmm." The non-committal sound irritated him. Tom scowled, looked away. "You want me to talk to her?"

It was a possibility. Henry had always been the best go-between for them, as he was better at being impartial than anyone else in the family. But he was sure Cosette wouldn't take it well. It would make him sound like he'd tattled on her.

"Maybe," Henry said when Tom didn't reply. "if you had talked to her about your concerns for her well being, it might not have come to what it did, last night."

It was the fanciest I-told-you-so Tom had ever heard. "Whenever I tried to talk to her she always changed the subject. Made it about Beatrice."

"And you couldn't have overcome that? Come here, asked Giselle to bring Beatrice over here for an afternoon, and have it out with her? Make her realize you were worried about her?"
"Possibly," Tom muttered. "But there's no point in worrying about what I should have done to prevent it, it's done and now I have to deal with it."

"Well, that's the easiest part," Henry said with a half smile. "You've always been really good at that. Well, mostly."

"Good at what?"

"Proving her wrong."

Cosette had managed to clear her brain for the massage. And the soak in the hot tub after. And the hot shower with all the lovely oils and cosmetics the spa provided, after that. And even the facial she booked when an opening suddenly came up. Then, sitting in the quiet room, wrapped in a warm robe and with her book, that was when it came back.

She'd done it again. No wonder Tom didn't want anything to do with her. She was an utter bitch.

She got dressed and headed home. The guilt pressed harder and harder.

It was ridiculous to accuse Tom of not caring about her. He cared about her well being because he was a decent person, and at the very least, her well being affected that of their child's. And while she was right to be furious with him for his neglect, she shouldn't have totally emasculated him like that. Not even given him a chance to defend himself. To apologize.

Although she didn't want apologies. She didn't even know what she wanted.

She knew what she certainly couldn't have. Couldn't have it the way it was before. It wasn't fair to Tom. He had a life, a career.

She didn't know what the fuck she had anymore. She was so miserable, lost and confused, and she'd taken it out on Tom. He'd tried to get her to talk but she wouldn't. But seriously, what could he do? He wasn't here. He couldn't help.
When she got home, she took the rest of the spaghetti and meatballs that Giselle had made from earlier in the week and took them down to Tom's. She decided she would just apologize. It would mean practically nothing, as no apology could make up for her behavior. Maybe her reasons had been right but the way she'd handled it was just wrong and mean-spirited. Maybe if he wasn't too angry they could try to talk it out, try to figure out some way for him to spend more time with Beatrice. It wasn't going to be about her at all, she decided. Only Beatrice was important.

He was home. She knocked on the door but let herself in with her key, in case Tom had his hands full with Beatrice. But the house was silent. She looked over her shoulder, double checked the car in the driveway, the little compact he kept for when he was in town with just enough room in the back for Beatrice's car seat. Maybe someone had come to pick them up---?

"Oh, Cosette," she heard Tom's voice from the kitchen doorway that led into his living room. He had a script in his hand, which he hastily set down in the little kitchen table he kept in the corner.

"Sorry," she said, almost expecting him to yell at her, "I thought maybe you'd need some dinner tonight. Giselle made her meatballs. Beatrice likes the spaghetti." She placed the package in the fridge, headed for the door. Her courage was fleeing.

"Beatrice is down for her nap," Tom said, his voice stopping her in the doorway. She turned. "Did you...um...I was going to see if maybe...maybe you wanted to stay and have dinner? I went shopping today, since I'm going to be here the next few weeks. We can talk about the birthday party."

He seemed as skittish and she felt. This seemed to help restore some of her bravery. "Look, Tom," she said, taking deep breaths, "I...I want to apologize. I was...I was a crazy woman last night and...I was horrible to you." She sighed, feeling like her words were empty. "I know that word is too small. I'm...I don't know what to say." She started to back toward the door, her discomforting making her want to flee. "I feel I just can't ever do anything right," she muttered, more to herself than to him.

"You weren't wrong," he said, stepping closer. He shoved his hands in his pockets, more of an effort, it seemed, to control them. "I've been away so much and I've been...I should have called you, I should have explained. I was afraid of..."

"Of upsetting me," she finished with a tiny, humorless laugh. "Yeah, well. Looks like you can never win with me." She really, really wanted to leave. "Okay, well, maybe tomorrow we can talk--"
"No, wait, please don't leave," he said.

This was too much. She felt her cheeks start to get hot, felt her tear ducts start to go into overdrive. She was going to start crying again. But if she started crying in front of him..."I should just let you enjoy your day. Beatrice can spend the night if you like." She swallowed down the lump, trying to get herself under control. "You can bring her by in the morning, or Giselle can come get her."

"Cosette, don't leave," he said, taking the last few strides so now he was in the small little foyer with her, hands twitching as if he was struggling with himself not to grab her.

"I should go." She had set her face toward the door, so he wouldn't see. Why couldn't she do anything but cry lately? What was wrong with her?

His hand was on her shoulder now. "Cozy, I'm so worried about you. Please, please, let me do something. I know I've been an utter shit, I know that, and I'm so sorry."

She cringed. "Don't. Just...." But nothing else would come out. Just sobs. His arms were around her and she was pressed against his chest. His hands stroked her hair, her back, squeezed and soothed. He wrapped her there, in his embrace, and just let her cry, cry until she'd soaked his shirt.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," she said in a tiny, tiny voice, barely a whisper.

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Tom wanted to absorb Cosette into his own body, wanted to take her in and protect her from whatever demons had been haunting her. He'd known this was a long time coming. He'd known it since he left, since that spark he was used to seeing in her eyes had started to fade. He'd had no idea how she'd festered, how built up this crisis had become.

And he felt utterly helpless.

Seeing her suddenly appear in his house, with food, after how cold she'd been earlier, was surprising enough. But the fact that she apologized...that had broken him. His anger evaporated and all he wanted now was to help her.
It had to be twenty minutes that he held her there, barely keeping her from flying out the door. Finally, she seemed to catch her breath, a slight shudder rolling through her now and again. Her hand covered the giant wet spot on his shirt as she pulled away, gently, just enough to let him know he could ease his grip.

"I don't know what's going on, Cosette," he said, "but I'm here, and I want to help. Please believe me that I want to help."

She gave a little shake of her head. "I'm not your responsibility," she said in that same diminished voice.

"It isn't about responsibility," Tom admonished her, very tenderly. "It's about our friendship. We said we would always be friends. I promise you, I swear on my life, on Beatrice's life, I'm not avoiding you, I don't want to stay away from you. I know how it looks, I know my words have no credibility. I didn't realize how...I mean, I thought..." Bollocks, he was cocking this up. Just because he could be away for months at a time and come back as if no time had passed didn't mean she could. He'd been so selfish.

"I'm sorry," she squeaked.

"Don't apologize again," he said with a touch more force. She winced. "You were right. Everything you said was right and you had every right to be angry. I know you were doing it for Beatrice."

"No. Not just for her."

"Even so. I have a duty to you, Cosette, no matter what, and it's not a millstone around my neck, it's an honor." No, that wasn't right..."Look, just come back inside, come sit down and I'll make some tea or something. I went to the bakery, got some things, I got those almond croissants I know you like. I'll make a kettle and we can just relax. Let me take care of you for just a little bit, anyway. Please?"

She seemed to hesitate, but nodded, letting him guide her into the house, to his living room and settling her on the sofa. "Beatrice just went down so she should be out for a few more hours," he said.

She nodded again, wrapping her arms around herself. He grabbed a nearby throw blanket and
wrapped it around her. "Coffee, instead, could we?" she asked, looking at him with her brilliant eyes, bright from her tears.

"Absolutely."

Within ten minutes he had coffee and chocolate biscuits and an almond croissant for her on his little coffee table. It had given his brain time to formulate what to say.

"Listen," he said, when she had sipped half her coffee away and nibbled on a quarter of her croissant, "whatever is going on, if you don't want to talk to me about it, I respect that. I don't like it, but I respect it. But you have to talk to someone, Cosette. And I think maybe you might want to consider talking to your mother."

She gave a little start. "My mother?"

"Well," Tom went on, choosing his words carefully, "didn't you tell me that your mother had gone through some things when you were little? I mean, at least maybe she would understand what it's like to have a child and...and feel alone." It was hard to say the next part. "I mean, I know she and your father had some difficult times, she felt like he was never around...maybe she would be able to direct you. At least it's a start."

Cosette gave a little grunt which sounded almost like a laugh.

"I know it's not exactly the same thing. You and I decided not to come back together. And it took a while for your mother and father to finally work things out. But just...something, Cosette. I just...you, you need someone to talk to. Someone who might be able to understand. If you think therapy---"

"No." The word was clipped.

Tom sighed, sitting back in his chair. "Well. And I'm going to make more of an effort to be there. To stay in touch, to spend more time with Beatrice. I promise not to let more than a few weeks go by again without some kind of visit, even if it's just a day. I have to go back for a little after her birthday but we'll break for Christmas and we're not scheduled to start again until mid-January so I will be here. I was...I was going to ask if I could bring you and Beatrice to London, for maybe a week. See her other grandparents for Christmas. If you want to go before or after Christmas, it's fine, we can work out the details later. But I'm going to be better. I'm not going to let this happen
again."

She looked at him. He got the distinct feeling that she wanted to believe him, but didn't. "I appreciate that, Tom. It will make all the difference to Beatrice."

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On Sunday, her mother decided she was going to serve up (or rather, use up) as many leftovers as she could for an evening dinner, and everyone was invited. Tom was more than eager to come, anxious to make up for his absence.

Cosette had been turning Tom's suggestion over and over in her head. He'd been good to her Friday evening, and on Saturday, when Giselle was back, he'd come over and they talked about the birthday party, planning the things they wanted to do, the people they wanted to invite. Cosette wanted to keep it small but she also wanted Tom to feel free to invite some of his friends who actually wanted to celebrate his daughter's first year of life. They'd gotten along, almost like old times.

Almost, not quite.

Her mother was going through her Sunday evening ritual of putting away the weekend's laundry. Cosette went into the back bedroom and sat on her parents' bed. "Mom, can I talk to you about something?"

From her mother's knowing look, it seemed no one in her family had been oblivious to the deep black funk that had been hanging over her head. "Anything, sweetie, what is it?"

"I want to know...after I was born, when you and dad were having problems...I mean, how did you cope with it?"

"Not well. You know that from first hand experience."

"I've been...I've been really depressed." It was hard to say it. Admitting it made it real. "I don't know what it is. I thought it would be easy to go back to work, to get on with my life, but...but instead I just feel like everything is wrong and I can't figure it out. Did you go through something like that?"
"Being a young mom is hard," Isabella sighed, sitting beside her daughter. "I wish I could remember better how I tried to cope. Mostly by making your father miserable, taking it out on him."

"I was pretty ugly to Tom the other night."

"Well, he did arrive seven hours late after not calling to warn you. He probably deserved it."

Cosette scowled. This wasn't helping. Although her mother had warmed to Tom considerably over the last year, was even friendly and motherly toward him, she still always defended whatever Cosette did against him. Maybe this was a mistake. "I don't know what's going on with me, Mom. I'm...I'm so unhappy and I have no idea why."

"Well, Cozy, to a certain extent, that's normal. A child totally absorbs your entire life essence. The modern idea is that kids are to fit into your life, but that isn't how it is at all. A child becomes your life, for a very long time. And it's totally normal to be frustrated and confused with that."

"So feeling like this is normal? Having a daughter is supposed to make me depressed and miserable?"

"No, of course not. But I do know that I felt it. It took a long time for me to come to grips with things. It took even longer for your dad and I to figure out how to make our marriage work. We loved each other but it took more than love. It took support and compromise, and so much prayer and talking."

"So it was because of your relationship with Dad, then?"

"People think that your calling is your career. But marriage is a vocation and everything else has to come second to it. Everything. Tom isn't ready to commit to anyone, he's too in love with making movies."

"It isn't because of Tom that I feel this way, Mom!" Cosette protested. But there was something...something deep down that wondered.

"Are you sure?" Isabella asked, very softly.
"It's me, Mom. Tom and I aren't together and we aren't going to be together. We decided that a long time ago and I'm...I'm over it." Even she heard the waver in her confidence. "And even so, changing that isn't going to fix me. It's not going to magically make this go away. I don't know what to do."

"Well, the first thing I'd suggest is talking to your doctor. But truthfully, Cosette, the real answer to everything is pretty simple. You need to pray your way through this crisis. I don't know where it's leading you or what's going to happen, maybe you could talk to your friend Fr. Francis. Maybe you could talk to a therapist. But we all go through a dark night of the soul, why do you think St. John of the Cross called it that? I wish I had an answer for you, Cosette, something more...immediate. I went through this, too, and you have to remember you aren't alone. We're all here. Me, your dad, Christina, Henry, and Tom."

Cosette drew a heavy breath as she rolled over her mother's words. "It's times like this that I miss Grams most. She would have said something utterly profound that would have fixed everything."

"Even your grandmother can't wave her magic wand and fix the human heart."
31 -- One Year, Three Months

Chapter Summary

Tom and his new girlfriend take a big step, and Cosette pays the price.

When Tom came into his little house in Los Angeles, he was greeted by the sight of someone having made additions to his walls while he was gone.

Pictures. Three large collages, sitting side by side on the main wall.

It had to be Cosette. These things had become her new hobby.

The first collage was of their Christmas trip to London. There were pictures of his family with Beatrice, his friends with Beatrice, and himself with Beatrice. She looked utterly adorable in the little red velvet dress his mother had bought, with a white velvet bow around her little head, and a huge, vibrant smile on her face. His favorite, however, was of him holding her hand while she was walking in Regent Park.

Yes, his little girl was walking.

The second collage was of Beatrice's first birthday. All of the friends and family that had come, and all the presents that Beatrice had bounced to, one after another, unable to decide which one she liked best. Eventually, she’d fallen asleep in the wrapping paper pile, and that picture sat in the middle of the collage, the largest. Although he had to admit it was neck and neck for favorite with the one of her smearing herself with her little birthday cake, that Cosette had gotten for her, decorated in pink icing but with a yellow rubber duckie in heavy frosting on the rim. Beatrice had gone for it when she realized nobody was stopping her from putting her hands in that cake. The other cake, for the guests, was off to the side, a large sheet cake that was half chocolate and half vanilla.

The third one was a mixture of moments over the last year. He recognized a lot of the pictures from ones that had been sent to his phone, but to have all of them like this, laid out, it made this place feel more like home than ever.

Tom spent a long time looking at those pictures, and something about then seemed...off. Not wrong, not really, as they were all so vibrant and full of life and memories that made him happy to his core.

And then he realized. Cosette wasn't in any of them.

At first, he thought maybe it was because she'd taken the pictures. But he knew she hadn't taken them all, as Christina was rather rabid with her camera phone and Isabella was just as guilty when given a chance.

He would just ask her. Later.

Things were surprisingly level between them. Cosette wasn't freezing him out, as much as he
worried she might. It hadn't been easy, telling her about Ashley. It seemed any way he could put it would just add to her already stress-filled plate.

He had waited to tell her for as long as he could. Cosette seemed better, a bit better anyway, after talking to her mother. They planned the birthday party, and even planned the trip to London. Cosette hadn’t been there since the summer, and Tom was worried that memories would darken the trip.

That was when everything had gone wrong between them. The spiral that they couldn’t correct.

But Cosette had been so good about everything this time. They spent most of the week at his mother’s house, to avoid the conflict that would arise when he wanted her to stay at his house, but for the last night, she didn’t raise a fuss. Beatrice had a lovely crib that had been set up by his sisters in the room where Cosette stayed, and the next day they packed up and headed back to L.A. as planned.

The whole thing went off without a hitch. During the visit to London, Cosette had graciously agreed to let Beatrice spend the day with her grandmother and aunts, and Tom took her to a few museums that she had missed during the first trip. They kept it light, just relaxing and enjoying getting away. Tom felt as if their friendship was starting to be renewed, that he was making it clear he wanted to make up for his neglect. They spent a day with his father, although still cautious about bringing Beatrice into close proximity to James for a long period, as his immune system was still slightly compromised. James insisted on being present, however, for the big family dinner at Diana’s, so there was more time spent with the grandparent.

Tom knew there had been pictures of his father, Cosette, and Beatrice. He knew Cosette had them. He was disappointed she hadn’t included it in the collage.

After arriving back in L.A., Tom knew he couldn’t wait anymore. So the last week, before he had to leave for filming again, he told her. Gently.

“I’m seeing someone.”

She blinked at him, startled. Her expression seemed to freeze into one of bemusement. He wasn’t sure how she was processing it. Was she jealous? No, that was ridiculous. Was she concerned? That would be understandable.

“A fellow actress. I know that doesn’t sound too good, but she’s very sweet. She broke up with her boyfriend some time ago and we’ve just been connecting, but I’m sure something is going to come out soon, if we start dating, and I wanted to tell you before it became gossip.”

Still, she seemed unreadable. “Okay. Thanks for letting me know.”

He went on, told her a little about Ashley. She listened patiently. She didn’t seem upset or confused or angry. Just accepting.

“It’s not serious…yet,” Tom went on, feeling awkward at her lack of a response. “I mean, I don’t plan on bringing Beatrice around her anytime soon.”

“If you do, let me know. I mean, Beatrice is good with new people, I’m sure it will be fine. I just…” She shook her head. “No, it’s fine.”

“What is it?” he pressed, anxious for something a bit more substantial.

“I just don’t want her to get attached if it’s not something long-term. But like you said, it’s too
early. I’m just being…sorry.”

“No, I understand.” But he felt…tweaked. Like a fight should be happening. Did he want to fight? Did he want her to get jealous? That was also ridiculous. “Do you want to meet her?”

Cosette gave a shrug of one pale shoulder. “I’m sure I will, if it gets serious.” She sounded dismissive. He felt the urge to change the subject, but wasn’t satisfied yet.

“What do you consider serious?” he asked, and instantly regretted it.

“I don’t know, Tom,” she said with a light little chuckle. “What do you?”

It was a fair enough question but it riled him. “Maybe if we’re still seeing each other by…I don’t know, March?”

The look she gave him…somewhere between amusement and pity. It flashed quickly and dissipated. “Easter. If you’re still seeing her at Easter. We’ll keep it casual, I don’t want to scare the girl. I’ll come to your house and we can meet. Have a chat. But this is silly to talk about now.”

And it had been. Then. But it was March, and Easter was the first day of April this year. Cosette would be on spring break, and off all week, and Ashley was expected to come to his house and meet his daughter and his…

His ex. Cosette was his ex.

These pictures. They would show Ashley his life. And Cosette wasn’t in them. It was, ultimately, an attempt by her to help him, he realized. To not intimidate his new girlfriend.

Truthfully, when he’d told Cosette about Ashley, he and Ashley hadn’t been “official” yet. They were casual, they were tentative, as Henry’s words had burned into his brain about women only being out a relationship for a month were not ready for a new one. Tom hadn’t meant to keep a distance, but he had, cautiously, wanting to be sure he wasn’t a rebound. Ashley for her part was what she always was – light and carefree, easygoing, willing to go with the flow. When he’d kissed her for the first time on his birthday, as she’d been invited by the cast for the huge party they’d thrown him, she seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. “I feel like I’ve been waiting forever for you to do that,” she’d said to him.

But they hadn’t had sex yet. Of that, Tom was keenly aware. Only a month since they decided to become “official,” and the paps hadn’t caught them yet, and Tom was…hesitating.

Because it wasn’t like him to hold back physically.

Maybe that needed to be corrected.

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A text came in from Diana.

D: Your package arrived today. It is beautiful, darling! But you should have made the picture of you, Tom, and Beatrice larger. It’s such a lovely portrait!

Cosette smiled, shaking her head, slightly dismissive. Diana still held out hope, didn’t she? But Cosette remembered, and that portrait had been quite nice. She felt a little bad that she hadn’t put it in Tom’s collage, but it was for the best, especially with Ashley soon to be a regular visitor at his house. It wouldn’t make a good impression on a new girlfriend.
The collages had been a great use of her time, she found, in the evenings after Beatrice was asleep and Cosette found herself getting restless and depressed. Choosing the pictures, arranging them, getting them framed, it had been a full time project, using every free minute for the last couple of months.

And now it was done. Tom’s, hers, her parents’, Christina and Henry’s, Diana’s, and even James’. Each one specially made for the person whose house it was to grace.

She needed something else to do, now.

Occupying her free time had helped stave off some of the depression. There wasn’t a lot of free time, not with a growing child who was now walking and getting into everything. But what there was, was enough to let her sulk, and she just couldn’t have that. She couldn’t have another scene like the one with Tom. She couldn’t fall apart again.

But Easter was fast approaching and she had agreed to meet Tom’s girlfriend during Easter week. It was going to be casual, she insisted. Tom had suggested they all get together for dinner but Cosette did not like that. She didn’t want it to be too formal. She didn’t want Ashley to think she was a threat.

Because she wasn’t.

Although she did feel a little guilty for reading up on the girl. Ashley had a considerable portfolio, which Cosette found when she googled her. She seemed sweet, smart, not stuck on herself, and full of the regular neuroses that most actresses went through, and who could blame them, with the pressures young women faced in Hollywood? And Ashley was young – in her late twenties, at least eight, maybe nine years younger than Tom, who had just turned 37.

Truthfully, Cosette had a feeling she was going to like her a lot. But she wasn’t quite ready to admit it. Yet.

“Oh, good, you’re home,” came Tom’s voice from behind her. Cosette turned around from where she was putting away groceries. “Thanks for the pictures. They look fantastic.”

She smiled. “Good memories,” she said. “I’m glad you’re here, I wanted to talk to you about a few things.”

“Where’s Beatrice?”

“Giselle!” Cosette called. A gurgle of laughter followed the call and Beatrice came toddling into the room, and upon seeing her father, she threw up her hands and squealed, “Dada!”

Tom scooped her up, face alight with joy. He kissed her little face and she giggled. “Scratchy!” she said in her baby-tongue.

“I know, I need to shave,” he chuckled. He looked at Cosette. “Talk about what?”

“Don’t panic, it’s not bad,” she said with a shake of her head. “Want to feed her?” She held out the plate of Beatrice’s dinner she’d been preparing, some cheese, a few pieces of chicken, and some banana slices. A balance of nutrition.

Tom gave a little jump of excitement and flew Beatrice into her high chair, making airplane noises as he did so. Bebe shrieked with excitement the entire way, and didn’t fight Daddy as he tied her bib around her neck.
“I not a baby!” Beatrice protested after it was tied, tugging at the thing.

“Yes, but you messy,” Tom returned, booping her nose as he set her plate before her. He picked up a banana and she eagerly chomped it from his fingers, almost biting him. “Easy, baby!”

“Not a baby!” she said, more clearly, almost spitting banana. Tom pushed it back in, almost getting his finger bit again.

Cosette watched this exchange with amazement. Tom always brought out the highly verbal side of their daughter.

“I wanted to know if you were free on Holy Thursday. I wanted to go to services but it’s too late for Beatrice.”

Tom looked to her as he handed Beatrice a piece of chicken and she took it from his grip. “Shouldn’t be a problem. You going on Good Friday, too?”

She felt a touch of satisfaction that he remembered. “Yes. But I figured Giselle—“

“I’ll watch her then, too. So you can have a quiet afternoon. Can I go with you, though, on Sunday? To Easter Mass?”

“You never have to ask, Tom.” She’d told him this before but he always asked before going to church with her. “We’re having a big dinner at that steakhouse Dad likes, you’re free to join us if you wish.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he said as Beatrice grew impatient with his lack of attention and pulled her plate closer. “She’s a good eater.”

“Only for you,” Cosette said. “That’s my other question. So when am I going to meet Ashley?”

“Um…” Tom seemed to fumble. Get awkward. “Well, maybe that’s not going to happen yet.”

“What? Is there trouble in paradise,” she asked with a mildly teasing smile. But Tom didn’t return it. She grew concerned. “Sorry, I was joking. Are there problems?”

“No, it’s not that, just…maybe we should wait. Just let you enjoy your break, and I’ll be leaving for Argentina the week after. Maybe summer?”

“Summer.” She said it with a flat edge. There were definitely problems. “Look, I know it’s not really appropriate for you to talk to me about…that kind of stuff.” She sighed. “I just hope things work out, okay?”

“They’re fine, Cosette,” Tom insisted, standing with Beatrice’s empty dish. “I think she needs a refill.”

“Nanas!” Beatrice cooed.

Cosette shrugged, getting the other half of the banana to slice. *Whatever,* she thought. It was Tom’s life.

“Everything is fine, Cosette,” Tom said, as if she were arguing with him. “There are no problems. Right now Ashley is away filming and I’m not sure she’ll be back by Easter, and I don’t want to pressure anybody. Not you, not her. It’s not urgent, is it?”

“No, of course not.”
“I appreciate you thinking of it, though,” he said with a charming little smile. She returned it. Changed the subject, because it was obviously what he wanted.

“Okay, well, I also wanted to tell you that I’m planning on taking Beatrice to spend some time with your mother this summer. Henry and Christina were interested in going as well. I know you’re filming but I wanted to make sure that’s okay with you.”

“Of course it’s okay. Like my mother said, I don’t always have to be there. But I’d like to be. Let me know the dates and I’ll try to pop in for a day or so.”

“It’s up to you.” She handed him Beatrice’s plate again and he went back to feeding his child. “You’re always welcome.”

“How is school going?” he asked her, making conversation.

“We just finished the third quarter. It’s all downhill from here,” she teased. “The kids have gotten their acceptance letters into the high schools they want, so right now it’s just a question of not flunking. Graduation stuff is coming up. Oh, shit, that reminds me—“ she flinched at Tom’s disapproving look. He did not like it when she swore in front of Bebe. “Richard was asking if you might be available the weekend after Easter break, for the big gala. Just to put in an appearance. It might help with attendance.”

Tom gave a wistful little smile. “Is it at that country club again?”

“No, we’re sticking to the school this year. Money issues, going a bit cheaper. That’s why we kind of need the help.”

“I’m not sure, I’ll have to see when I leave for filming again.” He paused. “If I can’t do it, you want me to see if I can get a friend to come?”

“Depends on the friend,” she replied cautiously.

Tom chuckled. “Chris Hemsworth is going to be in town for some work at the studio. I’m sure I could get both him and his wife to come.”

“That would be great,” Cosette said, thinking how pleased Richard would be. “Truthfully that might even be better than you,” she added, without thinking.

But Tom just smiled. “I don’t know, since The Night Manager, and also Kong, I’ve gotten a lot more recognition with the casual fan.”

Cosette just rolled her eyes. “Yes, you’re world famous, I’m surprised there isn’t a crowd of paps outside my door.”

“Funny,” he replied dryly. “Speaking of which, I wanted to give you a heads up. If Ashley and I do go public, you might get some backlash.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean you’re the previous girlfriend, the mother of my child, and the paps might want a reaction from you that I’m dating someone else.” Tom’s cheeks seemed slightly pink as she turned to look at him. “I’m just saying you need to have Isaac walk you into work instead of just following you there, or whatever it is he does.”

“He follows, usually,” Cosette confirmed. “You think it will come to that?”
“I hope not, but…well, I’m not sure about anything anymore and I just don’t want you to be unpleasantly surprised.”

Cosette immersed her hands into the suds in the sink, starting to clean the few dishes she’d used. She pondered this situation in her mind for a few minutes. “Is it worth it, Tom?” she asked quietly.

“Is what worth it?”

“Is it worth it, the downside you have to endure, for the upside of being recognized, being wanted for projects, getting your choice of work? Is that worth being hounded, followed, photographed, hunted like…like prey, I guess.”

“Ice creeee!” Beatrice said as Tom stood up with her empty plate.

“Freezer,” Cosette said automatically. Tom reached in and found the little container of chocolate that Cosette kept for Beatrice’s sweet tooth. He scooped some into a little bowl and sat down again, but Beatrice wanted to do it herself so he gave her the little plastic spoon for her to go for it. He walked over to Cosette, bringing the empty dish over to be cleaned.

“Sometimes I wonder,” he said as he immersed it into the suds. “If it’s worth it. I’ve said it before, I was trained to be an artist, not to be famous, but…well, the fame is a hard beast to tame.”

“You don’t get to control it,” she said. She met his eyes. “You don’t get to decide how it affects you. You don’t get to say, I’ll take this part, but not that.”

“I know,” Tom agreed. “You need the fame to get the work you want, but the fame can double back on you, make you more a liability than an asset. But…” he shrugged. “I can’t dance to its tune. I will do this my way or not at all. And I won’t allow Beatrice, or you, to be hurt by it. So just be careful.”

“And you be careful, letting Bebe feed herself,” Cosette returned, glancing over her shoulder to see her daughter already covered in chocolate. “You’re cleaning that up,” she told him.

“My pleasure!”

8888888888888888888888

A: Hey handsome.

T: Yes, gorgeous?

A: You doing anything important this weekend?

T: Why do you ask?

A: I’m in town. Got a weekend away and wanted to spend it with my favorite guy.

T: Tell your favorite guy that I’m extremely jealous.

A: Silly. Can I come over? Or do you want to come here?

Tom looked at the last message, debating. After the exchange with Cosette yesterday, it felt wrong to have Ashley suddenly appear at his house. He still wasn’t quite sure why he was putting it off. Something about it left him feeling restless.
T: Are you home already?

A: Yeah, tired. Could you come here?

T: Absolutely. Give me an hour, less.

Tom sighed in relief. Maybe he could bring Ashley back here on Saturday or something. Bring Cosette over, let them meet.

The sun wasn’t as bright in the sky, as the time change was approaching and the evenings were still short. Mentally, Tom noted that Beatrice would be in bed within a few hours, and he had spent most of the day with her, so he was pretty sure he wouldn’t catch any flack for not appearing at Cosette’s house again that day. He would spend the night at Ashley’s and come back mid-morning, spend some time with his daughter, and meet up with Ashley again late in the afternoon.

Ashley had a nice little house in a gated community, two bedrooms, two baths, with a yard and a little greenhouse. She liked to grow things. She grew a lot of different vegetables, especially cucumbers, peppers, and tomatoes. Tom remembered on set, how she would bring her own salads filled with her home-grown goodies, but she liked a good streak, too, and wasn’t shy when it came to sweets like most actresses were.

When he came up the walk, she called to him through the open front door and he went in, having been in her house a few times before. He followed the foyer through to the back to find her hunched down in the dirt, pulling at some weeds in her flower beds. She also had an herb garden, which she specifically planted to be bee-friendly. Tom couldn’t help but notice the nice curve of her buttocks in her jeans, and how when she stood up to greet him there was an adorable streak of dirt across her cheek, and even on the top of her cleavage, which peeked at him from the top of her scoop-necked tank.

“Hello, gorgeous,” he greeted her, kissing her sweetly.

“Mmmm…you’re too squeaky clean, Tommy. I swear there’s never a speck of dirt under your fingernails.” She brushed her hair from her face, not having put it back in a pony-tail, meaning it clung, slightly sweaty, to her temples. It was too light to be brunette and too brown to be blonde. Strawberry blonde might have been the best term for it, but like any actress, she was able to change her hair on a whim for whatever part. Thank God the costumers had given her a wig to play Death – he knew what black hair dye could do to your hair, and he liked her natural. And natural at this moment meant more dirt, which streaked now on her forehead as she brushed her hair back.

“You want my fingernails dirty?” Tom asked as he unconsciously looked down at his nails. Keeping them neat and clean was almost a compulsion for him…and Cosette had always liked them…

He chased the thought of her away. Ashley’s green eyes twinkled at him. “Not really. Just a sign that you’re not as perfectly put together as you seem would be nice, now and again.”

“Well, we can arrange that.” His voice had gotten dark, sultry. She was damn sexy when she was disheveled. They kissed again, her arms going around his neck. His hands gripped her waist and he could feel the softness of her belly and the firmness of her sides. He couldn’t help himself – his thumbs brushed against her skin just under her shirt. She pressed against him, eagerly.

“I’ve missed you,” she whispered. “I’ve been thinking about you a lot. It’s been what, three weeks?”
“Two and a half,” Tom returned, his mouth going to her jaw, down her neck. He loved the tangy, earthy taste of her. She tilted her head back with a little whimper.

“I waited so long for you to kiss me. I’ve waited even longer for you to…” She stopped herself, straightening. Tom felt her shift, and let her go, reluctant.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing, I just…” she shrugged. “You want some dinner? I was going to make pasta. Maybe you could show me that Bolognese you’re always talking about.”

Tom followed her into the house. He was disconcerted. He knew where she’d been going with her thought, but now she was pulling back. “Is everything okay?” he asked again.

She smiled at him, her usual bright smile. “Yes, Tom. I just…I was wondering about…about us, actually.”

“Us?”

She nodded. “I just feel like…like everything is kind of slow between us. Which isn’t bad, don’t get me wrong,” she said, moving dishes and taking fresh vegetables out of her crisper. “I just…I think I expected things differently from you. You have a little bit of a reputation.”

“That’s not really a good thing,” Tom said, sitting down on one of the little stools by her island counter.

“Well, I can imagine having a kid, and then the break up…I guess it’s shifted your perspective.” She considered him. “I just don’t want you to think that I’m trying to rush you, I guess.”

“You haven’t rushed me,” he assured her.

“No, I’ve been following your lead.”

“Well, then…what happened before? I mean, we were…” Were they going to? Tom had felt the motions, had felt the sensations take hold. It was the thing he had been waiting for, the right moment. And that moment had abruptly ended.

“I’m…not sure.” She began chopping tomatoes. “I guess it felt weird to me, you come through the door and then suddenly we’re…what, shagging?” She raised an eyebrow at him, her smile almost teasing. “I don’t know, I guess I just feel kind of…out of sync with you.” She put down what she was doing, fixing him with a serious look. “I’m not breaking up with you, Tom. I just want to know, where this is going. I mean, I sort of expect a physical aspect to our relationship before it gets really serious, so that way I know if we really have chemistry or not. But it has to happen naturally, you can’t force it. And with us it feels like a bunch of stops and starts. And I don’t know if part of it is just that we both are in the business and that’s the nature of our lives, or if…if one of us is just not all the way in.”

“I’m all the way in,” Tom said, and then fixed her with a seductive look. “Or I will be when you let me.”

She gave him an equally flirtatious smile. “Let’s eat first. I downloaded a bunch of music today, I know how much you love to dance. I will confess, I did want to spend this weekend with you, see if this is going to really go somewhere. But I don’t want to put any pressure—“
and thoughts flew from his head, banished as if nothing else mattered but this moment.

“If we were at my house in London,” he whispered into her ear, “I would press you up against the kitchen door and show you what pressure is.”

She shivered against him. “That sounds more my speed,” she hummed.

Cosette felt the hairs go up on the back of her neck when her phone beeped. That was a notification she didn’t want. It was a google alert.

Meeting Ashley on Saturday had gone pretty well. The young woman seemed sweet, cordial, and down to earth. She came across as intelligent and polite. The meeting was brief, very brief, because Ashley was in town that weekend for a quick break in filming and Tom wanted to spend what time he could with her. He was careful not to neglect Beatrice in that mix, for which Cosette was grateful. But she knew he’d taken Ashley out last night, Sunday. On this Monday morning, Cosette was awake a little early, lying in bed, listening to the quiet before the week went into full swing.

She reached for her phone, which sat beside her bed. Something told her not to look. But she couldn’t stop herself from swiping.

The magazine cover showed Ashley and Tom, his arm around her, pulling her tight to him, the two of them laughing, walking down the street outside one of Los Angeles’ trendier restaurants. It was obvious they were in love, it was written all over them. The headline was something inane, something stupid, and it blurred in Cosette’s vision. All she could see was Tom’s smile as his eyes were locked on Ashley, only a few inches from her face, which was thrown back in laughter, mouth wide and happy.

And then she knew. She knew without a single doubt in her head.

She had completely and utterly fucked up.

The jealousy hit her hard and low, so intense she had to shut her eyes and keep herself from reeling. Her stomach bucked, her head swam. The emotions she had been fighting off for the last four months kicked at her, getting stronger. That dark feeling of being sucked into a hole, that depression that lingered at the edges of her vision like a fog, all became more intense. That time she had cried in Tom’s arms had been sweet relief, knowing he still cared for her, that he wanted to help her.

She wouldn’t get that again.

It was her own stupid fault. All hers, and no one else’s. She’d known without a doubt how much he’d changed when he pushed her away at Christina’s wedding. And yet still she found an excuse to refuse him. He had told her he still loved her, still wanted to marry her, and had respected her enough not to let her fall into the trap she was so good at getting into, and yet still she’d turned him down.

Her self-loathing was so intense she could taste it in the back of her throat.

So now this was going to be her punishment. She was going to watch him with this woman, this sweet, intelligent, independent woman who was everything Tom wanted…

She wanted to curl into a ball and die.
But now that her self-loathing had kicked into high gear, memories flashed through her. Just the day before yesterday, Tom was in his kitchen, with Ashley a few feet from him, the two of them seeming to be unable to not touch each other in some way, but at the same time consciously trying not to, as if for her sake.

Trying to hide it. She knew Tom was sleeping with Ashley. Something in her just knew it. And this made her absolutely sick.

*This is what you get,* a nasty little voice in her head taunted, *when you are too stupid to know what you want.*

“Fuck you,” Cosette hissed, pushing back the covers and making herself get up. She threw herself into her morning routine, styling her hair, applying her make-up, getting her lunch ready, getting things ready for Beatrice’s day. She heard Giselle’s familiar rustle in the doorway, seven o’clock sharp, and forced a bright smile on her to face.

She was not going to let a hint of this get back to Tom.

Once she was at work, however, she knew she had to bend Shelly’s ear.

This year they were buddy classes, Shelly in third, her in eighth. It felt strange, walking into the room for smaller students, with the little chairs and desks, everything downsized. Even Shelly was downsized – in the last year she had lost a considerable amount of weight. She was setting up some materials for her math lesson when Cosette knocked on the door.

“Hey…how are you?” Shelly asked. The look on her face told Cosette that somehow Shelly already knew.

“How do you know?” she asked.

“My brother called me when the story broke. We’re both night owls. He knew I was close to you. Wanted to give a warning before you found out through…less savory channels.”

Cosette just grunted.

“I guess we’re too late. You saw the article?”

“The pictures. I knew Tom and Ashley were together, that wasn’t a shock, he told me, but it was just…a bit disconcerting.”

“Oh.” Shelly looked puzzled; Cosette could tell she wanted to ask a question, but hesitated.

“I know it’s silly, but…” Cosette sighed, plunking down in one of the small chairs. “Am I insane to be jealous?”

“Well,” Shelly drawled, coming over to sit across from her at one of the student desks, “depends on why you’re jealous. I have a hard time believing it’s the spotlight you miss.”

“No, definitely not that.” She sighed. “I guess as long as Tom was single, I didn’t have to compete for his time. I mean, when it comes to his work, there is no competition, and as long as he wasn’t neglecting Beatrice, I could make my peace with that. But now it will be split, and it was precious enough as it was…”

“So you’re jealous for Beatrice.”
Cosette waited a long time to answer. “I wish that was all it was,” she whispered.

Shelly didn’t say anything for a while. She seemed to consider her manicure, letting the silence stretch. Finally, she said, “Did I ever tell you that Tom apologized to me?”

Cosette jerked her head toward Shelly. “Apologized? For--?”

“It was that morning he surprised us. When I got out of Dodge as fast as I could get. He followed me out, caught up to me, and apologized for…for when I overheard him in his trailer, when they were filming here.”

“He…he apologized for that?”

Shelly nodded. “Sort of surprised me. I mean, yeah, that’s the Tom we were all obsessed over, the British gentleman, the unicorn prince. You know how disillusioned I was. And the fact that he apologized…sort of restored my faith in him. Not that I started crushing on him again, that’s kind of awkward when he’s one of your friend’s baby daddy.”

Cosette winced. “Don’t call him that.”

“Sorry. I guess my point is that he’s different. I don’t know him well at all but I can see it. Maybe that apology was just him being polite, trying to ease the tension for your sake, but…I don’t know. He seemed to really feel bad. To regret how he used to act. I don’t know, maybe I’m full of shit…”

“You’re not.” Cosette felt tears starting to threaten. She willed them back. In fits and starts, she told Shelly about what happened at Christina’s wedding. Shelly listened, asking the occasional question, and when Cosette was done, it was almost time to pick up the students.

“Geeze, Cosette,” she whispered. “Are you…you’re still stuck on him, aren’t you.”

“I am the biggest idiot in the world,” Cosette sighed.

“No,” Shelly said quickly. “Not an idiot, not at all. But…and please don’t get pissed at me for suggesting this, but…maybe, just maybe, it’s a territorial thing? I mean, you were used to being the alpha female. It can be rough, making room for another.”

“I’m not pissed. I wish it was just that, too.” Cosette sighed. “I don’t want to admit it. I don’t. Admitting it makes it real.”

“Well, I could say something that might make you…feel better about this. Not completely, but you’ll remember why you made the decision you did in the first place.”

Cosette frowned. “What could that be?”

Shelly gave an awkward little shrug. “He’s probably sleeping with her. Wasn’t that the reason why you and he didn’t work? Your core values weren’t the same.”

Cosette stood up, her legs starting to fall asleep from how she was squatted in the chair. “I know,” she said, irritated. “But he’s different.”

“Maybe some things about him are, but not all of them,” Shelly said. “I’m sorry if this upsets you but I think you came to me because you wanted someone to remind you. His idea of dating and yours is not the same, has never been. It’s not about sex, it’s not about what that other person can do for me, how they can keep me from being lonely. We believe in what it should be – and there are core values and non-negotiables that he obviously doesn’t share, if he’s dating Ashley.”
“What’s wrong with her?” Cosette asked. “She seemed really nice when I met her. Smart, respectful, not a floosie.”

“Yeah, but she’s kind of a serial dater,” Shelly said. “She has a reputation for burning through relationships. Although her last boyfriend was the longest one she’d been with yet, but…well, it just seems relationships come pretty easy for her.”

“I know you’re trying to make me feel better,” Cosette sighed, “and I appreciate it, but it’s not working. Now I’m worried she’s going to hurt him.” Just then the bell rang. “Crap.”

“We can talk at lunch. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“No, I appreciate it, you’re right. I shouldn’t get caught up in this. Tom wasn’t exactly known for his ability to commit when I first knew him, either. I’m just terrified that this is the one that’s going to stick for him. She’s nice, I like her, but…dammit, Shelly, why do I feel like this? What the fuck is wrong with me?”

Shelly shrugged, offering a sympathetic smile. “Hormones? And he’s Tom?”

“Not helping.” But they exchanged a grin.
One Year, Six Months Later

Chapter Summary

On a summer trip to Diana's, things get shaken up for Tom in his new relationship; Cosette digs in her heels; Tom and Christina have a heart-to-heart.

While summer didn’t actually start until June 21st, the beginning of summer for every school child was always the first day of June. At least, every child Cosette had ever known. She blamed it partly on the fact that California was always so warm, and anything below 80 degrees was considered “cold.” God forbid it should go into the fifties – everyone’s teeth would begin chattering!

In England, however, the weather was in the high sixties, and Cosette loved it. Just enough for a light sweater but not enough to get hot and sweaty. Plus Tom’s mother lived close to the coastline, so they were always walking along the beach or playing in the sand.

Sitting on the porch, with the sun warming her, Cosette felt herself ultimately able to relax. The stress and the pressure seemed to finally ease their iron-fisted grip on her neck and shoulders. She stretched her legs out before her and covered her eyes with her darkest sunglasses, sipped some tea (it was just cool enough for tea) and let herself go.

It wasn’t just school she was hiding from here, however. It wasn’t just grades and parents and students chomping at the bit for a vacation that had added a few gray hairs to her dark locks. Tom was arriving on Saturday and quite frankly, she wished she had the courage to just tell him not to bother. But spending time with his mother had always been a favorite way for him to relax, and she had no right to deny him that. Throw his daughter into the mix and the combination had to be irresistible.

The fallout from Tom and Ashley’s relationship going public had been much, much, much worse than either of them anticipated. Tom was hounded by paparazzi, as well as Ashley – together, apart, it didn’t matter. But not just them – Cosette found herself being followed down the street in the morning on her way to work, and the crowd was even thicker as they lay in wait for her to leave the school in the afternoon. It got to the point where Isaac had to drive her, pull up to the front door and escort her into the building to keep them off. Repeat for pick-up. Richard had called the police several times, saying the paps were a threat to the security of the school. She knew he was annoyed with her but also recognized that it wasn’t really her fault. But it didn’t stop there.

They parked on the street in front of her house, and they wrote horrible, malicious articles making up the worst of lies about the situation. She was painted as a discard, cheapened as having served her purpose as a brood mare and was now cast aside in favor of the younger, newer, more popular model.

Tom had been outraged. To his face, she pretended to not really be more that peripherally aware of the gossip, but on her own, she was near disconsolate over it. If Tom had been around more, he might have seen through Cosette’s façade, but at least as much of his spare time was going into his relationship with Ashley, and he rarely brought his girlfriend to his house, so they were always away. When he was there on the days he spent with his daughter (and insisted Cosette be included, like usual) she pretended it didn’t exist. She was slowly becoming a very good actress. Of course,
then the articles about Tom playing both sides when the paps got pictures of him with Cosette and Beatrice would fly, and that would set him off on a rampage. Which hurt even more, for some bizarre reason Cosette couldn’t quite understand. The phrase they used which drove him up the wall was “Hiddle’s Harem.” It became a trend on social media.

Here, however, she didn’t have to pretend. All of that was outside these walls. Diana’s house was a fortress for her. She would not allow any of it in. Even if her mind was able to remove itself from her own misery, she found herself wondering how Ashley was handling it. She was sure that Tom had had to reassure her many, many times that he was not involved with Cosette outside of their daughter, and that she was his one and only. These thoughts almost always amused, then wounded her – the Tom she’d first known would have said the words, but not meant them. But this Tom was very different now.

Her thoughts were disrupted by someone sliding open the porch door. She looked up and saw her sister coming through.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” Christina said back, perching in one of the porch chairs beside her. “How is it?”

“Nice. Quiet. A tiny bit chilly.” Cosette wrapped the thin sweater a bit closer around her shoulders. “How about you?”

“Henry is helping Beatrice and Diana make cookies. Diana adores him, you know. I don’t know how he’s managed to wrap so many Hiddlestons around his fingers… maybe we should call him the Hiddleston Whisperer.”

“Where’s Emma? I thought she was here.”

“She had to leave, she and Jack had tickets to a play in town tonight. You should see what she bought Beatrice. It’s adorable.”

“I can imagine,” Cosette sighed. The aunts and Diana always bought Beatrice a dozen things, most of which were cute but not terribly practical – which was not a bad thing, as Beatrice had more than twice what any eighteen month old should ever need. Still, it was more clutter in a house that was already filled with clutter. Cosette was quick to box and store the things Bebe grew out of, knowing that Christina might need them soon. But so far, the newlyweds hadn’t given her the big news.

The two sisters sat and stared at the ocean for a few moments, and then Christina said, “You don’t talk to me anymore.”

Cosette looked at her sister, trying to figure out what to say. “We’re talking now,” she managed.

Christina gave her a disapproving look. “You know what I mean.”

Cosette shrugged. “Come on, Chrissy, you don’t have time for my bullshit, you’re a married woman now, you have a husband—“

“And I still have a sister,” Christina protested.

“No, you have different priorities.” She considered, for a very long moment. “And I don’t think you’ve ever quite forgiven me for not getting back together with Tom.”

Christina didn’t say anything either, for an even longer moment. Then, hesitant, she spoke very
softly. “Have you forgiven yourself?”

Cosette refused to react. She didn’t want to have this conversation, not with Christina, not with Tom on his way here, not in a house thousands of miles away from home, in front of people who may not be strangers but were not going to be subjected to this strange drama she and Christina had been enacting on a subconscious level for too long.

“There wasn’t anything to forgive. I made the best choice I could.” Her stomach twitched at the lie. She wondered if Christina could hear it. From the look she was getting, it was definitely not completely accepted as truth.

“This can’t be easy for you, though,” Christina said, turning to face her sister, leaning forward, hands pressed together above her knees. “I mean, all this crap going on with the new girlfriend—”

“Have you met her?” Cosette asked.

“Yeah, briefly, one afternoon when he had to come by the house for something, I can’t remember what it was, Henry met her and they called me out for a quick hello. That had to be a treat for her, the sister of the ex. I don’t know when Tom and Henry became BFFs but sometimes I think he’s at my house more than he’s at his own.”

“She’s nice.”

“Yes. That’s not my point, though. It’s been a media circus, Cosette, and you haven’t said one word about it to me. Sometimes I feel all we do is exchange pleasantries. I’ve gotten married, not died.”

Cosette looked away. It hurt. She had felt the strain between her and her sister since her and Tom’s first horrible fight in London. That felt so long ago but the after affects still continued. And she knew it would be a matter of time before she cracked and her true feelings for Tom came out, and somehow, having Christina knowing them was just… unacceptable.

So she kept her distance.

“We can go shopping tomorrow, or something,” she said, pulling herself together and putting on a bright smile. “Spend some sisterly time together. If Henry can spare you.”

Christina considered her. “Yeah. That might be fun.” But there was still hurt in her tone. Christina knew. She knew she was still outside of that wall around Cosette’s inner heart.

“Look,” Cosette said with a sigh, “you are right, this circus sucks. I mean, getting called a discard, getting called all kinds of awful names, getting harassed, it’s been terrible. But I can’t let it get to me. And I know, eventually, it will pass. We can’t give them any reason to keep coming around. The media will get used to Tom and Ashley and it will stop being such a big deal.”

“But…” Christina floundered, trying to find the right words, “it’s not fair. I mean, he goes and sees some co-star and the media thinks they have the right to the innermost details of his life, like he’s their property or something.”

“Did he tell you that?” Cosette wondered out loud.

“He’s said a few things. It’s been really hard on him, too, Cozy. He worries about you but he says you just keep blowing it off. He hopes it’s for real, he knows how hard he has to work to keep it from getting to him, he hopes that you’re genuinely not upset by it, but we all know you too well.”
“I’m not a celebrity. They don’t have any right to me,” Cosette growled between gritted teeth.

“That’s what Tom says.”

Cosette rolled her eyes. “Honestly, I don’t care what he says,” she continued, her bottled up anger getting the best of her. “It’s all a load, anyway. This was one of the very first reasons why I never wanted to get involved with him. Actors, actresses, they live in a bizarre state of reality. They want to become known, they want people to enjoy their work so that if they’re in a movie, it will get viewers. Then they try desperately to have a private life and get all offended if it’s violated.”

“Tom always said an actor needs an audience.”

“But that isn’t the way it works, never,” Cosette went on. “It never stops with the role. The actor becomes the product. The studio sells that product, plays it up. Makes them do a ton of promotion. Tom gives this line that he wants to represent the film because of all the hard work that goes into it, that he represent the film and not himself. But it isn’t completely true. If he isn’t in the film, if he isn’t seen, he doesn’t get more work. If he doesn’t sell his own product, himself, he doesn’t get the roles he wants. So they feed the pubic this image, and he contributes to it, he’s the one who puts enough of what’s genuine into it to make it believable. And Tom, he can’t help himself, he puts enough of his real self into it to be dangerous. To make people feel like they know him. And so when stuff like this happens, he starts publicly dating someone of the same ilk? Someone who does what he does? Then they get offended that the media wants details? And of course they won’t give them, so the mad dogs go after what they can. It’s a vicious cycle, Chrissy. And I want to feel bad for him because I know it’s horrible to be gossiped and lied about, but…but I can’t help but feel that he made this monster and now is pissed that it’s turned on him.”

Christina listened quietly. After a moment, she said, “So…you think he…”

“No, I don’t think he deserves it,” Cosette sighed. “But I can’t feel too sorry for him, either. He chose to become famous. He chose this, knowing what could happen. I mean, there are consequences to your life choices, you know?”

“I know. Do you?”

“Trust me, I fucking know,” Cosette snapped.

“Should he quit acting, then?” Christina asked, her voice gentle even if the words cut. “Should he give up what he’s good at, what he’s passionate about?”

“No, of course not,” Cosette replied. “But…I don’t know. Maybe the problem isn’t him or any of his kind. Maybe it’s the world. Maybe the whole idea of fame is evil and corrupt and should be abolished. We shouldn’t know the name of any actor in any role. They should all just be meat puppets with no identities. Wouldn’t that be a kick?” She gave a jaded little chuckle.

“Impossible, though,” Christina said with a grin.

“We have entirely too much free time today, to spend it in such idleness that we have time to worry about who the guy who played Loki or Captain James Conrad is dating.”

“Maybe. But we’re all part of the problem.”

“True.” Cosette couldn’t help but think of how Shelly used to be. She would never have known about the monster that was Tom Hiddleston without Shelly’s Hiddlestoner knowledge.

Her thoughts were disrupted by a mild commotion inside the house. Both sisters turned to look.
Tom had arrived.

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If he was very, very honest with himself – and this was not always the easiest thing – the whole thing had started to go downhill when he and Ashley had consummated their relationship.

When he’d been filming High Rise, he’d been taken with the line about Laing and Charlotte, how when they went to bed together, it was more of an ending of their relationship than a beginning. He hadn’t quite understood it then. Now, he was crystal clear on it.

If he let himself admit it. Which he didn’t, not often.

But he knew.

His clearest memory of their sexual relationship was the feeling of waking up with her half on top of him, the smell of her Argon-oil shampoo filling his nose from where her hair tickled his nostrils. There was a sense of bliss there, a relief he was unaware of how badly he’d needed. And thus he slid into the lovely delusion that physical intimacy creates, when true intimacy, spiritual, emotional, mental intimacy, is not quite completed.

Again, a thing he didn’t like to admit.

The days after that had been happy, blundering, blind, just feeling their way through each other, touching each other, exploring each other physically but somehow going completely on hold when it came to anything deeper. The excuse that they just wanted to enjoy the now of their relationship, the joy it brought without overthinking it, was easy to come by and easier to embrace.

He felt the urge to tell her he loved her. He couldn’t quite bring himself to say it. It hovered on his tongue, most strongly when he had to tell her goodbye. He had to work. She had to work. But there were those two fantastic weeks in Argentina, where she came to stay with him during a very brief break in filming, in which he knew they had been daring and explosive and pushing each other’s limits, wanting to see the other at their most naked, most off-kilter. Wanting to know how unconventional the other could be and how exciting that was. The sheer adrenaline of falling into another person had kept them going for possibly a month longer than it should have.

But right there, recording it all, were the paps. Eager and hungry for this display being put on by two actors who were at the height of their popularity, or at least gaining it. The pictures didn’t show what he and Ashley had truly felt or exchanged during those weeks, that was true enough, but it didn’t stop everyone on the planet – or at least the media – from giving their little two-cent opinions that were each more laughable than the last.

Then, back in L.A., came in the inevitable complaint from Ashley – why were they never at his home? Why always at hers?

Tom tried to explain that he’d bought this house to be close to Beatrice, but that this afforded him minimum privacy when he was there. Cosette and all her kin had a key, in case Beatrice was there and they needed quick access.

“Well, let Cosette walk in on us once. That will teach her to knock first,” Ashley had said in an uncharacteristically bitchy moment. Tom bristled but didn’t snap at her, a feat he was proud of himself for later.

“You want me to leave a tie on the door, like in college?” Tom teased her.
“It just feels one-sided,” Ashley said. “I know it’s silly, I came to you in Argentina, of course it isn’t, but I feel like you’re in my life but I’m not in yours. Does that make sense?”

It had. Tom attempted to mollify her. Many times. It worked, until that afternoon.

And she hadn’t even broken up with him face-to-face. She hadn’t had the decency to at least come to his house in London, which he had invited her to do, and tell him that it was over.

It was a phone call.

Not even a long phone call.

“Tom, I’ve had so much fun with you, seriously. But I think it’s run its course with us.”

*Run its course.* Like a theater run. Or an infection.

“I thought we were getting serious,” Tom said, unable to get the hurt from his voice.

“I thought we could too, but I’ve been doing a lot of thinking and I just don’t think…I mean, I thought it could work, for a while. But the whole thing with Cosette right down the street when you’re here. I just wonder sometimes if you’re completely over her. You don’t see how you are when you talk about her. I wonder if you ever talk about me like that.”

“Of course I ---- Ashley,” he said, his hurt turning to frustration and anger, “why didn’t you talk to me about these things? We’re supposed to talk about these things, work through them. That’s what being in a relationship is supposed to be, isn’t it? Instead you’ve just decided that--”

“Come on, Tom…are you really the kind of guy who likes to have those relationship talks?” He could hear her making air quotes. “I knew things were getting complicated and I just don’t think things need to be that complicated! All that talking and hashing over a million little things is so tedious, it just kills the romance of it all. And besides, I don’t like being the girl who says, ‘we have to talk.’”

“So that’s it, then?” When did the women in his life suddenly get the right to make these decisions for him? First Cosette and now Ashley…he viciously shoved thoughts of Cosette away. This was exactly what Ashley was talking about and here he was, doing it! “Just over, done?”

“You’ll be thanking me in a while, I know feels nasty, but it is the best way, Tom.” She sighed, and he wondered how unhappy she really was about this. He had expected her to cry or something.

But no. A phone call, and that was it. No more relationship.

The last time he had hidden away at his mother’s house had been during that awful ordeal with Cosette after that ugly business in Australia. Ugly business he had deliberately caused. And his mother, while always loving and compassionate to him, had not been terribly sympathetic. Still, she let him stew, saying her peace and then not harping on it. Although her peace had left him with anything but.

Did he have a problem? Was he unable to make it work with a woman?

He pulled his jag into the familiar drive. He hesitated, sitting there for several minutes, knowing Cosette, Christina and Henry were in there, too. They would know something was wrong. He couldn’t fake his way through this – that wasn’t his nature. Even when acting, he strove for the truth of the character. Could he do any less with himself?
But could he take it? He was absolutely sure, without a doubt, that someone, somewhere, was going to say, “I told you so.” Maybe not in those exact words, but…

Except nobody had told him so.

Nobody had warned him.

Nobody told him dating Ashley was a mistake.

Nobody in his life had passed judgment. All that had come from the media. The continuous, relentless gossip that painted Ashley as a user, himself as a social climber, both of them as promiscuous, both of them as shallow and ambitious. Before, the media had loved him, never said an unkind word. The second he’d shown his face with her, that was all over.

He steeled himself, drew a breath. He got out of the car and grabbed his bag. Letting himself into the house, he saw his mother and Henry in the kitchen. Nobody had any idea what had happened. It wasn’t like he should expect them all to rush him to comfort him.

There was movement at his feet. He looked down and saw Beatrice looking up at him. She had on a little pair of blue trousers, a cream colored cardigan over a T-shirt, and on her head was some kind of furry covering that looked like it had bear ears. It was tied under her chin, enveloping her head. Her face peeked out at him through the fur, and she gave him a little smile.

“Dada,” she said in greeting.

He wanted to scoop her up, kiss her, hug her tightly. That one little word was a sweet balm on his aching heart. But the second he bent, she seemed to shy away, as if nervous, and then she spun on her heel and ran toward the patio, shouting, “Mama!”

He felt like his heart had just been ripped out and carried off.

“Tom!” His mother’s cheerful greeting made him want to snap. His teeth ground together and he suddenly just wanted to hide under a rock. She came in, kissed him, but must have felt the tension through his body because she pulled back and looked at him in concern. “Are you all right?”

“Hey man,” Henry greeted from behind, his mouth half-full of some baked treat. The fragrant smell of chocolate and sugar finally reached his nose. Tom was acutely aware, suddenly, of how fond his mother was of Henry, and here the man was, in her kitchen, enjoying the benefits of her home cooking, and he felt irrationally felt jealous.

Turned out none of the women in his life wanted him.

“Tired,” he said. “Gonna go unpack.” He shuffled off, catching out of the corner of his eye the sight of Cosette coming in from the patio with Beatrice in her arms.

He went right up the stairs and to his room. He flopped his backpack down on the bed, but then followed it with himself, on the foot, lying back and spreading his arms, staring up at the ceiling.

This was ridiculous. It was all just his grief over the break up manifesting itself in everything he encountered, but those were rational thoughts and he wasn’t feeling rational. His emotions were overwhelming and he felt the awful urge to start crying.

Had he loved Ashley? Was his heart this badly broken? It was so frustrating, investing your emotions into a person, only to have that person withdraw.
There was a familiar squeak – someone was coming into his room.

“Tom?” He knew her voice. His muscles clenched, his fingers involuntarily curling into fists. He covered by pushing them into the mattress to sit up and face her. She held Beatrice on her hip. She gave him a tentative little smile, but it quickly faltered and she frowned. “What’s wrong?”

He tried to smooth the muscles of his face into something more genteel, but they seemed to be stuck in a scowl. “I’m very tired, Cosette,” he said, his voice formal and clipped to keep himself from growling at her. “It’s been a very long week and I just wanted to relax.”

“Oh. Well, Beatrice was asking about her daddy, I thought I’d bring her up for just a quick hello.” She attempted to slide her daughter down her hip and onto the floor but Beatrice flung her little arms around her mommy’s shoulder and clung, saying only, “Mom-my!”

“It’s okay,” Tom tried to say, the façade slipping. He was irritated by Cosette’s obvious lie – Beatrice had not been asking about him, as she had run from him. But saying it would make him look idiotic. Beatrice wasn’t even two and couldn’t be held responsible for her behavior.

Cosette got Beatrice on the floor, but the little girl clung to her leg. Cosette straightened, bewildered. “I’m so sorry. She’s going through some changes lately.” She attempted a bright smile. “You remember how messy she used to get when she would eat? She’s so lady-like now, dainty and careful.”

“Mmm.” Tom watched Beatrice as she peeked at him from behind Cosette’s leg.

“Tom,” Cosette tried, her voice much softer, “what’s wrong? Did…did something happen?” She studied his face, her eyes scrutinizing him. “Is it…is it Ashley? Did you have a fight?”

Of course she would see right through him. And this only irritated him more. “We broke up,” he managed.

“Oh.” Sympathy. Compassion. He didn’t want to see them on her face. He almost wanted her to make one of her flaying remarks to set him off so he could scream at her and get his awful, curling beast in his gut to release its hold on him, but looked back down at Beatrice who was almost hiding from him now, and instantly felt bad. “I’m so sorry.”

“So am I.” He stood up, going to his bag and pulling the zipper open. He started to stuff his clothes into the familiar chest of drawers.

“I take it you don’t want to talk about it,” she said.

“Not particularly.”

That should have been her cue to leave, but for some reason she didn’t. What she was thinking, he had no idea. But instead she squatted down to their daughter and said, “Bebe, Daddy is very sad and upset. I think he needs a hug. Will you give Daddy a hug?”

“Don’t force it, Cosette,” Tom said, his voice harsher than he liked, especially when he saw how reluctant Beatrice was to get close to him. “She obviously doesn’t want me.” Under his breath he grumbled, “Not that I blame her, no one does.”

“Tom,” Cosette admonished, standing. “It’s not her fault, she just hasn’t seen you in a bit.”

“Two weeks.”
“Well, for her life span that’s long. It happens with her grandparents too, sometimes. More with Dad than Mom…but…” she sighed, playing with her fingers. “Look, if you want to talk, I know I’m probably not the person you’d think of, but…I know Henry is here…and you do need someone to talk to.”

Tom barked a bitter laugh. “What would Henry know about being dumped? He knows how to maintain a relationship, I obviously don’t, although fuck-all if I know why.”

Cosette scowled. Here it comes, Tom thought. He always got on her case for swearing in front of Bebe and she would do the same to him and it would be the fuse to light the fire—

Instead, she stepped closer to him. Her hands went to his shoulders, gripping them as if to get his attention. His body responded almost against his will. He seemed to relax, just a bit, and then her arms were around his neck and she was hugging him.

“I’m sorry, Tom,” she whispered. “You don’t deserve this awful crap.”

The hug was warm, and loving. He felt himself releasing the tension. His arms went around her waist and for a moment the two clung to each other. Her hair smelled sweet, and he’d forgotten how it felt to hug her. Comforting, safe.

After a few minutes, she looked up at him. Her hands gently stroked the sides of his face. “You were there for me in a bad time, Tom, she said. “If you do want to talk to me, about anything, you can, I hope you know that.”

He gave a little nod. She made to let him go, but they both realized at that moment that Beatrice had walked over to the two and put her arms around each of their calves, holding them together. Her head rested on her mommy’s side, but she looked up at Tom and smiled.

Cosette picked her up and thrust her at Tom. He caught his daughter in a bridal hold and pulled her up to his face so he could kiss her cheek, then blew on her belly, earning him a giggle. Cosette turned and left the room, tossing him one last compassionate smile. He let Beatrice go and she scurried off after her mother.

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“He doesn’t want to talk to me about it, Cosette,” Henry told her.

In the last three days, Tom had refused to talk about what happened with him and Ashley. They knew the couple split – they also knew Ashley had initiated the split. Diana was indignant on behalf of her son, but the most Tom would do was sit around the house, read his books, go on his runs (and get photographed), and eat whatever was within reach. He wasn’t grumpy or mopey, but he was quiet, reserved, and it made Cosette uneasy. That wasn’t the Tom she knew.

When Beatrice had come running onto the patio in her adorable bear-head cap, Cosette was confused. But upon following Tom to his room, she began to suspect why Beatrice was leery of her father – something was wrong.

Not knowing what else to really offer, she hugged him. And he seemed to melt against her.

Since then, she had tried to nudge Henry toward him – not that Henry needed a nudge, as he also knew something was wrong with Tom – but Tom remained tight lipped. All he would say was what he’d already said to Cosette in his bedroom. He and Ashley were over. It was his mother who asked who had ended it – none of them thought for a second that it had been mutual, not with the anger storming around Tom’s head – and he’d told her, reluctantly, that Ashley had broken up with
him.

After that, silence.

His mother suggested they take walks on the beach, the whole troop of them. Tom didn’t want to, worried that Beatrice would get photographed and he didn’t want that. The pap scrutiny became more intense the second day when word officially came down that Ashley and Tom were broken up. It was obviously Ashley’s PR people who had released it.

That morning, Cosette had broken down and gone to see the latest headlines. The three most outrageous rumors were: 1) Ashley had been jealous of sharing Tom with a daughter and wasn’t ready to be a step-mom, 2) Cosette had forced the break up because she didn’t want Ashley to be her child’s step-mom, and 3) Tom had obviously cheated with someone else and Ashley found out. After all, it was Hiddle’s Harem for a reason.

When Tom came downstairs that morning, his face pale and lips tight with anger, she knew he must have heard the latest gossip, too. So she’d turned to Henry for help.

“Maybe if we left you two alone for the afternoon,” Cosette suggested.

Henry almost laughed. “Sounds romantic.”

“No, stupid boy,” she said, slapping his knee. “Maybe he’s just worried someone will overhear, and he doesn’t leave the house unless it’s for a run. He doesn’t even go for coffee, which is not like him.”

They were out on the patio, one of Cosette’s favorite places. Thankfully it was shielded enough that if any paps wanted to get pictures she could see them and retreat into the house, but thankfully none of them had gotten that idea.

“I guess you, Christina, and Diana could take Beatrice to…something.”

“We could go shopping. I don’t think we’ve done that all together yet. Diana will go for it. You push Christina.”

“I don’t think he’s going to open up, though, Cozy,” Henry said. “I’ve gotten to know Tom pretty well and if he wanted to talk to me, he would have already.”

She scowled. “I don’t get it. Why won’t he talk to you?”

Henry shrugged. “I have my suspicions. But they will make me look like an egotistical freak.”

“What? Why?”

His shrug got deeper. “You don’t go to a happily married man for sympathy over a break-up. He hasn’t talked to me much since he and Ashley got together, he might think I didn’t…approve.”

“Do you? Or, did you? Approve?”

Henry looked away. “I don’t…think I should talk to you about it.”

“Why not?” Her voice was a bit louder than she liked, so she lowered it. “Henry, I’m not blind, I know Tom and Ashley were sleeping together. Why do you think Tom and I haven’t tried again? I know his attitudes in life.”

“Yes, but…” Henry shuffled in his chair. “I was getting the feeling that he was…hiding something.
Like he was …ashamed. On some level. I don’t know, I’m probably talking out of my backside.” They glanced into the house, making sure nobody was listening. “Okay, I’ll say this…Tom is not quite the guy I first met when you two started seeing each other. And I think this relationship with Ashley sort of threw a lot of attitudes he just took for granted, and contrasted them against how he’s grown. And I think it caused a lot of conflict for him. But he hasn’t said this to me, truthfully I could just be guilty of gossiping. But I think part of the reason he isn’t talking to me about it is because he…isn’t ready to admit it.”

“Well why don’t we disappear for the afternoon so you can see,” Cosette said.

So they did. Diana was more than happy to go into town and do some shopping for Beatrice, and even wanted Cosette to try on a few things as well. Christina came along, although things were a bit tense between her and Cosette.

And Cosette knew why.

As much as Tom seemed reluctant to talk to Henry, she was reluctant to talk to Christina.

Christina couldn’t know that she still had feelings for Tom. That she regretted not getting back together with him.

And now, more than ever, she knew she couldn’t let Tom find out. Why, exactly, she wasn’t sure, but she was positive it had to do with a combination of him being on the rebound, him trying to move on, and…

And he was trying to grow.

All she’d ever done was criticize him. Judge him. He didn’t need that. He didn’t deserve that.

He needed someone to love and nurture him. Not someone who was diametrically opposed to him – or had been. What would that look like – “I’ll love you if you’re willing to change?” That wasn’t love. That wasn’t unconditional. And her own confusion over it wasn’t going to help him. If anything, it would push him away.

So she remained silent.

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“Tom, I am dying for a cappuccino,” Christina said to him upon their return to Diana’s house.

“The coffee shop around the corner is pretty good,” he said, eyeing her. He knew what Cosette had tried to do, leaving him and Henry alone all afternoon. Instead of talking, though, Tom had wound up showing Henry a few of his favorite films. It had been a nice distraction, but he wasn’t going to talk about Ashley to Henry, of all people.

Was Cosette trying a different tactic?

“Walk me. Come on, I’m still a stranger around here, you’re not going to let me go alone, are you?”

So he went with her. They ordered their drinks and walked back, and Christina suggested a side trip toward the beach. The paps had gotten a picture or two of him at the coffee shop, which he accepted stoically. They didn’t follow them to the beach, thankfully, happy with their boring shots. It was nice, the cool wind and the waves contrasting with the warm drink in his hand. It was relaxing.
Christina didn’t ask him anything. Didn’t pry. She just kept him company, in silence, as they wandered along the rocky beach. It was probably this companionable silence that made Tom start to talk.

“Christina,” he said, as they meandered the edge of the surf, “when you had decided that you were going to make some changes in your life…was it hard?”

She gave a little snort. “What kind of question is that? That’s like asking you if you expected to become famous and be a big star. The answer is obvious.”

“Well, I guess what I mean to ask…when you decided that you were going to…wait.” Damn this was difficult. He regretted not taking advantage of his time with Henry to ask him. It was the same question. But Henry had succeeded in his goal. Tom felt like a failure.

But failure, as he well knew, taught more than success.

Christina was looking at him patiently. She looked a bit like her sister in that moment, more than she usually did. He felt a strange twinge in his heart.

“What did you do when you felt…like giving it up? I mean, how did you persevere?”

“Mmm…” She looked away, the breeze flickering her dark hair around her cheeks. “Well, if you’re asking if I ever messed up, slipped, had a moment of weakness. Yes. Many times. The Devil hates it when you resolve to stop something that’s bad for you. He triples his onslaught. But that just told me I was in the right place.”

Tom startled. It wasn’t really like Christina to get religious on him.

“Have you been trying?” she asked gently. “To change?”

“Not consciously,” he admitted. “I just feel…differently about things than I used to. I can’t help but feel that it’s inappropriate to tell you this but I hadn’t been with anyone before Ashley since that…stuff…in Australia.”

She didn’t ask him to clarify. She knew what he meant.

“Were you trying to stay…to abstain?”

“I know that I was trying so hard to make things right with Cosette that I knew putting that aside was the first step. I don’t know if she told you or not, but…maybe I shouldn’t tell you either, if she hasn’t.”

“Not really. I mean, the night of your wedding, she got a bit…emotional. We wound up…well, we got a little closer than we’d been in a while. And I was the one who put on the breaks.”

Christina shrugged. “Sometimes it’s the price you pay for being right. But go on with what you were saying, did something happen with Cosette?”

“NO, it didn’t get that close. Just some…kissing.” Maybe he shouldn’t have told her.
“Wow. No, she’s never mentioned it. And you stopped it?”

He shrugged, hands deep in his pockets, his drink long finished and the cup disposed. “I didn’t want a repeat of when we first…I mean, I knew she would hate herself later.”

Christina looked extremely thoughtful. “Geeze, Tom…”

“Please don’t say anything to her about it,” Tom begged, suddenly panicking.

“No, I promise. It’s not my business anyway, it’s between you two.” But the way she was looking at him. “But I have to admit, I’m confused. I would have thought that something like that might have made you two…try again?”

“Me too. But she decided against it. And after that, I knew it was over. That it was time to move on.”

“So that’s what did it.” She scuffed some rocks with her toes. “I knew something had happened, I just didn’t know what.”

“I met Ashley when I went away to film. I hadn’t been looking for a new relationship,” Tom explained. “But I always find things work better when you let them happen on their own. And I didn’t feel the urge to go running off and sleep with whoever I felt like, just to get some stress relief. It suddenly felt wrong, when it didn’t before. I didn’t realize I’d started to feel that way until the question of being…intimate…with Ashley came up. I mean, it was expected. It was kind of jarring, after being out of the whole scene for so long.”

“And that’s when you realized some of your attitudes had changed.”

“Not quite. It wasn’t until the last couple of days that I’ve really started to understand it. I’ve been trying to figure out why I’m so upset. I mean, of course it hurts to get dumped, rejection is never easy, but it’s not like it’s the first time it’s ever happened and I’ve done it myself. You pick yourself up and move on.”

“And it hasn’t been that easy this time,” Christina offered.

“I thought maybe I had been more in love with Ashley than I thought. But now I think it’s because I was intimate with her, and it had been a long time since I had been that way with anyone, and I just…things Cosette told me, how that sort of thing creates a bond. I never really paid much attention to it before. I mean, I always tried to be considerate of the people I was…” He seemed to come to himself then, realizing he was telling all this stuff to another woman, for crying out loud, and was suddenly embarrassed.

“You always thought you were respectful enough,” Christina went on for him. “And now that this bond you made with someone has been so abruptly severed, without your consent, you sort of feel like you’ve been used.”

He shivered. “Yeah,” he said in a small voice. Then, louder, “I sound like such a callous jerk.”

“No, not at all,” Christina reassured him. “I have to admit, I thought that sort of thing only happened to women, but Henry assured me it happened to men, too. Men just…their mind, body, heart connection isn’t as unified as a woman’s is. Our emotions are much easier for us to access. Men compartmentalize better. Generally. I don’t want to be sexist.”

“No, you aren’t wrong. I was the king of compartmentalization. Prided myself on it.”
“So now that you’re feeling that sting…it makes you reconsider. I know. I’ve been there. I think that’s why you’re talking to me.” She smirked at him. “Because I’ve been around the block, too.”

“I don’t mean any disrespect to you, Chrissy,” Tom reassured her. “But Henry is just… and Cosette, despite her mis-steps, she also…”

“I know. A bit holier-than-thou, but yes. Both are much better at keeping their legs crossed than either of us.” She gave him a warm smile, reached out and squeezed his wrist, where his hand was still firmly shoved into his pocket. “I’m glad you can talk to me. You needed to talk to someone.”

“So what did you do? When you were…I don’t know…tempted? Conflicted?”

“Prayed,” Christina answered simply. “Lots of it. Lots and lots of it. And I realized I can’t do it. God has to do it.” She shrugged. “Sorry to go all Jesus-freak on you but truth is truth. You can’t save yourself, Tom.”

“So that was it?”

“And I avoided situations where I was going to be tempted,” Christina said. “Some more successfully than others. There was a guy or two that I thought, just once won’t hurt…”

“And you never gave in?”

She snorted. “You’re not my confessor.” But she was still smiling. “Maybe a couple times. But each failure made me realize what I had to do to avoid it again. And I prayed even harder. I remember that it didn’t make me ugly, or bad, or evil. I was a sinner, but I was fighting. It’s when you stop fighting and give in, that’s when you’ve lost the war.”

“I don’t know,” Tom sighed. “It’s not like I have the urge to run out and screw the first woman I see. I didn’t have that, even then. But I was always open to possibilities. And now that that attitude has shifted, I don’t quite know what to make of myself.” He blushed. “I’m talking too freely, I’m sorry.”

“See? Would you have thought twice three years ago? Two? To be vulgar around a woman?” she challenged him.

“I…” he considered it. Maybe not. He always tried to be genteel. Respectful. But in private company, when he let down his guard…of course, he had always, on some level, considered Christina to be special.

“This why you came to talk to me. Not Henry or…well. Certainly not Cosette.” Tom detected a hard note to her voice, but before he could say anything, she went on. “Look, you’ll probably kick this notion out of hand but I want you to consider it. I know you aren’t Catholic, but I think that maybe you should talk to Fr. Francis.”

“Fr. Francis?” Tom echoed. “Cosette’s Fr. Francis?”

“Hey, he isn’t just hers,” Christina mockingly snapped. “He’s been a good friend to me, too. Helped me during my rough patches. He’s a fantastic listener. I know you probably won’t go because you’re not Catholic and have this idea that only Catholics can go talk to the priest, but I really think it might help. He’s not sparkly-new either,” she added, with a raised eyebrow.

“I’ll think about it,” Tom promised. “Hey, one more thing, though.”

“Yeah?”
“You shouldn’t be so hard on your sister.”

Christina rolled her eyes. “I’m not—“

“Christina,” Tom said, a bit more sharply. They both came to a stop, facing each other. She seemed to shrink a bit under his scrutinizing gaze. “I know you were rooting for me. I’m sorry it didn’t work out, more than you know, sweetie. But it isn’t going to happen. And you can’t resent her for that.”

“I don’t, that isn’t it,” Christina protested, although it was weak. “I just…I don’t know, when you two were together, when you made it work…when you put aside all the bullshit—“

“It wasn’t bullshit that pulled us apart, and you know it.”

“But that’s your history. It’s a history of failure, yes, and you’re only now coming to realize that. But it isn’t your present, or your future.”

“No.” He didn’t want it to be, certainly.

“And I just never felt she gave the two of you a fair chance.”

“Well…she did.”

She looked at him. Her eyes were not the violet that Cosette possessed, but there was a similarity there, in the deep blue. The same penetrating gaze. “I’m sorry, Tom. But I do believe, deep down, that you two are meant to be. But I’ll respect your wishes. I’ll let it go.”

“It’s not me you have to promise,” Tom said. “Cosette can dish it out, but she can’t take it…like so many of us, truthfully. She can’t take your judgment, Chrissy. She needs to know that you’re on her side.”

“I am.”

“If she’s not talking to you, then she’s not convinced. Convince her, and then, maybe, she’ll talk to you again.”

“I think she doesn’t talk to me because she ashamed,” Christina muttered.

“Well, she doesn’t have any reason to be. And you have to make her realize that.” He didn’t want to think about the implications of that shame. He shoved it away, deciding to forget he heard it.

“Okay, I’ll be more careful. But you go talk to Fr. Francis. And Henry, too – trust me, he’s not as perfect as you think. He’s not going to be scandalized or offended by you being human. He’s enormously compassionate.”

“I know. That’s why I’ve leaned on him as hard as I have,” Tom agreed. “Okay, this stays between us.”

She winked at him as they approached the house. The minute they stepped through the door, the familiar scent of mint reached Tom’s nose.

“Those smell like Mom’s mint brownies,” Christina murmured.

“Hey guys!” Henry greeted, coming into the main room. “Chrissy, did you tell him?”

“Tell him what—oh, I forgot!” she clapped her hands against her cheeks. “Tom, we stopped by that
“theater, what is it called? The Donmar? They had some tickets available for tomorrow night for that play you wanted to see.”

“What play---did I tell you about that?” Tom asked. “I thought I told Cosette.”

“It was her idea to get the tickets,” Christina said. She gave him a pointed look before she and Henry headed off to their room.

Tom wandered into the kitchen. His mother was tiding up. And sitting on the counter were those mint brownies that Isabella would make him if he asked nicely. His favorite item of her baked goods.

“Mum, where did those come from?” he asked.

“Oh, Cosette made them,” Diana said. “Hope you don’t mind.”

“Da-da! Da-da! Da-da!” came Beatrice’s bleat of greeting, storming into the kitchen. “Bow-nee!” She pointed.

Tom scooped up his daughter. It was the first time in a few days that she had come running to him for attention. And of course, he couldn’t resist picking up a brownie. He offered her a bite, which she took, eagerly, getting a considerable chunk of it, and then he stuffed nearly half of what was left into his mouth.
One Year, Ten Months Later

Chapter Summary

A familiar face returns to Cosette's life; Beatrice makes an adorable fairy for Halloween; Tom deals with jealousy and the premiere of his new movie, Sandman.

Chapter Notes

HAPPY EASTER!!!! HE IS RISEN, ALLELUIA!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

October was one of Cosette’s favorite months. The usually relentlessly hot weather of LA eased back a bit, giving them nice sunny days and cool winds to keep it around 70 degrees. Sometimes, it could get hot again, but not too bad and never for too long. Halloween loomed around the corner and the students’ excitement slowly became evident. Even the older middle schoolers, although they played it off, looked forward to the holiday, as at this age they could start throwing their own parties and get together in big groups to go trick or treat.

Things had started much smoother this year, Cosette noticed as she began to wrap up grades for the first quarter. She had either gotten her groove back as an educator or her general disposition had improved.

Of course, she suspected why she was in such a good mood, but she wasn’t ready to admit it yet. It was too soon to tell.

She clicked on Pintrest and looked through the costume ideas for Beatrice. Two months outside her second birthday, she was still a bit too young to fully appreciate getting dressed up and going trick or treat, but she was a good natured and relatively easy going little girl and had little issue cooperating with her mother. Cosette wanted to dress her up as a fairy, put little wings on her back and make her sparkle. Tom loved the idea, as there were fairies in his upcoming movie Sandman, which was being released on October 31st – although they were not the Tinkerbell variety. For Beatrice’s first Halloween, Cosette had dressed her like an Easter egg. A pumpkin and a green M&M had been her other choices, but she always wound up going toward the more colorful option.

Beatrice seemed to favorite the colors blue and green. And she loved things that sparkled. She had been enamored of the fairy wings Christina had bought her on a whim and Cosette was going to make the most of it while it lasted.

“Hello,” came a familiar voice from her doorway. Cosette looked up from her desk and saw him standing just inside her room.

Joseph.

“Hello,” she returned with a shy little smile. She would have asked him, a month ago, if he’d come to get Hugo, but of course he’d come to get Hugo. He tried to pick up his son himself every chance
he had, but there were plenty of days when his work ran longer than the afterschool daycare service, and Grandma was the one who had to scoop up the newly minted kindergartener.

She couldn’t help but feel those butterflies in her stomach, knowing he had stopped specifically to see her, to talk to her, before going to check out his son, when that first day of school in August, he had hardly been able to look at her steadily, let alone speak to her.

When she had seen him, that hot August morning, as the students were all being dropped off or walked in for the very first day of a brand-new school year, she was sure she was imagining things. Either that or it was just someone who looked like him. She let him go past, and at the very last minute, before he went into the building to take the little boy beside him to the classroom – as all the new parents did when it was their child’s first day for kindergarten – he glanced up at her and did a double take. Then, he gave her an awkward little wave and grin, which she returned. And that was it.

That afternoon, he walked in to pick Hugo up. All the kindergarteners were gathered over by the picnic tables, with their teacher and two aides, making sure everybody went home with the right parent. Hugo was easy for her to pick out – he had his dad’s very dark, curly hair. Joseph had shaved the goatee he used to sport, and had let the hair on top of his head grow out into thicker, glossier curls. They were both wearing white shirts and dark pants – although Hugo’s was the school’s traditional polo and Joseph was in a dress shirt. It was apparent that Hugo had made friends on his first day, and was animatedly talking with them, and wasn’t quite ready to party company to join his father yet. There were many parents around Carrie, the kindergarten teacher, asking about their child’s first day, and Joseph was obviously far down the line.

He turned, and looked at her. She didn’t see it at first, as she was busy monitoring cars, opening and closing doors. But as she turned back from helping a first grader get into his mother’s car, she caught sight of him, watching her, and they exchanged a little grin.

Slowly, he walked toward her. “Hi,” he said, attempting to be casual.

“Good to see you,” she said in reply. “I assume that’s Hugo?”

He glanced toward his son. “Yeah, just turned six. Starting kinder. We had him at a local preschool but…well, time to move into the big leagues.”

“You won’t be sorry. Carrie is fantastic.”

“I forgot that you worked here,” he said, a bit lamely. “I mean, you weren’t working when…when I was working with…well, you know what I mean.”

“I know.” She couldn’t help but find his awkwardness a bit adorable. Even if he had totally blown her off the last time she’d seen him. “This is my second year back.”

“And your daughter, Beatrice? How is she?”

“She’s good. With her nanny, at least for another hour. Isaac, who replaced you, will be coming by to pick me up when I call, want me to tell him you said hello?”

“Sure.” He shuffled. “I don’t, uh…I don’t work for that company anymore. I wound up getting an offer for an exclusive contract a few months ago. More routine, less excitement. Which is a good thing, ultimately.”

“Oh.” A student came rushing up to her, frantic about a homework assignment. Cosette had to turn away to deal with it – it was the first day, after all, and sixth graders were always overwhelmed.
When she turned back, Joseph had managed to get Hugo away from his friends and the two were holding hands.

“Hello Hugo!” Cosette greeted as they approached her. “Did you have a fun day at school today?”

Hugo gave her an enthusiastic nod of his head.

“Hugo, this is Miss Mitchells. She teaches the middle school. The big kids. You have a while to go before she becomes your teacher.”

“Hello,” the little boy said.

“Well, I promised him hot dogs if he made it through the whole school day. He was a bit nervous this morning. It was wonderful to see you.”

“You too. Don’t be a stranger.”

“I’m sure I’ll see you again soon,” Joseph said. The two left through the main gate, Hugo waving to her from behind.

In the following weeks, their conversations got easier. Sometimes a grey-haired older woman would come pick Hugo up, and Cosette learned it was his grandmother—Joseph’s mother, as his mother-in-law had passed away before he’d even met his wife. Sometimes Hugo would go to daycare after school, and Joseph would come pick him up – and stop in her room along the way to say hello.

That was when he found out about Tom.

“I hope you don’t think I’m being invasive,” he said one afternoon, as the sun was coming in through her windows as it did at that time of year, “but I can’t help but notice that you’re not wearing…a ring.”

“No,” she said.

“I don’t want to assume, but I’ve heard that things with Tom…didn’t work out.”

“No,” she said with a shake of her head.

“May I ask why?”

She shrugged. “Too different in our basic core values. Some things just aren’t negotiable.” It was starting to sound like a recording, the way she kept having to say it.

“When I saw you last, I thought you two were still together,” he confessed. “Or had gotten back together. I did follow the gossip for a bit, but I knew it was just gossip so I made myself stop paying attention.” He sighed. “Sorry, I wasn’t very friendly to you that night.”

“You were fine,” she reassured him. Then, she motioned for him to sit down. “There was something I wanted to ask you, though. They told me that… I mean, the agency told me that you requested a reassignment because… because you had…”

“Feelings for you?” Joseph supplied with a bashful smile. “Yes, that was true. It was company policy. I had to support Hugo, and things were chaotic, and you were going through something with Tom…it was for the best.”

She nodded. “Well, I was sorry to see you go. I enjoyed our time together.” Yeah, that didn’t sound
then, suddenly, she felt a strange sensation throughout her body – almost like panic. she shouldn’t be doing this. she couldn’t get involved with him, could she? she hadn’t been with anyone since tom, and even before him, her dating history had been scarce. her father always said she was too picky.

“I thought of telling you what I was going to do before I did it,” joseph said. “I just…I couldn’t imagine that conversation. I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable. I’m sorry I disappeared so abruptly, though. I just felt it was the best thing at the time.”

“I understand.”

“Okay, well…I need to go get hugo. although he won’t be happy to see me if jamie is there, they’ve become best friends and hugo always asks if he can go to after school because jamie is there. I think I’m going to have to arrange a playdate soon. probably his grandmother will take him.”

“Come by any time,” she said as he left.

and he had. at least twice a week, never consistently on the days, but he would come. sometimes briefly, sometimes for longer chats. maybe today was one of those longer chats.

Cosette thought she was making it clear that she was interested, and available, but she couldn’t tell. joseph seemed to hesitate. and she wasn’t even sure of her own feelings, so maybe she was giving him mixed signals. or maybe he was just like most men, and pretty dense. after all, tom could never take a hint. of course, tom had been very clear about what he wanted and had gone straight for it, not letting anyone tell him – not even her – that he couldn’t.

She almost wished – almost – that joseph would be more forward. she got the strong inclination that he still had feelings for her. of course, her own internal struggle wasn’t helping. sometimes she was ready to take matters into her own hands and just ask him out herself, and other times she convinced herself they were just better off as friends.

But she knew what she felt when she saw him. That tingle of excitement…

“I was going to ask you something,” joseph said as he came into the room and sat down in one of the student chairs. “Hugo’s grandmother is in the choir, and she can’t help with trick or treat that night because they have a practice for All Saints Day Mass. I was wondering if you might be willing…if it might be okay with you if we came by your neighborhood and went with you and Beatrice. To go trick or treating.”

“Well,” Cosette said, “I want to say yes, that sounds like so much fun, but…I’m not sure what’s going on that night myself, I mean, who is going to be taking Beatrice trick or treating?” She took a breath and just told him, “I mean, Tom might be there. But I don’t know. And my sister and her husband – well, my sister, mostly, Henry will probably get stuck on candy duty at my house like he did last year. Or if not Giselle will do it – Beatrice’s nanny.” She realized she was rambling. “But of course, you’re welcome to come over no matter what the circumstance.”

“I don’t mind your family being there,” joseph said with one of his big grins. “The more the merrier. Although I don’t think Tom liked me very much.”

“Mmm. Well, he also has a movie coming out and we think he might have to skip the trick or treat that night because he has to be there early to schmooze the reporters. He says he’s going to try to
work something out but…” she shrugged. “I swear that film promoters are worse than drill
sergeants.”

“Isn’t the school having a trunk or treat on Monday night?” Joseph asked.

“Oh, I forgot about that – that’s brilliant!” She lit up in a smile. “That might solve a lot of
problems. Are you going to bring Hugo?”

“Yes, but it isn’t the same as good old fashioned house to house. But if Tom is going to be busy, he
could take Beatrice to that, easily.”

“I’ll run it past him. Thanks, Joseph.” She glanced at the clock. “Actually, I gotta be getting home
to my little trick or treater. Next time you come by, we can decide on a time for Halloween night?”

“Sounds great.”

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movie is important, you could get a franchise out of this. You can’t take chances being late for the premiere.”

“We have to premiere in London, that one is much bigger because Gaiman is from there,” Tom argued, referring to the Sandman creator. “It’s more important that I’m there for that one, and it’s even a week earlier. People will understand that I wanted to take my daughter trick or treating.”

She sighed. “It’s a bad idea. Luke will back me up on this. You’ll still get to see her in costume, you’ll get to hear her say ‘trick or treat’ and hear everyone fawn over how adorable she is. It just won’t be in this neighborhood!”

“And you want me attracting a bunch of attention at your school?”

“Maybe there will be a cute single mom you can ask out,” she said, half-teasing.

Tom grumbled. That was the last thing he wanted. “Maybe you just want to find a cute single dad.”

She gave a startled little laugh, and then sobered. “Actually…”

Tom felt every single hair on his arms raise up. Something about her tone…”What?”

“I wanted to tell you, but I was…well, there isn’t anything going on, but I thought you should know. Do you remember Joseph?”

An image blazed into Tom’s mind. Cosette and that agent, sitting at her kitchen table, big smiles on their faces, having just been sharing some private joke. And when he walked in, those smiles vanishing. Instantly. As if they’d been caught.

He shook it from his brain. “Yes, the agent who quit because he had feelings for you. What about him?”

“His son is in kinder at my school. He and I have been…renewing our friendship.”

This wasn’t what he needed. Not when he was this grumpy and stressed. “Has he asked you out?”

“No, but he did ask if he could bring his son Hugo over here on Halloween. He’s also going to be at the trunk or treat. So you’ll get to see him either way. Nothing has happened, he hasn’t asked me out, and I haven’t asked him out, but…well. I just wanted you to know.”

Tom looked at her. He knew how he should react. After all, he hadn’t given her the same courtesy of letting her know that he was starting a flirtation with a fellow actress. He hadn’t said a word about Ashley until they were regularly seeing each other. And here she was, just wanting him to know that someone who had liked her was back in her life, and that she might like him back.

And all he could feel was the acid in his stomach.

“Okay,” he said, and that word took enormous control and effort. “Well…thank you.”

She nodded with a little smile. “When is your flight back to London? Will you see Diana at any point or is it going to be too fast?”

His mother? What did she…”Why do you ask?”

“I was wondering if you could take something for me. But it’s okay if you can’t. I can always ship it.”
“What is it you want me to take?”

“A scrapbook of the London trip this summer,” Cosette said. “I mean, I could just send Diana the digital photos but she loves it when I arrange them, and I have to admit, scrapbooking has been a nice way to distract myself.”

He wanted to ask, from what, but didn’t. All he could seem to think about was a tall, dark haired man that Beatrice was going to wind up calling Daddy, and seeing much more than him because he was away all the time. But Tom made himself dismiss these thoughts. It was too soon to tell and he had no right…

“He wanted to ask, from what, but didn’t. All he could seem to think about was a tall, dark haired man that Beatrice was going to wind up calling Daddy, and seeing much more than him because he was away all the time. But Tom made himself dismiss these thoughts. It was too soon to tell and he had no right…”

“Can I see it?” he asked.

“Sure.” She went into the dining room. Tom followed. He’d eaten in this room a fair number of times, but had never quite noticed how old the furniture had gotten. The backs of the dining room chairs were broken in some places, nothing that made the chair useless but definitely didn’t add to the decor. And under his feet, the carpet was a bit threadbare, looking worn in some places. He glanced around her, toward the living room furniture. It was in relatively good shape, but had it been there since her grandmother had passed?

“She scoffed. “And who has the time – or money – for that?” She walked up to him and handed him the scrapbook. It was a soft brown leather, thick with parchment-like pages. Tom took it.

“I could help.”

“Why? You’re worried about your daughter being raised in a shabby home?” Her dark eyebrow raised and her eyes flashed at him. Had he just inadvertently stumbled onto a hornet’s nest?

“No, I just want you to be comfortable.”

“We are, Tom. Besides, this furniture has been in this home forever. It doesn’t feel right to replace it. Maybe the dining room chairs could do with restoring, but…no, there just isn’t time right now. Ask me about it during the summer and we’ll see.”

Tom nodded. “My flight is the day after tomorrow. I’ll be back in a week, yeah, I’ll be zipping up to drop in on Mum really quick. I can take this to her.”

“Thank you.” She pecked his cheek.

The days went by quickly for him, after that. Before he knew it, he was on a flight home to London, and Cosette’s scrapbook was in his lap while he stretched his legs in First Class. Always in the front row, because he needed the leg room. He flipped through the pages she had decorated and saw the smiling faces of his mother, his sister, his daughter, and Cosette, Christina and Henry. He had to flinch a little, as some of the shots of him had that look on his face, that tense jaw, that melancholy air, and it made him think of Ashley dumping him, but it didn’t hurt as much now as it had before. It just made him feel…frustrated. Stuck.

“What was he doing wrong? Maybe he should have taken Christina’s advice and called Fr. Francis. Maybe it might have helped to get a fresh perspective. He had hesitated because he wasn’t quite sure what to make of her advice – what does a celibate priest know about relationships? -- but he also knew that Christina hadn’t much heeded his own advice either, as she and Cosette still were more civil to each other than close again.
London went by in a haze. He threw himself into the premiere, and there were so many, many pictures taken of him, Ashley, and Neil Gaiman, along with the other main actors in the show. It was a huge deal, and he and Ashley barely exchanged more than a few words, but their body language had to be relaxed or else people were going to talk about them being bitter exes. Luke had lectured him on that quite clearly. So he kissed Ashley’s cheek and put his arm around her and smiled as wide as he always did, and it all looked like they were good friends.

Which wasn’t entirely wrong. It wasn’t really in Tom’s nature to hold things against people. And Ashley was just protecting herself, he couldn’t blame her for that.

Before long he was back in L.A., having dutifully dropped off the scrapbook off at his mother’s in Suffolk. He missed it during his return journey back, and had to content himself with the dozens upon dozens of pictures stored in his phone and tablet.

There would be more, though. He was sure Cosette was easily going to overload her phone with all the pics she would take, both of the trunk or treat and the main event. Tom would pretty much see it all later.

So when he, Cosette, and Beatrice headed over to the school that Monday night, on the 30th of October, he was in a much better mood than he’d been previously. And not at all nervous about running into Joseph again.

Not at all.

“Maybe we should have done one of these,” Tom mused as he parked the car and walked over to the larger lot with Beatrice – resplendent in her fairy costume, complete with wand and crown – on his shoulders. Cosette walked beside him, a bright smile on her face. She had changed out of her more formal teacher clothes and into a long sleeved t-shirt and jeans. It was a cool evening, not cold, and the time change was coming so the sunlight was precious.

“If we did, someone would have had to stay with it,” she said. “It’s more fun this way. Maybe another year.”

Tom pulled Beatrice from his shoulders and daintily set her down. Cosette bent down and handed Beatrice a blue plastic pumpkin with a strap across the top. It was hollowed out like a bucket, for her to collect her candy. She took it eagerly in both hands, looking into it as if there should already be candy inside.

“What do we say when we ask for candy?”

“Can-dee plee?”

Tom laughed. “Close, baby.”

Cosette said, “Try again. Trick or—“

“Tick or tee!”

“Perfect,” Tom agreed.

They started going around, and Beatrice charmed everyone. More than one mother recognized Tom, and the few middle school girls who had come that night to help pass out candy blushed and stammered when Tom approached. He took selfies with them, but was quick to move on. This night was about Beatrice.
He was admiring the orange Christmas lights that one family managed to string all through their trunk, and showing Beatrice that the skeleton was made of plastic, when he realized Cosette had disappeared. He turned to see her standing with a familiar figure. He waited for Beatrice to be content that the skeleton was in fact a toy before they walked back over to join them. Both Cosette and Joseph glanced up at him, and twin expressions of apprehension flashed across their faces. He had a sickening flash to that awful afternoon, but shook it off quickly. He extended a hand to Joseph.

“Hello, Mr. Hiddleston,” Joseph said.

“Tom,” he corrected. “I know we never got off on the right foot. I’m sorry about that. I hope you’re doing well?”

“Very well.” Joseph glanced around toward a group of kindergarteners who were running like a flock of birds from one trunk to the next. “I would introduce you to my son but he has the candy-craze, I’m afraid!”

“Can-dee!” Beatrice squealed, holding up her bucket.

“That getting heavy, Bebe?” Cosette said. “Want me to take it?” She extended her hand.

“My buck-et!” Beatrice declared, clutching it close.

Tom raised an eyebrow. “Well. I see she’s been indoctrinated quickly.”

“She’s adorable,” Joseph said to Cosette.

“Yes, and she knows it,” Cosette said dryly. “She inherited her movie-star daddy’s blonde curls and big blue eyes.”

Tom almost blushed. “Well, let’s hope she’s not as big of a ham as I am.”

“Rick or tee!” she said, running up to the nearest trunk, which she had already visited. The people didn’t care – she was so adorable they gave her candy again.

“Too late,” Cosette said, smirking at him.

“Ah, well…good to see you Joseph.” Tom gave him a nod and went after his daughter.

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“Buck-ets got a hooooo innit. Buck-et’s got a hoooo innit….”

“What is she singing?” Joseph asked.

Cosette fought not to laugh. The two of them walked behind Beatrice and Hugo, who were holding hands. Joseph had asked his son to take Beatrice up and down the walk, and the two of them made the most adorable pair. While they had met briefly last night, both children had been too caught up in the after-excitement of the trunk or treat to pay much attention to each other. Now, Beatrice kept singing as they walked from house to house, swinging her blue pumpkin bucket gently to the song.

“I think,” Cosette managed, “it’s an old Hank William’s song. My Bucket’s Got A Hole In It. Tom was singing it last night on the way home from the trunk or treat.”

“Tom’s a Hank William’s fan?”
“He played him in a movie,” Cosette explained.

“He did?” Joseph scowled. “How…he’s British, right?”

She laughed. “You should see it. Tom’s actually really good in it. Did all the singing and playing. It was probably one of his best performances.”

“Ah.” He looked away. *Way to go, Cosette, talk about your ex in glowing terms in front of a man you’d like to ask you out. Brilliant.*

Hugo was a very even-keeled little boy, Cosette observed. He had a certain patience that one did not often see in six year olds. He did not walk too fast for Beatrice, and he held her hand gingerly. He seemed to be a bit taken with her, in her little blond curly pig-tails that sparkled with the blue glitter spray Cosette had used to shellac her hair. Every house they went to, they would go together up the walk; Hugo would ring the bell because he was tall enough to reach it, if there wasn’t already somebody on the step, waiting. They would shout “trick or treat!” together, with Beatrice getting clearer with each practice, and then they would dutifully come back down to where Cosette and Joseph waited. Beatrice was always eager to show her mommy what she’d gotten.

“Tomorrow is going to be a fun day,” Cosette bemoaned as they went up to the next house. “We always have to take them first thing in the morning to All Saints Day Mass and they’re usually all riled up from the night before.”

“I’m glad about them going to Mass, though,” Joseph said. “Hugo’s pre-school was Protestant. It was small and easy for us to get to, that’s why we sent him there, but I wanted to be sure to get him a good Catholic education. I’m probably going to come tomorrow morning myself. I’m not needed on shift until noon.”

“Usually they let the parents sit with the kindergarteners,” Cosette offered. “Helps with crowd control.”

“I can imagine. Although Hugo’s always been well behaved at Mass.”

“Beatrice, too. Although she’s a bit of a flirt. She likes to wave at people, smile, play peak-a-boo. Whoever sits behind us at Mass probably doesn’t have an easy time concentrating with her putting on her little show.”

Joseph laughed. “Hugo was like that too when he was really little.” He sighed. “I hope when he gets old enough he wants to be an altar boy.”

“Were you an altar boy?”

“Only for a little while. Once I got into high school I sort of had a bit of a rebellion. Wasn’t until I met Leandra that I started to get back to my roots. She wasn’t into bad-boys. I had to clean up or else she wasn’t going to go out with me.”

“Really? She reformed you?”

“Wasn’t as much to reform as I would have liked,” he laughed. “But yeah, I started going back to church to impress her. Turns out it took. We got married right after college.”

“High school sweethearts. I think you told me that.” She paused, considering. “How long has it been, now?”

“Three years, plus a few months.” He looked at her. “You know, it’s strange, how you adjust to
things. You never get over it, not really. It’s just a hole in your life that you learn to navigate. You learn to build around it, but you never cover it up.”

“That’s…that’s so sad.”

“I thought so too, for a while. But, if you think about it, all great tragedies are like that. Our lives don’t end because of them, we just have to adjust to the new landscape.”

“Mommy! Look!” Beatrice squealed, running up to them. She held a candy bar that was bigger than her hand. “Kitty kat!”

Joseph chuckled. “That’s a full-size candy bar,” he mused. His own son was grinning at him, proudly, showing his own choice, a full-size Reese’s. “Guess these are the high rollers.”

“Kit-Kat,” Cosette said to Beatrice, helping her get it back into her bucket. “Leave it in there until the end of the night, Bebe.” She shook her head as the two went off again. “I try to teach her manners, I swear I do.”

“Trust me, it could be much worse,” Joseph said. “The first time I took Hugo trick or treating, he was grossed out by any candy that was green. He would shout ‘ICK!’ if any green candy went into his bag. I had to really go over that one with him.”

“Green candy? The candy itself or just the wrapper?”

“Usually the candy. Anything green apple got a giant ‘ick’ from him.”

“Green apple is delicious!”

“Thankfully I agree, so I got to eat it. He got over it but I had to warn him if he was rude he wasn’t going to go up to the next house. That changed his tune really quick.”

“Wow, you’re strict,” Cosette teased.

He winked at her. “Well, I am for living.”

“You weren’t that strict with me.”

“I didn’t have to be. And you probably don’t have to be with Beatrice, either. She seems to have inherited more of her mommy’s temperament.”

“Some days,” Cosette sighed. “Although I have a bit of a rep for being strict, too. With the eighth grade, you have to be, or else they’ll run roughshod all over you.”

“From what I’ve seen, you rule more by love than fear,” Joseph said, with a little wink. Cosette felt her cheeks heat up.

“You see the end of the day, when they’re happy to be rid of me,” she said.

“I see the beginning, too, when they’re happy to see you. If I’d had an eighth-grade teacher like you…well, I would have probably had a crush on you.”

She was getting pinker by the minute. He seemed to have embarrassed himself, though, and looked away, but she could still see him smiling.
Usually, Tom relished these opportunities. He wanted the people to see his work. He always hoped, on some level, that it would bring people together. That their shared experience of the film would bring out some shared experience in them, unite them somehow, make them realize that they had more in common than they realized.

But all he could think about tonight was his little girl, running around trick or treating…and Cosette walking beside a man who wasn’t him.

He chastised himself for his feelings. It was unfair. She’d had to tolerate his romance with a co-star, and she had never complained, not once. She had gotten dragged through the mud, and came out smelling like a rose – at least in his eyes. She’d been patient and supportive, both when it was going well, and when it crashed and burned.

She deserved this opportunity. Joseph seemed like a decent man. A fellow Catholic, at the very least, and someone who did the right thing, even when it hurt. He’d removed himself from her presence when it violated the rules, rather than play it to his advantage. He could have stayed, could have easily wooed her and hidden it under the guise of just protecting her, or being a friend, but he hadn’t. He’d walked away.

Tom wondered if he would have been strong enough to do that. He doubted it.

There wasn’t anything to dislike about Joseph, but still…Tom couldn’t help the bitter taste in the back of his mouth. He didn’t have any hopes for a future with her, but the thought of her having a future with someone who wasn’t him…hurt.

As he got out of the car, he heard the swell of the crowd, heard his name being called repeatedly. He smiled, he waved, he paused for all the pictures they wanted. He talked to the reporters, dodged a few hairy questions here and there, and greeted all his co-stars. He didn’t even feel a slight pang when Ashley smiled at him from beside her escort for the evening, a man Tom didn’t recognize.

It was okay, he told himself later as he watched the film. He could do this. It was the right thing to do. Whatever he and Ashley had had, it obviously wasn’t real, if he was more upset about Cosette’s potential dating life than the fact that his ex was three seats away from him on another man’s arm.

The after party was…not terribly interesting. Tom sat and chatted with everyone politely, but at the first opportunity, he headed home. He drove past Cosette’s house, but the lights were off – everyone was obviously asleep, as it was well past midnight. He didn’t want to bother her when she had work tomorrow.

However, he did come by early the next morning as she was getting ready for work, with some Halloween-themed donuts from her favorite bakery.

“So how did it go last night?” he asked as she flitted around the kitchen, getting herself together for work.

“Great,” she chirped, a happy smile on her face. She was in her traditional skirt and heels, although the skirt was not her slim, figure-hugging one, but instead a bit more flouncy, with a purple lacy pattern. “Beatrice got a ton of candy from just our block. Some of the houses were passing out whole candy bars. She’ll have enough chocolate to keep until next Halloween.”

“Or Christmas,” Tom said, “if you let me sneak some of it.” At her look, he shrugged. “She won’t even notice! She’s barely two!”
“She’ll notice, Tom. She laid it all out last night, and counted it.”

“Counted? How far did she get?”

“Fifteen, before she started repeating herself. She watches a lot of Sesame Street.” She looked at the box of donuts. “Damn…you got the peanut butter ones. You know I’m a sucker for those!”

“Yes, I know.” He wanted to ask about Joseph. He knew asking would be…creepy. Or at least prying. “How late did it go?”

“Oh, until about eight. We put on *It’s the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown* when we got back and ate pizza. Henry and Christina were here, too, after they passed out some candy at their own place for a bit. Giselle wound up passing out candy here. Fun was had by all.”

“Good…” The way he said it must have given him away.

“Joseph hasn’t asked me out,” she said, almost as if to reassure him.

“He…he hasn’t?” Tom rubbed the back of his neck, uncomfortable.

“He has invited me to join him at his church on Sunday. He says afterwards he and some friends go out and get some dinner. He usually drops Hugo off at Grandma’s, and gets a couple of hours to just hang out. He asked if I was interested in joining them.”

“What about Beatrice?”

“My parents can take her. Unless you want her, but don’t you have some interviews?”

“I’ll check, but…I don’t know, I’m just surprised he didn’t ask you on an official date.”

“Well…” she sighed. “We did talk about that, a little bit. He hasn’t dated anybody since his wife died, you know. And even when he was with her, they were together from high school. Everything was very carefully chaperoned. Her parents were very, very strict. He could come to the house, eat dinner with them, but they were never left alone.”

“Cosette, you’re grown adults.”

“I know. But he wants to be careful. I mean, it’s not just him, but Hugo is involved, and so is Beatrice. We need to get to know each other. And I don’t blame him for being old-fashioned about it. After all…” she trailed off, not finishing her thought.

Tom flinched. He could almost read her mind. The last guy she’d dated – aka, him – had presented particular problems. Resulting in a child.

“All the better to avoid temptation,” he said out loud.

“He thinks so, and I agree. You know, it’s better than dating, a kind of courtship. And it’s not bad, or wrong. It’s kind of like what Henry did with Christina.” She gazed into space. “Henry would come by my parents’ house a lot. I played chaperone dozens of times, usually at his request. You want to know a person, you have to get to know their family, too.” She smiled at him. “I think it’s kind of sweet.”

Tom nodded. “So, dating, but a different kind of dating.”

“Kind of like a prequel to dating.” She giggled. “A friendship with an established understanding.”
“Da-da!” came Beatrice’s greeting as she shot out of the hallway. Giselle was on her heels. “Donuts!” she chirped at seeing the familiar box.

Tom scooped her up and let her grab a donut from the box. Her favorite – the glazed – was shoved into her mouth almost whole. Or would have been if Beatrice’s mouth had been bigger.

“Good morning, Tom,” Giselle greeted.

“Thank you for coming early, Giselle,” Cosette said as she gathered up her purse and bag. “I appreciate it.”

“You have to go already?” Tom asked, holding Beatrice.

“Parent conference before school,” Cosette said, coming in to kiss Beatrice – and getting a donut-glazed kiss in return. She smiled up at Tom. “I’ll take the donut to work, enjoy it on my break.” She pecked his cheek. “Thank you.”

Tom watched her go. He had to get over this. He’d been carrying this torch for her for too damn long and…why the hell wouldn’t it go out?

Beatrice grabbed his cheek. “Da-da! Watch tee vee wit me?”

That was the best offer he’d had all week.

Chapter End Notes

I tell you, my dream casting for Sandman is Tom as the Morpheus role. Oh well.
Two Years, Two Months Later

Chapter Summary

The gang heads to the annual school fundraiser; Cosette struggles with public image; Tom flirts with Shelly; Joseph brings up a difficult subject.

It had sort of become a tradition, Tom showing up at the big annual fundraiser for Cosette’s school. He was a draw – attendance always went up when he was there, even if they didn’t widely publicize it outside of the church and school population. But it had also allowed the school to upgrade their level of décor. This year, the theme had been “Denim and Diamonds,” and they ran with it. Hard.

The tables were covered with denim tablecloths, and in the center of each was a crystal centerpiece, some of them bearing a resemblance to trees, covered with dangling sparkles. Other tables had varying sculptures, but all of them glittered with the wink of glass, polished plastic, rhinestone, or cubic zirconia. It was tastefully done, with nearly every single seat getting some kind of table prize – either a goodie bag, or a neatly wrapped mini-cake, or a box of sweets. Waiters stood around and some maneuvered the flocks of revelers, each of them carrying trays of champagne in plastic flutes with blueberries floating in the bottom of the bowl, or with tall, shiny, blue bottle of Bud Light. A disco ball dangled in the middle of the wide dance floor they had cleared in the middle of the tables, not active yet but waiting for the right time of the night. The DJ had taken over the stage, where the usually red velvet curtains had been replaced with blue, resplendent with blue Christmas tree lights that spanned in every conceivable direction.

There were treasures to be found wherever you went. In an adjacent room was the silent auction and raffle prizes, where people could either bid on items or take a chance on winning them. The buffet took over one whole wall, not yet ready to be served, but with the silver coverings reflecting the light in patient repose. There was a large table for coffee, tea, and water, although the waiters kept all the water goblets on the tables full. There was a small bar where you could get your Tanqueray and tonic or rum and Coke, for a modest price. And in the far corner, Tom’s current favorite, the “candy bar,” with multi-colored goodies sitting in various shaped jars and containers, not yet open but promising their sweetness later in the evening.

In the silent auction, there was a large spa package, and Tom had put in a bid. Cosette’s birthday was coming up next month and it would be a nice treat for her. He had also bid on a dinner package to Los Angeles’ famous Magic Castle. He was a bit more determined to get that one, as he’d always wanted to go there, and thought it would be nice to bring as many along as he could – it was for a party for ten. With Cosette’s family, plus herself, Beatrice…and yes, he was sure that Joseph and his son Hugo would come along.

The thought bothered him more – and less – than it used to.

Joseph didn’t seem to be into the traditional dating scene. He and Cosette didn’t go out on Friday or Saturday nights. In fact, he and Cosette rarely ever seemed to be alone. Cosette took Beatrice to Mass with her at Joseph’s church on a regular basis, and sometimes Tom tagged along – his reasoning being, if Beatrice was going to be raised in this religion, he wanted to have a clear idea of what it really was. He was always invited to join them for lunch after, an open invitation. At first,
Tom didn’t want much of anything to do with it – he felt that the last thing Cosette needed while trying to get to know the new man in her life was her old one hanging around. He would take Beatrice back to his house and the two of them would spend a lovely afternoon. But right around Christmas, he had broken and gone with them for a few hours, and had seen how friendly everyone was, how there was no pressure, there was only good conversation and people getting to know each other.

It struck him as curious that Joseph never brought Hugo to dinner, instead opting to drop him at his grandmother’s for the afternoon. The only time Beatrice came was when Tom brought her. When he asked Cosette about this, trying very hard to make it clear that he wasn’t accusing anyone of anything, he just wanted to know why, Cosette had pointed out the obvious – children get bored silly listening to a bunch of adults talking. Plus, both she and Joseph were trying to protect their children from getting too attached in case it didn’t work out.

Tom didn’t see how it wasn’t going to work out.

For Cosette’s part, either she or Christina often had dinner at their respective houses on a Saturday evening, and invited anybody who wanted to come. Her parents sometimes joined in, but not always. Raymond’s line was that it was for “young people.” Shelly would come, and of course Joseph, and either Christina or Cosette always invited Tom when he was in town. Tom had hesitated very much with these dinners as well, but realized it was much the same situation as Sunday dinner. It was just about fellowship.

How a man and a woman were supposed to get to know each other in the way Tom was used to getting to know the women he dated, boggled him at first. But soon he realized that that was the point.

“I feel strange about this conversation.” Cosette had said to him one afternoon before he started to attend. It always seemed that these important conversations with her took place in her kitchen, Tom noticed. Usually while she was feeding Beatrice, as it was when the three of them were together, alone, the most. “But I want to make something clear to you, Tom. I don’t ever want you to feel like you’re unwanted around here.”

Tom didn’t reply to this at first. As usual, she always saw through him. Instead, he just considered his fingernails.

“I don’t want to assume anything with you, okay?” she said, pausing in front of him to make sure she had his attention. He raised his eyes to meet hers, feeling shy and uncomfortable. “But it’s important that you know that you are a part of my family. As much as Christina, or Henry, or even my parents. You are a part of us, of all of us, and you are always welcome, whenever or for whatever reason. But I don’t want to force you to be somewhere that makes you uncomfortable.”

He wanted to say that he wasn’t uncomfortable, but that was a bald-faced lie. He was uncomfortable right now. “If you were still with Ashley, or with somebody,” Cosette went on, “she would be invited, too. But I also understand how hard it is to deal with an awkward situation—“

“Does it make you feel awkward, having me there?” he asked, interrupting her.

“No.” Not quite true, detected. He narrowed one eye at her as she corrected, “Only if I think you feel that way. I’m sensitive to your moods, Tom, in case you haven’t been able to tell, or at least I’ve tried to be. It’s important to me that you’re…okay.”

She wanted his approval. He couldn’t not give it. He could tell from minute one how Joseph treated her. Not just that he was affectionate. It was the respect he showed her. Respect on a level
that Tom had never conceived.

So Tom had started attending, making himself get comfortable, even if he didn’t naturally feel that way. He had always been good at adjusting to new situations. He had never let fear drive him away from important things before. And Cosette deeply cared about him, and this meant something to her, and he didn’t want to disappoint her.

And it had paid off.

He would never say that he and Joseph were exactly friends, but they had become friendly over the last months. The turning point had been at Beatrice’s second birthday, where Joseph made it clear – although exactly how, Tom wasn’t quite sure – that Tom was Beatrice’s father, and always would be, no matter what. Joseph didn’t assert himself, didn’t try to wedge his way into places where it was Tom’s rightful place to be. He didn’t get jealous when the three of them had posed for pictures, when Beatrice had run from Mommy to Daddy with a manic glee at the various presents she was given. He even kept a certain amount of distance during the most important moments, such as the singing of happy birthday or the cutting of the cake. There had been no competition, no jealousy, none of the things that men tended to do when there was a woman involved for whom they both had deep feelings.

When Christmas came and separations were inevitable, she and Joseph talked a lot by phone, but Tom never felt he was invading. Even when Cosette took the standard week trip to London with him, to visit Beatrice’s other grandparents, there was no feeling of resentment that she was being dragged away from where she really wanted to be. Although Tom caught snatches of conversations late at night, due to the time difference, and even then, there seemed to be nothing but interest in the other, and the willingness to share.

In mid-January, however, things had shifted. It was his own doing – he was starting rehearsals for a play in London, which he hadn’t been able to do for a few years. It was Shakespeare, one of his deepest passions, and it was a small run of Much Ado, which he had wanted to do forever. It wasn’t on as large a scale as he would have hoped, but the director and the cast were amazing and he was excited to do it, and happy that it was getting the draw it was getting. In some ways, he empathized more with Benedick than ever – the old bachelor, having failed at love so many times that he becomes embittered and desires nothing more than to stay single.

But truthfully, Tom didn’t want to stay single. The urge to find his own partner was getting stronger than ever, so he buried it. He buried it under the one thing he could always trust to stifle it. Work.

Rehearsals had consumed him for the rest of January and nearly all of February, and he had just arrived back in Los Angeles that previous Thursday, wanting to spend his ten days off before final dress rehearsals and preview night -- leading into a three month run -- with his daughter, before all he could do for the following days and weeks was make Skype calls, which would have to be monitored by Giselle while Cosette was at work, also because of the time difference between L.A. and London – a long eight hours. The thought of being away from Beatrice for three whole months – longer, if you counted the final rehearsals and the closing business at the end of the play – gutted him. But this was his life. And he couldn’t sit around and watch Cosette and Joseph get closer and closer, even if Joseph was a damn prince and Tom knew he made Cosette happy.

How a struggle could get better and worse simultaneously, he had no idea. But Tom was good at ignoring things in favor of work that excited him, and he was chomping at the bit to get his portrayal of Benedick out into the world.

While he stood at the bar, considering getting a drink, he saw more and more people entering the
banquet hall. People were dressed in all manner of outfits, but the more common theme he was noticing was women getting dressed up and making their men put on suits for a fancy night out. Generally, dresses in a blue theme with some kind of sparkle around their necks. Mass had been going on in the church before and now that it was over the crowd was making their way over to the hall to start their evening.

Then he caught sight of her. Cosette walked in on Joseph’s arm, taking a glass of champagne while he took the proffered Bud Lite. She wore a royal blue dress that dangled around her knees in three layers of ruffles, made of some shiny fabric that caught the lights. The top was modest, sleeveless with a bit of a V-shape for the neck, but it didn’t reveal any cleavage. Cosette’s sweet hour glass figure didn’t need more dressing than that – it was impossible to hide her high, round breasts or the soft curve of her hips and buttocks. On her neck was some glittering confection made of out whatever it was costume jewelry was made from these days, with a dark blue stone in the middle surrounded by many clear stones that created a feathery pattern. Her earrings dangled in matching shapes.

While he preferred her in purple, it was easy to see that she was dressed to match Joseph, who wore a shiny blue three-piece suit of the same royal blue. The shades were not identical but close enough, his deeper, hers brighter. And Tom couldn’t help it. He was so jealous in that moment, it had to show on his face. He forced his facial muscles to relax and then smile. Here he was, still lusting after her, after everything. She deserved better than that. She looked so happy, her sister and brother-in-law following behind…

Henry looked over and noticed him first. Christina was also dressed in a shimmering royal blue, the skirt wide and flouncy, skimming past her knees. She beamed at him, but there was something in her eyes…sympathy, most likely. “Didn’t expect you to already be here,” Henry said, shaking his hand. “Are you usually fashionably late?”

Why had he come early? Nervous energy was his own best guess. “Wanted to be sure to get a good table,” Tom said. “Over here.”

Of course, Tom hadn’t had to fight for a good table, Richard had made sure he reserved one, calling Tom a “guest of honor.” Tom never had to pay for his seat at these events, but he also was quite generous in bidding on various auction items as well. When Beatrice got old enough to go to school, however…

“Nice choice,” Henry said. Tom glanced up to see Cosette walking over to him, Joseph behind her. She kissed his cheek and her fingers slipped around the lapel of his jacket, straightening it.

A vicious part of him wanted to slap her hand away.

“Thank you for doing this,” she said. As if it were a favor.

“You know I don’t mind,” he said.

“Yes, but you could be spending your time with your daughter and instead you’re here. It is a sacrifice.”

“Oh, yes, people fawning all over me for the evening is a huge sacrifice,” he said, a bit more loudly than perhaps he might have otherwise, with a distinctly sarcastic laugh. She shrugged one beautiful pale shoulder, her jewelry catching the light and twinkling at him. She wasn’t wearing her particular shade of purple lipstick that night, Tom noticed, instead opting for something redder and more striking.
They settled into their seats at the table. Cosette wound up sitting between him and Joseph, with Henry next to Tom on the other side and Christina at the end. There were still a few seats in front of them, and Cosette wound up snagging Shelly to come and join them when she came in a short while later.

Tom couldn’t help but notice that something seemed off with Christina. Henry, however, seemed to playing go-between for just about everything, making sure she had a drink – although she didn’t drink any alcohol that night – and any food she might want, and going along with her every whim. He hadn’t seen Henry dote on her that much since they first got married. They had just celebrated their second anniversary, and yet they still hadn’t started having children yet, which made Tom curious but he just couldn’t bring himself to ask. He’d known that both wanted children, and lots of them – or as many as God was willing to give. But so far, nothing.

He also caught Cosette giving Christina a few long, concerned looks. She eventually grabbed up both her sister and Shelly so they could go peruse the silent auction. This year, the eighth grade had done a marvelous job decorating an old chair, painting it blue and then designing it with many different Disney characters. He knew Cosette was anxious to see how well it would do. However, all the classroom keepsakes, as they were called, were not in the silent auction, but were going to be put on public auction toward the high point of the evening. That was one of Tom’s jobs – not to be the auctioneer, thank God, but to help bring out the items and encourage bids. It was one of the more fun aspects of the evening for him. He knew he was guilty of being too fond of all that attention, being a show-off for the crowd, but they seemed to love him doing it even more than he did.

That left him with Joseph and Henry at the table, when the women went to shop. “So what are we bidding on tonight?” Henry asked, trying to start a conversation.

“Isn’t the big raffle for a trip to Hawaii?” Joseph asked.

“That’s what it usually is,” Tom agreed.

“I already bought a few raffle books for that from Cosette,” Henry admitted. “It’s for four—“

“Oh, please don’t tell me you’d take her parents with you,” Tom said with a wince. “That totally kills the romance.”

Henry laughed. “Well, two couples are a lot easier. Unless Cosette and Beatrice want to come while you’re off on your run.”

“On your run?” Joseph asked.

“I’m opening a play in London in a few weeks,” Tom explained. “Much Ado About Nothing.”

“Oh, I know that one!” Joseph enthused. “I admit I haven’t seen it performed live before, but I have seen Midsummer Night’s Dream on stage. But I’ve seen Much Ado by Kenneth Branagh and also the one by Joss Whedon…although I didn’t like that one so much.”

Tom was torn between jumping on talking about his dear friend Sir Kenneth, and asking why Joseph didn’t like Joss’ version. He decided to go for the sour before the sweet. “Can I ask why?”

Joseph gave a shrug. “I guess I didn’t like the opening, where it was basically said that the two characters had had a one night stand and he slunk out like a snake. It sort of cheapened the whole thing for me.”

“Well it is implied that the two had a prior relationship,” Tom said.
“Maybe, but it’s just such a modern thing to insert a sexual relationship. Even more to make it a one night stand. It just bothered me. I don’t think the Bard would have appreciated it either.”

“Why do you think that?” Tom kept his voice academic, light and curious.

Joseph gave him a rather sly smile. “Well, I’ve always had a pet theory when it came to Shakespeare.”

Tom was intrigued. And worried. If it was that Marlowe stuff again he was going to have to get up and walk away before he lost his temper. “I’m on the edge of my seat.”

“I always thought Shakespeare was Catholic.”

Tom arched an eyebrow.

“Me too,” Henry said, swigging his beer.

“Huh,” Tom grunted.

“There’s lots of reasons I think it,” Joseph went on, detecting Tom’s skepticism. “I mean, the way he handles everything is very much in line with a lot of Catholic theology.” And he proceeded, for the next half hour, to cite examples.

Which had Tom enthralled.

Cosette wrote her name and a bid on the line. The basket was adorable, filled to the brim with a few different bubble machines a dozen or so different bubble wands, some bubble-shooters and a few other trinkets that she knew Beatrice would love. Plus it had several refill bottles, always a must.

“Tom bid on that spa basket,” Shelly pointed out, a few prizes down.

Cosette shook her head. “Maybe he needs a nice me-day,” she joked.

“I doubt it,” Christina said dryly. “He’ll probably give it to you if he wins.”

“Well we’d better tell him he got outbid,” Shelly said. “I want that basket of chocolate covered strawberries and wine,” she added in a murmur, heading to the bidding sheet.

Cosette glanced at her sister. She was staring at a baby doll, dressed in the school uniform. It was standard at the school auction every year, but the curly dark hair and blue eyes gave it a particular resemblance this year.

“You okay?” Cosette whispered, squeezing Christina’s arm.

Christina let out a sigh. “I’m…” She shook her head, her dark curls fluttering around her shoulders. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not,” Cosette said, not with defiance but with a simple, matter-of-fact tone. “You look gorgeous, and I know you were looking forward to getting all dressed up for tonight and having fun, but you can’t do that because there’s something on your mind. I don’t want to make you talk if you don’t want to, but it’s obvious, Chrissy. And Henry seems to be trying to wrap you in bubble wrap.”
Christina gave a soft, wistful smile as she let her eyes travel over the other items up for bid. “I went to the doctor today.”

Cosette nodded. She knew that something was off with her and Henry and their attempts to have a baby. She knew Christina tracked her fertility through NPF, and knew that she and Henry were still in the honeymoon stage where they could disappear into a bedroom at any given moment. Why Christina was not yet pregnant was a mystery to her, but she felt it was just too intimate an issue to press her on.

“We’ve had several appointments, actually,” her sister went on in a very low voice. “Trying to figure out why I’m not conceiving. They don’t think there’s anything wrong with Henry, and I seem to be ovulating regularly, but…it’s just not happening. And today Dr. Ivery gave me a bunch of research on how weight can affect a woman’s ability to get pregnant.”

Cosette froze for a moment. Christina had always been on the heavy side, but she had never suffered from the insecurity and self-esteem issues that many plus-sized women seemed to have. Cosette had always been a bit more voluptuous and curvy than most other women, but she was of the kind that could only be called chubby at worst. Christina, however, had always tipped the border over into the dreaded f-word -- fat. But as long as she was healthy, which she’d always been, and most of all happy with herself, it was never a problem. And it had never detracted from her ability to attract men, something she’d proven many times over in her younger years.

But for that weight to now be preventing her from having a child – of course that would be upsetting.

“Do you think that’s it?”

“We’ve eliminated so many other things. The only way to know for sure is if I lose weight. But I… I don’t know how, Cozy.”

Cosette felt a smile tugging her lips when she saw Shelly coming back to them, looking concerned at how they were conversing so privately. “Well, Shelly does,” she said, taking in the fact that her friend had lost a considerable amount of weight over the last few years. “You should talk to her.”

Christina turned her head sharply and saw Shelly approach. For a moment, Shelly looked scared, like she had intruded. “What’s going on?” the woman asked. “Everybody okay?”

“Just noticing how great you look,” Christina said.

“Oh.” Shelly blushed. “Yeah, well, it’s taken a bit but I’m almost at my target weight.”

“Are you doing a program, or---”

Shelly nodded enthusiastically. “It’s called Healthy Choices, Healthy Life. You get a free coach and everything. Yes, you have to buy their food, but it’s super effective.” She looked from Cosette to Christina. “You guys interested?”

Cosette shrugged. “I’m not getting any younger and I haven’t exactly been eating that great.”

“What, you’d do it to?” Christina asked.

Cosette put her arm around her sister. “I’d do anything I could to help you, so you could be happy,” she said warmly.

The three went to go sit back down at their table. Cosette noticed that the three men seemed to be engrossed in their conversation, so they moved to the empty seats beside Christina’s seat, with Shelly in the middle, explaining the program.

Henry, sitting on Christina’s other side, was distracted from his conversation with Tom and Joseph – and they were talking about Shakespeare, of course, that was the only thing she could think of that would make Tom that riveted – when he heard about his wife talking about losing weight. “So have you decided to do that?” he asked her quietly.

She squeezed his hand, and their conversation became inaudible to Cosette’s ears. She looked across the table at Tom and Joseph, who still seemed to be talking. Joseph was beside her, and her former empty seat sat between him and Tom, with Tom leaning over her empty chair, his long arm resting over the top, straining the button of his jacket and making the fabric cling to his form much more tightly.

And she felt a very sharp sting.

Tom looked incredible that night. He was wearing his blue suit with the white pinstripes, no tie, with a white shirt underneath it, slightly open at the collar. Something about that suit, the way it hugged his upper body, made him look much more built than he actually was….

Why was she still attracted to him? With the man she was trying to establish a real relationship with sitting right there? It had to be just lust. Lust was strong, powerful, and always deceptive. Cosette tried very hard to live her faith, to be an example, to stay true to her beliefs, and Joseph was the perfect companion for that. So many of their conversations had been centered around that so far. Of course, they’d gotten to know each other – childhoods, personal stories of life changing decisions, the various ups and downs of their lives – but they’d also talked about things Cosette had never really found herself able to get into with the other men she’d dated in the past. No one had ever seemed as passionate about the faith as Joseph was. And next to none of them had ever had his depth of knowledge.

It had been discouraging for him, the dating scene, as he’d told her. So many women were not interested in getting to know someone’s spirit as much as their body. Some women he’d known had seemed relieved that sex wasn’t a condition for their relationship, but even with the few who had made it through the screening process, the relationship had come down to it sooner or later. It was considered a milestone, a turning point, of knowing whether the two of them were physically compatible. They didn’t understand why he didn’t want to sleep with them, thinking that he just didn’t find them attractive – or worse, than he just wasn’t attracted to women in general.

Cosette found this common ground with Joseph so liberating. She confided things to him that she rarely talked about to anyone. He seemed to understand her on a level nobody ever had before.

Her attraction to Joseph was more than just physical. Yes, he was pleasing to look at, with his dark curls and dancing eyes and those lips that sometimes seemed to be perpetually curved into a smirk, or his dark eyebrows that made him smolder at times, when all he was really doing was concentrating. But sitting there, next to Tom…why was she comparing them? Why was she so acutely aware that for all of Joseph’s charms, he still didn’t draw her in the same way Tom did? That he didn’t shine and light up a room the way Tom could, with his laugh and his smile and those eyes that she felt she could just fall into at times.

She was sabotaging herself, she thought. She was trying to ruin a good thing out of some kind of…guilt? Was that it? Guilt over her past, that she wasn’t the pure and delicate snowflake she had idealized herself to be, that she was just as low and base and subject to her body’s urges as anyone else. And Tom – well, he was an actor, and being physically beautiful was a necessity. He was
made to draw attention, it was his profession, a part of who he was. He couldn’t help it. He was a
dream, a fantasy. He always had been, and she was wide awake now.

She reached for her water glass and set it beside her new place setting, and rested her hand on the
table, letting the back of it brush against his. Joseph immediately turned his hand and offered his
palm to her, which she rested her hand in.

“We’ll be back,” Christina said, she and Henry getting up from the table. Cosette slung her other
arm around Shelly.

“Thank you,” she said.

“I’ve wanted to talk to her about it for a while,” Shelly said in a low voice. “But she never seemed
to be unhappy about her weight, so I just kept it to myself.”

“Everyone has their own image of what makes them comfortable,” Cosette agreed. “Chrissy’s
never been uptight on her weight. But there are some…other issues.”

Shelly frowned. “Henry doesn’t seem to be that gung-ho on it,” she noticed.

Cosette shrugged one shoulder. “He loves her for who she is. But men are…well, they’re strange
creatures, they get stuck on a body type, no matter what it is. I don’t think Henry would stop her
from losing weight, he’s not that kind of guy…but he might be worried about other things.”

“Guess they need to figure themselves out,” Shelly said with a little smile. “She can call me
anytime, though, make sure she has my number.” She squeezed Cosette’s hand and then stood up.
“I’m going to go check on my bid.”

“I’ll go with you,” Tom said, rising from his seat. Cosette turned her eyes away for a moment, and
then focused them on Joseph, who was smiling at her.

“Good, you got outbid on something,” Shelly said playfully. Cosette glanced up in time to see Tom
offer Shelly his arm.

“Everything okay?” Joseph asked, glancing toward where Henry and Christina had vacated the
table.

“I think so,” Cosette said. “Or it will be, eventually. What were you and the boys talking about?”

“Shakespeare being Catholic,” Joseph said with that twitch in his lips that Cosette found adorable.

Cosette arched an eyebrow. “Wow. Do tell.” They both laughed. It was a conversation they’d
already had, on and off, many times. “He’s going to be like a dog with a bone on that one now,”
she said, pushing her hair back.

“I recommended a few books to him,” Joseph said.

“He’ll probably read them. All he can do on those long flights between L.A. and London is sleep
and read.”

“Really? I’ve never been able to read in a moving vehicle. No matter how gently it moved.” He
stretched his legs out, scooting his chair out a bit to accommodate himself. He wasn’t as tall as
Tom, but he was a bit more muscular and did need some room. Cosette had a sudden urge to plop
herself down on his lap, but refrained. He might not take to it too well. He hadn’t even kissed her
yet, although he had made it very clear on numerous occasions that he liked her very much and
wanted to explore their relationship and see how it developed into the future. She had no doubt that Joseph was attracted to her, but he was hesitant with physical affection. He would hold her hand easily enough; she had to wonder if they would dance later this evening. They hadn’t had the opportunity dance yet.

“Did you bid on anything?” Joseph asked.

“Just some toys for Beatrice,” Cosette said. She noticed that movement had begun around the silver domes that covered the buffet containers. “I think they’ll be serving dinner soon.”

“Good,” Joseph murmured, rubbing his hands together. Cosette watched him, sensing nervous energy.

“Something up?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed or not, but you and I have gotten a few looks this evening.”

“That’s not us, darling, that’s Tom,” Cosette assured him. “Everyone stares at him.”

“No, it’s been us. Pointed, a few times. I just wonder how it’s being received, a parent dating one of the teachers at his son’s school.” He sighed. “I just don’t want to put you in an awkward position.”

“Well, I did talk to Richard about it before we started seeing each other regularly. He said as long as we weren’t heavy on the PDA, and since Hugo isn’t going to be in my class for at least the next six or so years, it should be fine. There aren’t any rules against a single teacher and a single parent dating. As long as we’re discreet.”

“You did talk to him?” Joseph seemed mildly relieved.

“Sorry. I guess I didn’t bring it up because I didn’t realize you felt self-conscious.”

“I guess I’m more used to being invisible.”

“Well, because of Tom, I’ve had to learn to ignore public attention. It’s not easy, but low-level stuff isn’t too hard to just block out. I guess I just didn’t think about it.” Which wasn’t like her, she realized. She was always highly conscious of image when it came to her job. “I guess because we’ve been so careful and, well…upright about everything I just didn’t think how people might see it.” Oh God, what if they thought he was sleeping with her? She’d had a child out of wedlock with a movie star, for crying out loud, she might have a reputation already – NO, she told herself. She wasn’t going to do that. She had known when she returned to her job that she was going to have to hold her head up high and keep strong, and not let the possible opinions of others get to her. Tom had told her that dozens of times when they were dating, and it seemed more relevant than ever.

Still…she couldn’t bear to see Joseph come under that kind of unfair scrutiny. She didn’t want people to think poorly of him because of Tom…or her.

“If anyone says anything,” she said, leaning toward him, “you need to come tell me right away.”

He looked surprised. “I don’t listen to gossip,” he said firmly.

“When it comes to preserving your reputation, it’s not participating in gossip,” she said. She fingers
twisted together on her lap. “I appreciate your concern about me, Joseph, but I’m actually more concerned about you. I mean, having been with Tom, having had a child with him…I can’t bear people judging you because you’re choosing to be with me, in spite of that.”

He looked at her, the dark line of his brow coming together in that deep, penetrating stare that was almost like a scowl. While Tom’s charm became glaringly apparent when he smiled, Joseph’s came when he was serious. And intense. “If they think that about you,” he said, “it’s because they’re ignorant asses. And I don’t have any time to give those people a single thought.” He reached for her hand, his warm fingers enclosing over hers, which were still on her lap. “I know who you are, Cosette, and you are above reproach. And I would like to make sure it stays that way.”

“Being seen with you could never be a detriment to me,” she said after a long moment, having to work past the lump in her throat.

“I hope not,” he said, his expression mildly sad. “But this does make me realize…there is something we need to talk about. Not tonight, not even this week, but at some point, soon, if we are going to take this to the next level.” At her look, he shifted his eyes toward the silent auction room, and then back to her. “Tom.”

Shelly flitted around the auction room, talking to this parent here or there. She made a second bid on a basket of strawberries that were covered with chocolate, paired with a wine Tom had not heard of – which wasn’t a good thing, considering he had had more than his share of expensive wines. He considered that if Shelly did win that basket, he was going to send her a bottle that would go much better with the fruit and chocolate.

Someone had tried to outbid him on the Magic Castle dinner. He raised it a few hundred dollars, refraining from going up five. He did want that package. And the money was for a good cause.

“I love the Magic Castle,” Shelly said when she saw what he was doing. “You’ll have a blast if you go. The magicians come right to your table, and there are acts going on in different rooms as well.”

“You’ve been?” he asked.

“It’s been ages, a decade or more,” she sighed. “Not easy to get in, though. You have to be a member of some club or get special permission or something, I can’t recall.”

Someone greeted her and she stepped away as Tom went down the tables. He noticed that Cosette had bid on a basket of what looked like bubble-blowing equipment. She’d gotten outbid on it – he put in his own, raising it only a hundred. The spa package had also gotten more bidders, and he’d had to go higher than the thing was worth, but it didn’t bother him.

He glanced up at Shelly, where she was standing and chatting with some parents. When he’d met her, she’d been a lot larger, he realized. She’d apparently lost some weight, and it flattered her enormously. Her cheekbones were more prominent, and he could detect a hint of her clavicles behind the wide collar of her dress. She had her long glossy brown hair pulled up into a bun on the top of her head, showing the line of her neck. He hadn’t really seen before that she was attractive.

*Because you’re a shallow man who only pays attention to women who interest your cock,* a nasty voice inside him said. He shook himself, smiled and greeted a small group that was passing by him, shy at being in the presence of the movie star. He recognized a few school board members and names popped into his head, and he made small talk with them for a few minutes, until Shelly…
wandered back.

“I think they’re about to serve dinner,” she said. “We should come back before the auction closes. Or at least you should,” she added with a smirk. “I can’t go much higher on my bid.”

Tom made a mental note to send some chocolate covered strawberries with that wine.

It was ridiculous. He couldn’t date Shelly. She was Cosette’s good friend, and for a long time she hadn’t been able to stand him.

_She’s too good for you_, that nasty voice spoke up again.

They went back to the table, and soon the buffet was open, and the prime tables were invited to go first. Tom held back, even though Richard came by and told him to go on and get some food, but instead deciding to wait for the rest of his table and not wanting to embarrass any of them.

Dinner was excellent, he had to admit. The candy bar opened up shortly after and he managed to pocket a few gold-wrapped chocolate horse-shoes. He attempted to give one to Shelly, but she refused it, saying she couldn’t have it. Although he did see her sneak one of the pecan bars from the dessert bar that was set up after the buffet had been decimated.

After dinner was dancing. They were doing country line dancing, and all the women at his table went to join in. He couldn’t quite help himself, even though he wasn’t a country line dancing fan, and went to join them, earning himself the honorary spot in the middle, surrounded by women in fancy dress with their legs and cleavage occasionally flashing at him.

He wasn’t proud of it, but he did like being the center of attention.

Somehow Cosette and Christina managed to get Henry and Joseph to join them. The fundraiser had advertised that they would be given a proper lesson, and their instructors, a cute little blonde in a black skirt that was a bit too short for a Catholic banquet, and a man about his age who wore his jeans a bit too tightly, were patient and charismatic, and fun was had by all. Then the line dancing broke up to couple dancing, and Tom snagged Shelly’s hand as she went past him, heading back to her table.

She seemed surprised, and not a little uncomfortable. As much as he liked playing the ham, Tom hated it when people were intimidated by him, and did his best to put her at ease. He noticed that Cosette and Joseph were maintaining a certain level of distance as they danced – Tom had always been taught the couple dancing, with the man’s thigh wedged between the woman’s legs, and while he was never obscene about it, it seemed that wasn’t the polite thing to do with Shelly. Instead he kept a few inches between her hips and his, but his long arms were able enough to guide her.

“You know we’re going to pass you around like a joint at a high school bonfire,” Shelly teased him as she slowly eased into his lead.

“That’s usually par for the course on this night,” he replied with one of his smiles.

She did trade him off to a fellow teacher, and from there he went to a school board member, and he went with it as he always did. He felt like he was somewhat of a co-host at this point, even when the elderly ladies blushed under his compliments and left small smudges of their lipstick on his cheek. Eventually, though, he was called away to start bringing out the live auction items.

The high point of the evening was the Jenga game that one of the classes had created, made much larger than the small traditional size. The students had each designed a brick and then had asked
the teachers and other staff to make one as well. Everyone had their name stenciled on the side, and Tom remembered Cosette bringing him a brick at one point, on which he’d decided to doodle some Loki sketches and a few of his favorite Shakespeare quotes.

With each bid, the person bidding would come up and move a brick. Tom couldn’t help but get caught up in the game. Even though he was just the model for the piece, he would take his turn, even though he suspected he would be awful at this game. The crowd ate it up – eventually the bid got as high as five hundred, which was very high for a classroom keepsake. The Jenga tower wobbled as the final bid was made, and then the other bidder came and toppled the tower over, to everyone’s intense amusement. Tom helped picked up the pieces, laughing the entire way, before the final items were brought out. He had just enough time when it was over to put in the final bids for the silent auction.

Thankfully, the only one he had to fight for was the Magic Castle dinner. He went for five hundred higher this time, determined to end the competition. Then he felt bad – who knew who he was taking it away from? But anyone who had the money to compete against him probably wouldn’t fare too badly…

*Posh little rich boy always gets what he wants.*

He comforted himself in knowing that had been the only thing he wanted for himself, even if he was going to invite everyone else. The other two were going to Cosette and Beatrice. And he was going to send that wine and those strawberries to Shelly, regardless.

They held the two baskets for him, but the Magic Castle tickets went into his pocket. He went back to the table, where Cosette was sitting with Shelly and Henry. Christina was dancing with Joseph, a faster song and a dance that they both seemed to know pretty well as Joseph spun her around the floor. He plopped down beside her.

“I got the tickets to the Magic Castle dinner,” he said, showing them to her. “Maybe this coming Friday, if that doesn’t seem too soon? I’d like to do it before I leave.”

“Congratulations!” Shelly enthused. Cosette took the tickets Tom handed to her, going over them. “This is for ten, Tom,” she said.

“I know. We can bring everyone.” He counted on his fingers. “You, me, Beatrice, your parents (one hand down), Henry, Christina, Joseph can come and bring Hugo, and—“ he gestured to Shelly with his other open hand, “you’re invited, of course.”

Shelly blushed. “Oh, no, Tom, you don’t have to—“

He reached for her hand, which trembled slightly in his. “Please. It’s a party! My birthday was last month and I didn’t get to celebrate with everyone, so I want everyone there, if they can.”

Cosette smiled at him. Damn her for being so beautiful, he thought. “That’s really sweet, Tom.”

He shook his head. “It’s not sweet, it’s all about me.” She laughed, and he laughed with her. “Speaking of being about me, come dance with me.”

Cosette let him take her to the dance floor. He didn’t spin her around quite as hard as Joseph was twirling Christina, although they couldn’t help but make a few catcalls as the whirled past. “I didn’t know he was such a talented dancer,” Tom mused as he tucked Cosette under one arm.

“One of the thing his wife, Leandra, loved to do was take dancing classes,” she explained.
“Ah.” Tom had almost forgotten that Joseph was a widower. He wanted to ask questions, wanted to know how Cosette felt about that, but refrained. It wasn’t his place to press into her relationship.

“Ah?” She gave him that maddening look, her eyebrow raised. “You two have a bit in common, you both love dancing.”

“Mine is organized flailing. He actually has form,” Tom said. But he gave Cosette a light spin anyway, enjoying how the layered ruffles of her skirt flared around her shapely legs. Of course, as the music changed, he did wind up going into his familiar routine, to the cat-calls and chanting of encouragement around him. Cosette laughed as she always did – he knew he could get her to smile by dancing for her, it had never failed him yet.

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Cosette’s feet ached by the time she and Joseph were walking to the car. Behind her, she could hear Henry and Christina whispering to each other and giggling quietly. But Cosette was smiling and happy. It had been a great night.

For the most part.

She didn’t relish really talking to Joseph about Tom. But they’d been building their relationship for the last four months and it was about time to talk more in depth about their romantic pasts. Joseph had never hesitated to share little things about Leandra here and there, but Cosette understood his anxiety about Tom. While it was unfortunate, Leandra had passed on. Having Tom around was a bit like having an ex-husband. He was still there, present in her life and taking an active part.

She didn’t think Joseph was jealous. He hadn’t done anything but smile at her when she was laughing at Tom’s “organized flailing,” as he called it. He had been gracious and gentlemanly, and totally respected Tom’s place as Beatrice’s father. But if this thing between them was going to grow, it was time for more intimate conversation.

And she couldn’t imagine much more intimate conversation than talking about Tom.

Beside her, she felt Joseph’s hand brush hers and she turned her wrist so they could join hands. Henry had driven, and she looked for his familiar Nissan Rogue. As she was turning her head, however, she felt Joseph let go of her hand and slip his arm around her shoulders, bringing her closer to him. She glanced up at him, and he smiled at her, dipping down to press a warm kiss to her cheek.

When they’d been dancing, he’d been absolutely genteel, their hips only lightly brushing every now and again. Cosette had never really liked couple dancing, with the man’s thigh shoved between her legs – she’d done enough weddings with creepy cousins and uncles that seemed to take liberties they had no right to, to put her off that. With Tom, he’d been into more energetic dancing, and their couple dancing had been hindered by a baby swelling her belly.

But now, as she was so close to Joseph, who was still moist with sweat from their earlier exertions, she caught his musky, woody scent. And she felt a zing run through her.

“Tired?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Tom told me about the Magic Castle. He invited me and Hugo. This Friday, right?”

She nodded. “For his belated birthday. Can you come?”
“I’ll trade shifts with someone,” he said. “It was nice of him to think of us.”

“Well, you’re a part of this merry band of misfits now,” she teased. She spotted the Rogue and shifted direction, taking Joseph with her. “You are one of us,” she added in a robotic voice.

He gave a hearty guffaw as they stopped in front of the car. But Cosette heard someone calling her name, and saw Tom with someone trailing behind him, coming over to meet them.

“Tom?” she called back, confused.

“Okay, you wanted this basket of stuff for Beatrice, I assume,” Tom said, gesturing to what his companion held – one of the parent volunteers held the basket of bubble toys, “but I’m going to steal it so she and I can play with it during this week. Hope that’s okay?”

She frowned, playfully. “Well, I want to see her play with some of the bubbles.”

“I’ll make sure,” Tom promised. Then he hoisted the basket into the back of the Rogue, which Henry had just opened. “This is for you. Your spa basket.”

Cosette paused. “Mine?”

“Your birthday is next month and I won’t be here. So have a treat on me. Take Shelly or Christina with you.” He hoisted the basket into the trunk.

“Tom, that’s a two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar spa certificate,” she admonished him.

“I know. I probably could have gotten something better if I had the time, but...sorry, I hope you enjoy it,” he said. “Plus there's some other fun stuff I’m sure you girls will enjoy. It’s smelly.”

Joseph chuckled. Cosette shook her head. “You shouldn’t have. But thank you.”

“No problem.” He swept past her, kissing her through her hair. “I'll see you tomorrow—“

Shelly. He’d mentioned Shelly. He had invited Shelly to the Magic Castle, had danced with Shelly earlier. Cosette let go of Joseph and grabbed Tom’s arm, bringing him up short.

“What?” he asked.

“Tom,” she said, “what’s going on with Shelly?”

He looked embarrassed, and then surprised. “Nothing,” he said. “Why would you think—“

“You were paying her a lot of attention,” Cosette said. “I just want to know.”

His high pale brow started to wrinkle with his scowl. “Did you have a little too much champagne, Cozy? I’m surprised at you, asking me—“

“It’s not about you,” she said, her voice a little high. She calmed herself, closing her eyes for a moment. “You can date whoever you want, I don’t care, it’s not about that at all. I just...she’s not comfortable with you giving her that kind of attention.”

He muttered something that sounded like, “I noticed that.”

“Just...be careful, okay? I know you’re probably just being nice but not everybody can take your level of nice.”
He sighed, shifting on his feet. “Yeah, okay. I wasn’t doing anything, I promise.”

She tip-toed up and kissed his cheek, earning her a slightly mollified look. “Thank you for my birthday present.”

“At least you can handle my level of nice,” he teased before he headed off to his own car.

But a week later, when Tom was back in London and immersed in his play. Shelly told her that he’d sent her a basket of chocolate covered strawberries and a bottle of very nice wine with a note that simply said, “Thank you for a lovely time.” Thankfully, though, that seemed to be the end of it.
Chapter Summary

Tom has a moral crisis; Cosette and Joseph come to an impasse.

Chapter Notes

Apparently Tom and Cosette got jealous at the attention I was giving the other story so they decided to get their acts together. This chapter is unedited and pretty raw -- I haven't had a beta in months so I have no idea if there are serious mistakes. Hope you enjoy!

This hadn’t gone well at all.

Tom stood in the hallway leading backstage. Leslie was ignoring him. He knew why she was ignoring him and he understood it – it was even justifiable. But it bothered him enormously and he was desperate to do something about it.

He caught a bob of bright ginger hair as she flashed through a short series of directions. As Stage Manager, they all depended on her, every single night. She kept things running, and smoothly, and her warmth and control was something they all clung to. But she was distant from him, and it wasn’t really his fault, was it?

It is one’s fault when he finds out a very old friend, who he had never, ever thought of in that particular way, has been carrying a torch for him since pretty much day one?

Leslie had always worked through the London theatre circuit. They were old, old friends, from their Cambridge days. While Tom had been contemplating becoming an actor, she, of their circle, had always been more interested in behind the scenes stuff. She was not one to go on stage and draw attention to herself. She was a backbone. Even among their own group she was the dependable one, the one you went to when you had a jam that needed fixing. She was a problem solver, and the giver of the best advice.

Tragic for those kinds of people, that their own lives never benefitted from it. While she hadn’t
been attached to anyone when he first knew her, he heard while he was in RADA that she’d gotten engaged, and when she’d brought the bloke around to their little group he’d thought the man was an utter sod, but kept his mouth shut, because Leslie seemed so happy with him. He attended her wedding. Even though he hardly ever saw her in the few years she was married, he still perked up when she was mentioned. And then when she finally wised up and divorced that wanker, he was one of the first to welcome her back.

Yet she’d never said a word about her feelings.

They’d run into each other on and off during the years, mostly through group gatherings, which were few and far between. Occasionally, if he had a free day, he’d ring her for lunch and they would catch up, but it was never consistent. He’d been overjoyed when she turned out to be the Stage Manager of this particular production. They got drinks after closing on more than one occasion, and during the run he felt their old friendship renewing, and it was a mild relief to his loneliness, missing Beatrice, and quietly wondering how soon Cosette and Joseph were to getting engaged.

Then it all came out. In a horrific series of misunderstandings and thinking he knew things he didn’t, he realized that Leslie had feelings for him. Beyond friendship. Far, far beyond it. And had done so for nearly the entire fifteen years they had known each other.

Poor Leslie was utterly humiliated. He tried to reassure her, but that was useless. She didn’t want to be reassured. She wanted him to return those feelings, and knew he never would. The sheer blinding pain of someone knowing you love them and not being loved in return was too much for most mortals to bear.

Tom knew. From personal experience.

So now she was distant from him. Gone was her welcoming smile each afternoon when he showed up for his warm-up. Gone was the friendly drink after they closed up, or the conversation that would last way too long in his dressing room as they prepped for the next day. When he dared try to bring her a coffee, she accepted politely but he saw it sit later, stone cold and untouched.

A week had gone by like this and he was at his tipping point. Something had to be done. Before production ended in a few weeks and she vanished, never to see or speak to him again, which he was sure was going to happen.

Tom was not one who could bear much when it came to confrontation. But knowing how much she was hurting, and that he was the cause, prompted him into action.
Leslie was not really his type. She was short and a bit stout, wide framed and freckled. There was a certain adorableness to her cheeks when she smiled, he noticed, and a gleam as she would run her fingers through her reddish-orange hair. Her Irish father had gifted her with his traditional looks, but her English mother had raised her and gifted her with just about everything else, including a posh education. She had a voice like a trumpet when she needed it, but her laugh was lilting and he missed it. She was attractive, in her own way. She wore her hair a bit too short, but those were superficial things.

Maybe he was being unfair about this whole mess.

 Somehow, suddenly finding out that a person has tender feelings for you can make them appear completely changed. When Tom came up to her the evening he decided to ask her if they could talk, he realized how badly he missed her. He realized how sweet and nurturing she really was. And when she looked up at him, he saw how beautiful her green eyes really were.

“Do you need something, Tom?” she asked, and while her voice wasn’t cold, it was clipped and to the point. That kind of polite distance he would expect from a working professional. Although he usually made it a point to be friendlier with all he worked with than this, and it chaffed his pride a little.

“Can we talk for a moment, in private?” he asked.

He had deliberately timed his approach so that it was nearly time for everyone to leave. The stage was clean, costumes and props were put away, and it was almost set to lock up.

“I kind of need to get home as soon as I can,” she said, stalling him.

“Then I’ll go with you. See you to your door, at least.” He knew she took the tube, everyone did, and he had no problems following her home and catching a cab back. “We can talk on the way, or wait until we’re at your house. But we need to talk. I need to talk to you, Leslie,” he added in a softer, pleading tone, which he knew would get to her. No one who claimed to have feelings for him could possibly resist that tone.

She sighed, considering. Then she seemed to resign herself. “All right. I leave in ten minutes. Meet me at the back door and we’ll walk.”
He practically rushed through his close up to make sure he beat her to the door. He was bouncing on his heels when she finally came out, shutting the lights off, everyone else gone except them. “Thank you,” he said. “I know this isn’t easy for—“

“Tom, you have no idea,” she said as she slid the deadbolt into place, her tone so different than the clipped, cool one she’d used a little while ago. It was low and restrained. A voice filled with pain. “Look, you don’t have to apologize to me, you don’t have to explain anything to me, you don’t owe me anything, you don’t.”

She wasn’t angry, but he could hear the hurt. He reached out and took her hand, which was stiff and unresponsive in his grip, and they started to walk down the street. Her fingers wiggled as if looking for a weak point to slip through, but only for a few minutes, until she finally resigned herself to the intimacy. For what felt like a long while, neither of them spoke.

“Leslie,” he finally started, when it was clear she’d said what she wanted to say, and had nothing to add, “I want us to be friends again. You say I don’t owe you anything but I know something’s gone wrong between us and I want to fix it, somehow.”

She looked up at him, her eyes somewhere between baleful and accusing. Then they softened. “It isn’t your fault, Tom,” she said, her tone much more gentle this time. “You can’t help how you feel.”

“But…” he stumbled on his words. He didn’t want to confirm that he didn’t feel that way, but at the same time didn’t want to give false hope. Finally he asked the question. “Why didn’t you ever say anything sooner?”

Her laugh was sharp and bitter. “Please, when? In college, you were surrounded by girls much prettier than me. I didn’t feel like I had a chance. And then when we would run into each other it just…I mean, I figured if you were interested in me you would have said something, done something, you never seemed to hesitate when it came to other girls you liked.”

“Okay, that was then,” he said. “But I’ve been available since this production started.”

“Tom, I’d long since given up any hope.”

It hurt. It hurt for her, it hurt for him. He felt shame, he felt remorse. His hand squeezed more tightly around hers. What could he say to her? He couldn’t say he did like her, that he thought of
her that way…and what he could offer, he knew would feel hollow.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, mostly under his breath. He didn’t know what else to say. “I’m just so sorry…I just don’t… I don’t want us to stop being friends… your friendship is important to me, having you in my life is important to me.”

She pulled her hand away. “I’m really not in your life that much, Tom,” she said. “We barely see each other anymore. And I really hate the idea of you feeling sorry for me.”

“I don’t feel sorry for you, I just feel…I feel awful that this is causing you pain and I want to do something about it.”

“But you can’t.” She faced him with a look. “I have to get over it. Should be easier now.” She shoved her hands into her pockets.

“You’re angry at me.”

“I’m not, I’m angry that you found out,” she said with a sigh. “And yes, I’m angry that… that…” She was going to say it and it was going to bleed like a wound. But somehow she managed to reign it in. “That things are the way they are. But that’s fine. That’s normal. Par for the course.” She sighed again, falling silent for a few minutes before she added, “I suppose I have been punishing you. That isn’t right.”

He couldn’t disagree. But he also knew how selfish he was being. He knew how it would only hurt to still be around, how she needed to heal. It wasn’t fair to expect her to suffer just so he wouldn’t feel guilty. If he was really her friend….

“Look,” he said, “if you don’t want to see me anymore, after the production is done, I promise I’ll stay away. I mean, if we see each other among our mutual friends, I suppose that can’t be helped, but I won’t call you, I won’t try to… to stay friends, if that’s what you want.”

More silence. She seemed to be considering it. He wondered if she felt the same way for him that he felt about Cosette. About how the thought of not seeing her anymore would gut him, even if it meant he could see Beatrice all he wanted. Staying away from Cosette was the last thing he wanted, even if she wasn’t ever going to be his again.
From the waver in her voice, he could hear that Leslie understood that feeling. “I don’t think I want that, either.”

He saw her to the tube, where she insisted that he go home, that it wasn’t safe for a “celebrity of his caliber” to be wandering the streets of London at this time of night, and that she would talk to him tomorrow. She promised him that she would be fine, and that they would actually talk tomorrow, not just the polite little exchanges they’d been enduring.

That was when the weirdness started.

He started thinking about her a lot. A lot, a lot.

He started to see things he hadn’t seen before. He started to recall conversations that they’d had and found himself looking forward to seeing her even more than he ever had before. He told himself at first that he was imagining things – why suddenly be attracted to a woman he’d known for a decade and a half, after finding out she was in love with him? It was bizarre. Maybe he was making it up, trying to overcompensate.

Yet he couldn’t shake it.

It wasn’t, however, that he was falling in love with her. He knew that much. He knew what that felt like, and this wasn’t it. It was something else, something more primal.

He wanted her.

It was utterly fucked up, he told himself. He was experiencing lust because, quite frankly, he’d felt rather neglected for some time. He had never been one to actively seek a relationship before, as the amount of attention he usually received was enough to keep him satisfied. But he was not that man anymore. Gone were the days of casual sex and empty flirtations.

And this woman loved him. Loved him for years. Knew him when he was nothing, watched him grow, understood on him levels that maybe even Cosette didn’t.

There was a strong appeal in that.
Yet he knew with certainty that he didn’t return it. He didn’t love Leslie. Yet he was now attracted to her. Why couldn’t something come from that?

But was it fair to do that to her? To take that chance? To see if it worked? Her feelings were too entrenched in her, for him, and if it failed, it would…

He couldn’t begin to think about the pain that would cause. And he couldn’t approach her fairly under that kind of pressure. He couldn’t know, each day, that ending whatever they might start would break her heart. If they were on even ground, if it was something they were exploring together, that was fine, it was a risk, yes, but an even risk to both. The way she was – the risk to her was almost too much to bear, because he couldn’t be sure. He couldn’t be sure he would ever return her feelings.

Yet the thought continued to taunt him. Day and night, whenever he saw her. Her smile brightened a bit, and there was something approaching normalcy in her voice when they would talk. He wanted to ask her for a drink, he wanted them to sit down and talk like the old friends they had been. But he knew it was still delicate – he could tell by the look she would sometimes give him when she didn’t think he was looking.

He couldn’t bring himself to do it.

Closing night came. The cast party was huge. He wasn’t much for drinking heavily anymore, and she had never been, so they were a bit of an oasis to each other among a sea of drunk people. She had a bit more than maybe she should have, though, and Tom offered to see her home.

“So when are you going back to Los Angeles?” she asked him as she let them into her apartment.

“A few weeks,” Tom replied. He hesitated in the doorway. “Are you going to be all right?”

“Please come in, Tom,” she said, sweetly. “I’m hardly going to see you once tonight is over and I’d like just a little bit longer, if that’s okay.”

Cautiously, he entered, walking through the hallway and entering the snug, cozy little living room. The couch was inviting, and covered with pillows, so he made himself comfortable. She flitted around for a few minutes. “Something to drink? I have some ginger ale,” she offered.
“That’s fine,” Tom said. “You should drink some water.”

“I’m okay. I think the walk got rid of the buzz,” she said, coming into the living room and flouncing down in the corner. Not too close to him, but turned so she was facing him. “How is Beatrice doing?”

“Very well. Chattering like a squirrel. Cosette says she takes after me.”

“Mmm.” He couldn’t help but notice how Leslie’s face closed a bit when Cosette was mentioned. “And she’s still dating that guy…Joseph?”

“Yeah. Not heard too much about it, though…Cosette’s usually at work when I call to talk to Bebe so we’ve only had a few conversations over the weekend and they’re usually about Beatrice.”

She chuckled. “You’ve got to be excited about getting to see her again…Beatrice,” Leslie corrected quickly. “I mean, it can’t have been easy, being away this long.”

They’d talked about that, a few times. “Well, it’s part of the sacrifice of the job,” Tom said.

“I always liked being local. Being able to go home at night,” she said. “I never had your high sense of adventure. And London is a fantastic place for it, all the theatres here.”


“I’ve no desire to live across the pond. I’m firmly entrenched. But…I shall miss you.”

They stared at each other. How exactly it happened, Tom was not quite sure. He didn’t know if she moved toward him first, or if he went for her. But they were kissing. Kissing passionately for several minutes. His hands discovered she was soft and yielding against him, and he felt her fingers brushing against ribs and stomach.

He let it go on too long. It felt good, that physical intimacy with someone, that passionate connecting. He could feel her tenderness toward him in how she touched him, how she murmured against his neck, caressed his hair. He was partially disoriented, lost in the euphoria he hadn’t
gotten to experience in a long time. Or at least it felt like a long time. It hadn’t really been that long, had it?

Her moan when his hand kneaded her breast was what brought him back to himself. He had to control himself, not push her away, but he did stop. He moved his hand to her shoulder and applied a gentle amount of pressure.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, her eyes hazy with lust as she looked up at him.

“This is wrong,” he said. “We can’t do this.”

“Why not? Why’s it wrong?” she whimpered.

“Leslie,” he tried, but her face clouded, the flush from heat quickly turning into embarrassment and shame.

“Oh…oh God…it’s me, I know it’s me. I don’t know what happened, I didn’t mean to throw myself at you like that…” She scrambled to put more space between them.

He stopped her. “You didn’t,” Tom reassured her. “I…I initiated it as much as you did.”

“Oh…okay,” she stammered. Then a sharp, borderline angry confusion started to set itself in her brow. “Then what is it? Did I do something wrong?”

“No, you didn’t.” He put a bit more distance between them, trying to breathe and clear his head. It wasn’t so easy to put things back in the box once they’d gotten out. “I just…I don’t think this is right. I mean, you have feelings for me---”

“And you don’t have feelings for me,” she shot back, wounded.

“It’s not that!” he said a bit more forcefully. “I mean, I care a lot about you Leslie…and I know that sounds hollow, compared to what you’ve been feeling.”
“You care about me but you don’t want me,” she whispered.

“That isn’t true, actually. I…” Oh hell, he’d gone and done it now.

“So you do want me?”

“It’s hard to explain, but…you are attractive, Leslie. And I’ve been thinking about you, but…but it isn’t love.”

“No…but it may be the closest thing I ever get to it.”

“Don’t say that—“

“Why not? Are you suddenly going to fall in love with me? You’re still stuck on your baby-mama —“ (it took considerable effort not to snap at her for calling Cosette that) “—and I obviously haven’t been able to move on, no matter how hard I try. What would be the harm? You want me, I want you.” She slid closer. “It’s okay, Tom. I want this. You don’t have to worry about hurting me, I can take the consequences.”

And then Cosette’s voice was in his head, as clearly as if she were beside him. “A true gentleman respects a woman, even if she doesn’t respect herself.”

He understood. He knew he had vaguely understood before but now it was so obvious it was painful. He felt monumentally stupid. He felt embarrassed and he wanted to run, he wanted to hide.

*That night. That night Cosette had come out of her room in that tank top and those shorts and had straddled his lap as he reclined on her couch, that devilish smile on her face, letting him touch her and kiss her and move her into the position he had been dreaming of having her in for the entire time he’d known her. That night he had failed that test, horribly. Everything that had happened in the interim had been what, punishment? Was this his chance now, to do the right thing?*

It was so clear how painful this was for Leslie. She’d wanted him for so long. For him to even have initiated or gone along with her initiating this intimacy was…how could he stop now? How could he reject her now?
He had to. He couldn’t do this. Some voice in his head was awake and screaming at him to stop or it would never let him live with himself if he did this.

“But maybe I can’t,” Tom said. “I can’t do that to you. I can’t know that I’m responsible for that.”

Now the anger in her face was much clearer. “So you’re going to reject me, humiliate me like this? How is that better?”

It wasn’t better. “I’m so sorry, Leslie, I should never—“

“But you did. You did and now you…God, you’re such an asshole.” She was dissolving, tears starting to stream, her body withdrawing from him, her friendship withdrawing, her hands going to her hair and the sweat making it stand nearly on end. “Get…get out, you…you mother-fucker, you…get the fuck out! Out!”

She stood up as she shrieked, grabbing the pillow on the end of the couch and swiping him with it. It may as well have been a brand of fire. He winced, got up, tried to assume the least threatening post he could think of, but for a man over six feet it wasn’t easy. His hands were out in defense but she wasn’t coming at him, instead she retreated to the other side of the couch toward the bathroom and shut the door.

Tom stood there for a long moment, stunned. He could hear vague thumping coming from the other side, could hear her sobbing. A loud thunk every now and again made him think maybe she was kicking something.

He couldn’t leave. He couldn’t leave her like this.

He walked to the door and gently knocked, and it flew open, her face a blotchy red mess, streaked with tears and snot, her teeth bared like some animal.

“Why the fuck are you still here? You want to watch me fall apart? Get out, Tom! GET OUT!”

A pounding coming from one of the walls let him know the neighbors were listening and not happy with the noise. Not wanting to be called in for a domestic disturbance, Tom did the only thing he knew might possibly make her calm down.
He left.

He grappled with his phone as he walked down the street toward the tube. There had to be someone nearby…he texted the one person he knew what closest to Leslie, which turned out to be Sue, of all people, and asked her to please check on Leslie, as he had really upset her and didn’t want her left alone.

When he was back at home, Sue sent him a single text. Three words.

You’re an asshole.

He knew.

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“It was better than Joss Whedon’s,” Joseph told her.

“I have to agree, although Clark Gregg was amazing in that version, and Nathan Fillion and Tom Lenk were utterly hilarious.”

They were in the Grove, a popular outdoor mall adjoining the Los Angeles Farmer’s Market. The theater there had just let out playing the broadcast version of Much Ado About Nothing, which had been pre-recorded and was being selectively played in various theaters. Usually she would have to drive out to Irvine for such an event but Joseph had found out it was there. They had enjoyed a delicious lunch at a Greek restaurant just outside the Market, and now were chatting and hanging out in the Market itself, having grabbed some crepes from a local stand.

They were spending more time alone, lately, but usually in public spaces. They’d gone for many walks through the Los Angeles arboretum -- so many times that Cosette was pretty sure some of the peafowl were starting to recognize them – and the Market was their second favorite spot. It had places to sit and drink coffee and chat, not to mention the variety of food. Cosette would always bring back a few sweets for Beatrice and a few goodies from the bakery for Henry, and for her sister, a bag of the roasted nuts.

“I have to tell you, Christina looks really good,” Joseph said as Cosette placed her order for a bag of pistachios.
“I know, that program works fast,” Cosette replied. “She’s lost nearly forty pounds…but quite frankly, I never thought she looked bad.”

“Of course,” Joseph agreed. “I just meant she’s been successful.”

She smiled at him. “Sorry. I’m just giving you a hard time. I’ve lost weight, too, you know.”

“Yeah, but you cheat a lot more than she does.”

“Only when she’s not looking.” They shared a chuckle.

It had actually been Joseph’s idea to go see the broadcast. They had talked about Tom, on and off. Mostly casual, as he was a major part of Cosette’s life. Joseph never seemed to be jealous, but there was something underneath it all, something Cosette was sensing but couldn’t quite put her finger on.

She’d told him about how she and Tom had gotten together, and how they’d broken up; how he’d cheated on her, and how she’d been awful and judgmental to him. Not all at once – these conversations took place piecemeal, and always spontaneously, he’d never sat her down and asked for the whole story.

It was a bit of a surprise, then, when Joseph said, “There was something I wanted to talk to you about, though.”

“Oh?”

“About Tom.”

“Okay.”

“Well, I mean, I understand what happened between you, but I’m curious, as you two get along pretty well right now. How did that happen? I mean, what caused the change?”
Cosette drew a breath. “Well, I decided, when Beatrice was born, that I was going to forgive him. I was going to put aside what he did, even though we weren’t going to get back together, because he was Beatrice’s father and I knew he had to be in my life. There wasn’t any point to being resentful.”

“And that was it? It was that easy?”

“No, of course not.” Her voice was terse. Her posture had straightened in her chair, her legs crossed. She knew it was defensive even with Joseph telling her. He was good at reading people, his livelihood depended on it, and he was certainly getting her vibes now. “It wasn’t…I mean, it was kind of like a wiping of the slate. But the condition was no talk of reconciliation. We were done.”

“And he was okay with that?”

“At first,” Cosette said. “He was just happy I was letting him back in. It took some adjusting.”

“He didn’t even try to get you back?”

Cosette frowned. “Why are you concerned about that? I mean,” she shook herself, “I don’t have any secrets from you, Joseph, or at least I don’t want to, you want to know and I’ll tell you, I’m just curious why?”

He looked away, watching some people who were passing by, a family with a few kids, obviously tourists. He rested his head on his hand, his brow set in that way that showed he was puzzling over his own thoughts. “I just…I’m not jealous, Cosette, but it seems you two are very close. I’m not trying to get between you, I’m not, but…I can’t help but feel that there’s something there. Something you’re not telling me. And I can’t move forward with us unless I’m sure that…” he sighed, sitting up, his hands in front of him on the table, motioning toward her. “You and I have been getting closer these last months, but I feel like there’s a wall that I can’t cross. Something…something keeping us from taking the next step. I’m just trying to figure out what it is. I was hoping talking more about Tom, trying to figure out where all that stands, if you’ve even ever thought about it yourself, might help us figure it out.”

Cosette struggled with her patience. She had thought she’d made it clear that she and Tom were not ever going to be together, that she had no intentions of ever going back to him. That he wasn’t a threat to her future with Joseph, and yet it seemed Joseph didn’t quite agree.
“You think Tom is between us?” she asked, her arms wrapped around herself.

“I don’t know. It’s something to do with him. Maybe if I just understood…I mean, you forgave him, he stuck around, he’s been a good father to Beatrice. But that kind of pain doesn’t just disappear, it has to be dealt with, or else you just wind up resenting each other, and you and Tom don’t seem to be in that position.”

“Well, at Beatrice’s baptism, Tom’s father had a pulmonary embolism. I helped with the CPR, they say it helped save his life. That could have been part of it.”

“If anything it might have made him fall more in love with you than ever,” Joseph said, in a strange tone Cosette couldn’t quite place. “But I mean YOU, toward HIM. You don’t just let someone who’s betrayed you back into your life and everything is all hunky-dory.”

“It wasn’t like that. It took time. And it wasn’t all one-sided, I mean, I was awful to Tom in London.” She’d told Joseph, at one point, all the things she’d said, or at least the things she could remember. “I realized later why Tom did what he did. I forgave him for it at Christina’s wedding.”

“What happened that made that event so significant?”

Cosette felt her stomach starting to twitch. She hadn’t told Joseph about that night. She hadn’t told him how she’d been lonely and missing Tom, how far things had gone between them. The things Tom had said to her that night.

Should she tell him? It almost felt too personal. It wasn’t just her story to tell, it was Tom’s as well. Should she tell Joseph something so personal about another man?

Maybe this was what Joseph meant, though. That wall. She knew, deep down, what he meant. She knew her own feelings. She had never once, in these last several months of their relationship, ever felt compelled to tell Joseph she loved him. She told herself it was because she didn’t want to rush things, that she had said it once and it had ended horribly and she was hesitant to do it again. Even though the circumstances were nothing alike and the men were nothing alike.

She liked Joseph so much. She trusted him. She enjoyed her time with him. She was very much attracted to him. But she couldn’t let herself say that she loved him. Not even to herself.
What did that mean?

Her brain reminded her of the fundraiser, where she had seen the two men side by side and known, as much as she disliked it, that Joseph did not quite compare to Tom. And then felt shame for comparing them to begin with.

Now, faced with having to reveal their almost-reconciliation, she felt a conflict. Was her loyalty to her relationship with Tom stronger than her loyalty to this new one with Joseph?

If that was true, she had to end this now. One way or another.

“Okay, this is…this is something that…” she stammered, trying to find her words. “Uh…it’s hard to talk about. During the reception of the wedding, I was…I was feeling pretty lonely. I mean, I was watching my sister get married, and here I was, unmarried with a child. And Tom was…he was getting a lot of attention from a lot of pretty women, and I was…I got jealous.”

She blushed, looked away, examined her nails, a nervous habit.

Joseph looked at her, compassion in his deep brown eyes. “It’s okay, Cosette, you can tell me. I don’t want to judge you, I just want to know what happened.”

“It was late and I…I guess I just wasn’t thinking straight and I tried to…I tried to…well, to put it plainly, I came on to him. And he stopped me.”

“Because---?”

“Because he knew me better. He knew that wasn’t me. He protected me from myself. And I knew then that he was different. That he’d changed, somehow. That he’d made up for what he’d done and…well, I don’t know. Our relationship wasn’t the same after that. I guess that’s why we get along so well. Because we understand each other?”

“Okay.” He frowned at her, not skeptically, but penetratingly, as if trying to see into her. “It just seems to me that Tom would have, I mean, from what I know of him, would have tried to re-establish something between you. Unless by that point he was no longer interested in trying
“No, he was,” she sighed. “I told him no. Because…because even though he stopped me, I knew that in other circumstances, with another woman, he would have absolutely have gone through with it. He was still that person, still with the same attitudes he’d always had.”

“Was he?” Joseph’s frown deepened. “How do you know?”

“I asked him,” she replied, her voice catching a bit. “He admitted it.”

“Oh.” The frown fell, and Joseph’s eyes drifted off to the side as he took this information in. “I…hmmm…” He rubbed his chin. “But he wasn’t with another woman, Cosette, he was with you.”

Now it was her turn to scowl. “What are you saying? That we should have gotten back together?”

“No, I mean, of course not, not if you didn’t want to. Not if you didn’t feel that way about him anymore.” His eyes drifted back to her, and she felt like he could see through her. “Unless you did feel that way.”

Now her hackles were up. Again, with her feelings for Tom. “Tom and I are done,” she said, tersely.

“Yes. I know that. You’ve both moved on. I just can’t quite figure out why.”

“Why does it matter?” Her tone was getting louder now, a bit too loud in the public space. “We’re not. We decided that night that we’re not. It’s over, it’s done. Can you let it go?”

“I want to make sure you don’t have regrets, Cosette,” Joseph said patiently. “I don’t want us to get seriously involved, get Beatrice and Hugo involved, start to become a family, and have you suddenly have a revelation that you made a mistake. Because…” he seemed to hitch, hesitate, his jaw twitching a few times before he let it out. “Because I’m pretty damn convinced that Tom is still in love with you and would drop everything or anyone for you in a hot second. And I can’t figure out if you still have feelings for him or not.”
“I do have feelings for him,” Cosette said, “but they aren’t---“

The sentence fizzled and died. What she was supposed to say was, “they aren’t love. Not like I love you.” But those words were not there.

“I’m sorry,” Joseph said, finally. But it didn’t actually sound apologetic. “I know we’ve been over this, and I know you’re tired of talking about it, but it doesn’t make sense to me, in my head. I can’t figure it out. I can’t understand why you—“

“Maybe it isn’t up to you to figure it out,” Cosette snapped. Her anger and frustration with herself was now easily attaching to Joseph. The two were about to have their first fight. “It’s my past, it is what it is.” She growled. “You know, I was awful to Tom, grilling him about his past, judging him for the choices he had made. I guess I deserve to see how it feels.”

“I’m not judging you,” Joseph said, his voice strong but not angry. “I just want to understand—“

“Maybe it’s not your place to understand it!” she snapped. Seeing his expressions, not quite anger, not quite hurt, but something related to both, she attempted to side-step. “It’s my past, I know why things are the way they are. If you trust me, if you trust my feelings, if you trust our relationship, there isn’t any reason—“

“That might be the problem,” Joseph said, meeting her eyes. “I…I don’t trust it. Cosette. I don’t trust our relationship. I can’t understand why, everything has been going well, we get along, we have so many common views. But something in my gut is…it’s screaming at me. I can’t ignore it.”

She pulled back. Her hands had already been off the table, but now they wrapped even tighter around herself. “You…you don’t.”

“I don’t know why. I thought bringing these things up might help but…but it’s making it worse.”

She blinked, realizing she was starting to cry. She struggled to contain it. “Do you…do you want to break up? Stop seeing each other?”

“No.” He gave some kind of gasping laugh, not quite a laugh, definitely not happy. He extended his hand toward her, palm up, lying on the table, as if wanting her to take it. She didn’t. “I care about you so much, Cosette. Those feelings I had for you when I worked for you, they never went away. I want to tell you that I…that I’m falling in love with you, but something just can’t…can’t
let me. It insists that I wait. It insists that I hold back. I thought I was just being mistrustful because of so many potentially bad experiences I’ve been struggling to avoid with the way people are these days, but it’s more than that. Something is wrong here and I can’t figure it out. I want you to help me, if we’re going to do this, if we’re going to move forward.”

She squeezed her arms, her fingers nearly turning white. It hurt, to hear him say these things. Was this how Tom felt, when she didn’t want to trust him, when she didn’t want to give in to her feelings for him? And why the fuck was she still making it about Tom?

“It’s not easy for me, either,” she said, struggling to speak around the lump in her throat. “I mean, your wife…I know how much you love her, how much you still grieve for her. The way you talk about her…I have a hard time, too, because I’m convinced that if you had a choice, you would drop everything, give up all of this in a heartbeat if you could get her back. That your whole life right now, any relationship with you is entirely conditional on the fact that she’s not with us anymore. And I can’t compete against a ghost.”

He looked distressed. “Have I honestly made you feel that way?”

“Have I made you feel like I only want you because I can’t have Tom?” she returned.

A silence fell between them as they contemplated each other, and themselves. Cosette knew that she had pulled the “dead wife card” out only out of self-defense, because it killed her for Joseph to say those things to her. Maybe she was really a horrible bitch and deserved to die alone. Apparently she couldn’t treat anyone right.

After some time, Joseph finally said, “I guess that’s what it comes down to, doesn’t it? I don’t have a choice. There’s no power in the world that’s going to bring my wife back. But you…you still have a choice, Cosette. I’m just afraid of what it’s going to be.”

She stood up. Her last resort. “I’ve told you, again and again, what my choice is. You won’t listen. And you’ve said it, you don’t trust me.”

“I didn’t mean it like—“

“I’m going to call a cab or something. I need to go home.”
“Please, let me drive you. Come on.” He stood up. His face was a mask of remorse, and Cosette felt awful. She let him drive her home, but they didn’t speak the rest of the day, except to say goodbye.

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When Tom came back to town, the first place he went, even before he went home, was Henry and Christina’s house.

It had taken a week to get out of London. He had accelerated his usual leaving process because he wanted to get away. Run. Hide. He spent every day in a depressed stupor, sitting around his house, staring into space, hardly even being able to read. He tried to go see a few films, take his mind off things, but he couldn’t manage to distract himself for more than an hour.

He knew he’d done the right thing, and he still felt fucking awful about it. Was that normal? Was that right? How could that be right?

Leslie refused to speak to him. No texts, and she wouldn’t answer his calls. He was completely shut out. He didn’t dare go to her place, he knew that would be disastrous. So he left, tail between his legs, never feeling lower in his life.

Usually, he was quite analytical about experiences like that, and spent his time trying to figure it out, trying to understand it. Sometimes he would think he had a grasp of what had happened, but it would slip away. Every time, he would be overcome by shame and guilt, and soon he just shoved it away in a dark hole, locking in a room in his brain, until he could talk to someone about it.

But who? He thought of Cosette. She might be proud of him for not giving in and sleeping with Leslie, but the thought of going to her with this, needing affirmation that he’d done the right thing, turned his stomach. It didn’t feel right talking about his sexual or moral failures – or triumphs, if he was honest – with an ex, even if she was the mother of his child.

Henry. He was a man, and Tom trusted his opinion. And Henry had never judged him. He’d always been compassionate and fair. He would set him straight.

When Tom walked into the house, however, he was not expecting to see Joseph, of all people, sitting out on the patio with Henry. Looking just as miserable as the face he saw in his own mirror.
“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s okay,” Joseph said, standing. His empty beer bottle dangled from his fingers. “I’ll just toss this on my way out. Thanks, Henry.”

“No problem,” Henry replied, rising with him. The two men shook hands, Henry clapped Joseph on the back. Joseph gave him a tight smile and nod of the head as they passed, Tom did the same. But as he left, Tom couldn’t help but turn and watch him go, concerned.

“He okay?” Tom asked Henry as soon as they were alone.

Henry shrugged. “I, uh…I guess he will be. Welcome back, man.” He extended his arms to hug Tom, and Tom wound up hugging him a bit longer than he knew Henry was completely comfortable with. However, Henry didn’t shove him away. “You okay?”

“No,” Tom said miserably, plunking down into the seat Joseph had just vacated. Seeing Joseph, of all people, had sent his thoughts into a tailspin. Joseph would never have this problem, he thought. Joseph would never have put himself in the position where a problem like this could conceivably happen!

Pushing the thoughts away, he attempted to spill his guts. He couldn’t order his story right. It came tumbling out of him, the entire sorry mess. And he didn’t spare himself, eviscerating himself for his behavior toward Leslie, and finally ending with his cowardly fleeing from London.

Henry listened to him intently, his face fixed in a scowl of concentration. When Tom was done, he simply said, “You did the right thing.”

Tom groaned, flinging his head back over the back of the chair. “I know, but I still feel like shit!” After a minute, he sat up, having expected Henry to go on, but instead found the other man watching him with an expectant look on his face. “I mean, I know, rationally, I did the right thing. Emotionally, though…I can’t get past it. Just keep seeing her face, how crushed she was, how angry. I keep thinking that it’s because…because the person I used to be, the person she knew before, would have gone ahead with it, no question. It was a shock to both of us that I didn’t. Any other man, I mean, even me, as little as a year ago, would not have hesitated, would have said, hey it’s her choice, if she wants to, and I’m okay with it, who cares?”
“But that’s not the man you are now, Tom,” Henry said. “I’ve seen it, we’ve all seen it. Now you’re getting to see it. You don’t treat sex like you used to. And it’s, pardon the expression, hard. Or difficult, if you prefer.”

“But why is it wrong now?” Tom grumbled. “I mean, it would have been wrong then, too, wouldn’t it? I just wouldn’t have cared. God, I was such a shallow shit. No wonder Cosette didn’t want me.”

Henry cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably. “Okay, hang on. You’re being too hard on yourself.”

“Am I?” Tom knew his voice was getting louder and struggled to contain it. “I deserve much worse than this. How many other times have I caused the exact same damage that I just tried to avoid? Is it even worth it? They hate you either way---“

“Okay, stop,” Henry said, leaning forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasping each other. “Stop right now, and listen to me.” He waited until Tom was upright, facing him. “First of all, one thing you need to know, right now, no questions. You are not an object to be used.”

Tom stared at him, blinked. “I’m not an object.”

“No.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?” Henry arched a brow, skeptically. “You are beating the hell out of yourself for almost using this woman, Leslie? Using her as an object to satisfy your lust, when it is just as much her fault for attempting to use you to satisfy hers.”

He had not thought of it that way. He had never once considered himself potentially being the “victim.” “She said she loved me, she wasn’t trying to use me, she just was willing to accept whatever I was willing to give.”

“Yes, but she also wanted to sleep with you, for one night, no strings attached. Now, while we both know, that’s utter bullshit, there are always strings, her intentions toward you were just as dishonorable as your initial intentions towards her. You stopped it, you stood up for both of you.
She didn’t. She made you feel like shit because you didn’t do what she wanted you to do. So stop beating yourself up for that right this second.”

Tom couldn’t help but pause at this new information.

“So she was wrong? To be mad?” he asked, his voice almost child-like.

“I don’t know. You can’t judge emotions. You did let her think that maybe you were going to, briefly, and yes, it’s natural to be angry when you don’t get what you’re expecting, if it’s something you’d been wanting for a very long time. But she was wrong to ask of you what she did.”

“But she was the one who was in love with me. It was her feelings at risk, her emotional state. She was the vulnerable one. That’s why I think I feel so shitty. I mean, I feel like I crushed her. I let her down.”

“Whatever she said, whatever torch she’s carrying, is no justification to use someone. Because however you want to say it, Tom, telling someone to just sleep with you for one time so they can get something out of their system is using someone, full stop.”

Tom’s mouth nearly hung open. The sudden reversal threw him for a loop. He’d been prepared to deliver an entire monologue about the nature of relationships, even wring Henry for advice on how to find a girl who wasn’t just after sex, and then laugh at the irony (if that was even the word) of him searching for someone like that when for so long, so very long, he had been a borderline predator.

Of course, he’d never seen himself like that. Before.

Before Cosette.

Tom gathered his thoughts. “Do you think that maybe…maybe in addition to not hurting her potentially worse by sleeping with her and then having nothing come of it, I may have ultimately…protected her? From something that wasn’t good for her?”

“Yes,” Henry said, almost smiling but not quite.
“And she tried to…basically tried to guilt me into it,” Tom said, realizing it even as he said it. “And then she’s the one who made it worse. Not me.”

Henry sighed, sitting back, having the air of someone who has finally gotten a difficult, thick-headed child to comprehend an important piece of information. “Kind of nice, knowing you weren’t as horrible as you thought, isn’t it?”

“She might have been angry because I don’t love her,” Tom added quietly.

“And that isn’t your fault,” Henry assured him. “And I think the only reason you felt the urge to do it in the first place was also out of misplaced guilt, which she was making worse.”

“No,” Tom shook his head. “She didn’t do anything before, she didn’t even want me to know about it.”

“But when you did find out, she refused to talk to you. Made you feel bad for something you hadn’t done. It wasn’t your fault she thought she was in love with you. It wasn’t your fault you found out. None of it was your fault. Your urge to even be with her in the first place probably came from that damn people pleasing instinct you seem to carry, the thing that makes you so crazy popular with your fans. You have an urge to give people what they want. Even if that’s at personal cost to you.”

Tom shook his head. “I wouldn’t go that far. I’m far from selfless.”

“No, it’s actually rather selfish, that need to make people like you. It becomes more about you than them. But I digress. Her feelings aren’t on you. Yes, you got her hopes up, but what she wanted was wrong. It was wrong against you, not just against her. You stood up for both of you. That’s what a man does, he protects a woman when she’s going to hurt herself.”

“That’s what Cosette says,” Tom murmured.

“Well, she’s right.” Henry sighed. “Okay, you’re going to feel crappy for a bit, but you keep telling yourself you did the right thing. I think you should pray on it, but…”

Tom lifted his eyes, which had been sort of stuck on Henry’s shoes, up to meet his friend’s gaze. “Christina wanted me to talk to this priest friend of hers.”
“Father Francis? That’s good advice. But only if you’re ready.”

“I think I am, but… I don’t know, do they talk to people outside of their, what do you call it, their flock?”

Henry chuckled. “Oh Tom. Don’t worry, Christina or I will make the call and set it up. You just have to show up. When did you get back into town, anyway?”

“I just got here. I haven’t even been home yet.”

“Oh.” Henry looked a bit flustered. “You haven’t even seen Beatrice yet?”

“I’m going now,” Tom said, standing up. “Thank you. For your words. Your help.”

“At least I was able to help somebody today,” Henry said. “I’m not some kind of prophet or something, you seem to have this impression that I have all the answers, Tom, but I don’t, I screw up as much as anybody.”

Then Tom remembered. “Is that why Joseph was here?” he asked. “Was he having a problem? Could you not help him?”

“It was…it was more than a one beer problem,” Henry said.

Tom could not let it go. “Is it Cosette?” he asked. “Are they okay?”

“Why don’t you go home and find out?” Henry advised.

So Tom did.

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It wasn’t even two days before Joseph texted her, asking if he could come by. As it was the beginning of June and the most hectic time of the year for Cosette, it was a considerable effort to
be home early enough for him to come by at a decent time – but she wanted to be. She wanted him to come so she could apologize for her behavior. Giselle was with Beatrice in the other room when he came into the kitchen, looking miserable.

“I want to apologize,” he said. “I’m so sorry for the way I acted—“

“No, stop,” Cosette said quickly. Still in her work clothes, she padded over to him in bare feet, having long since removed her shoes. “I’m sorry. I never should have said those things to you. I realize what you’re trying to do, I know, Tom is still here and your wife isn’t and I can understand it’s hard, dealing with this situation—“

“I said awful things to you,” he cut her off. “I never should have let you think that I don’t trust you, I do trust you. I know you wouldn’t lead me on.” He motioned for her to sit down, and he grasped her hands, holding them between them.

“You didn’t say anything awful, I was defensive and—“

“Cosette, please,” Joseph begged. “Listen to me. I know that you and Tom have a complicated relationship. I’ve gotten to know you somewhat, and I can’t figure out what would make you, a person I know to be of such upright moral character, make the choice to…to do what you did. The only explanation I can come up with is that you were really in love with him. And I know that kind of thing doesn’t just go away. I’m not judging you for what you did, I promise, but I can’t help but worry that Tom…” he took a heavy breath. “From what I’ve seen of him, he doesn’t strike me as the shallow, user type. And I know how he looks at you. And I see how you look at him.”

Cosette felt herself start to get tense. She thought this was going to be a much different conversation. “I don’t know what you want from me,” she said softly, with a hint of despair.

“I guess I’m asking you, point blank. Are you completely over Tom?”

She stared at him. She was supposed to say yes. And something wouldn’t let her.

Then, to her own horror, she heard her own voice saying, “No.”

He considered her for a very long moment. “I don’t want to break up with you, Cosette, but I want you to be happy. I care about you that much. So if you need to work things out with him—“
“No,” she said again. “No, Joseph, you don’t understand…it isn’t like that.”

“Then how is it?”

“He’s…he’s my best friend,” she said, in a small voice. “And he…he and I just don’t work. We’ve tried, twice, even, and it doesn’t work. We just…we can’t.”

Joseph nodded. “Okay. If you really believe that. If you’re sure. But I don’t want to spend the rest of my life worrying you’re comparing me to him in your head.”

She felt herself grow hot.

“I think, for a bit, we should spend some time apart, and really think about what we want.” He squeezed her hands. “We can talk, please, call me, text me, whatever you need. But we need to take a step back. You have to be sure about Tom, Cosette. I can’t live with being second choice. I just can’t.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “You’re a wonderful man, Joseph, and you deserve to be first.”

“I want to be first with you,” he said, touching her cheek. “When you’re sure I can be that, tell me. I will come running.” He smiled at her, kissed her cheek, and left.

Cosette sat where he left her. She must have sat there in a daze for a bit, because when Tom came in, he startled her.

“Cosette? Are you okay?”

She hadn’t seen him in months, except for in brief video chats. And here he was, flesh and blood, in her kitchen. Somehow, seeing him seemed to trigger something inside of her. It felt like a tremor, running through her limbs, through her heart. Was Joseph right? She had been denying it for so long, but the knowledge that he could see it meant it was real, not some delusion running through her brain.
Tom knelt down in front of her, almost as tall as her sitting down, even on his knees. His hand cupped her cheek, his thumb streaking through her tears. “What’s wrong, Cozy? What happened?”

That voice, those eyes, comforting her, caring about her, broke her heart. Her hand went up, pushing the tears, and his fingers, away. “I’m okay,” she said. “It’s fine…”

“Did you and Joseph have a fight?” he asked.

“Why do you think…”

“I saw his car before when I passed by, on the way home,” Tom said. “What happened? You can talk to me.”

She stood up, reaching for a tissue. “We, uh…not a fight, no, but…well, we’re going through a rough patch.” She threw the tissue out, straightened herself out. “But you’re home! Welcome back. Bebe’s in the living—”

“No, that can wait, Cozy, come on, talk to me, tell me what’s going on. You’re upset. Don’t try and blow it off.” He had gotten up and followed her, almost crowding her.

She scowled up at him. Why did he have to be so…? “It isn’t his fault, actually. It’s mine.” She couldn’t tell him, couldn’t admit the truth to him. If he knew… how would he react? Would he be angry? “I have…I mean, you know how I can get sometimes, I let my mouth get away from me. I said something to him… about his wife. Me and my vicious tongue,” she muttered.

“It couldn’t have been that bad,” Tom said, but he didn’t sound convincing.

A little truth wouldn’t hurt. “I told him that if he could have his wife back, he would trade me and all of this for her in a hot second,” she said dryly, inwardly cringing at the words.

Tom looked down at her for a moment, considering. “He must have upset you pretty bad for you to say something like that. You’re not like that unless you’re sorely provoked.”

“Don’t defend me,” she sighed.
Tom cupped her shoulders in his large hands. “I will, it’s my prerogative. Have you apologized yet?”

“Yes, that’s why he was here.”

“And?”

“He’s a good man, of course he forgives me, but…well, that isn’t all there is to it…I don’t want to get into it.”

“No, I understand, I’m sure it’s private.” He lightly massaged her arms with his fingers. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t pry, but…you just looked so upset.”

She nodded. “He’s a good man. He doesn’t deserve to be treated poorly.”

“No, he doesn’t. He is a good guy.” Tom frowned down at her. “Do you love him, Cosette?”

The question startled her, and it must have shown on her face because Tom quickly backtracked.

“I’m sorry, that’s none of my business, I know, but…I see how happy he makes you. You deserve someone who treats you the way he does. Someone who values you, respects you, and understands your path in life.”

Her expression softened. Her heart started to plead with her, telling her that Tom was those things, too, that he was a better man than the one she’d first met, that he valued her, respected her, and was growing to understand her path, her beliefs, the things she held most precious---

---as awful as she was at actually living them.

“He treats you like gold, and you deserve to be treated that way.” Tom went on, his eyes meeting hers rather intensely. “Don’t be afraid of it. Whatever happens, I trust that he’ll be a good stepfather, that he’ll love you and treat you right, and you’ll have all those things you’ve always wanted. You should have that kind of man, who cares for you, all of you, in every conceivable way. I know I’ve come along and mucked everything up, but---“
“Don’t say that,” she said, distressed.

“It’s true,” he shrugged with a bashful little chuckle. “I’ll do whatever you want, Cozy. I want to help you, any way I can, if there is anything I can do, to make this work for you. You have my support. My blessing, if you need it.”

She was going to cry again. “You’re…you’re already doing it, Tom. I appreciate how great you’ve been.” She cleared her throat, trying to shake off the lump.

He gave her a small, sad smile. “Tell me, whatever it is. I want you to be happy, Cosette. Truly, more than anything.”

She reached up, patting one his hands. “Thanks, Tom,” she whispered. “Now go kiss your daughter hello.”

He kissed her temple, and then let go, off to see his daughter, who squealed with delight at seeing him.
Two Years, Six Months Later, Week One

Chapter Summary

Tom makes a decision -- and so does Cosette.

Chapter Notes

Happy Brexit 1776!

“Stupid car! Of all days!” Cosette shrieked.

Her temper was short, frayed. Today was graduation. The eighth graders were going to line up with their little third grade buddies, Shelly’s class, and walk in front of the school assembly in their gowns, and bid their goodbyes to the school. Then they were going to be dismissed so they could go home early and get ready to come back in the early evening for their graduation Mass and ceremony. It was a big event. It was the culmination of the year.

And her fucking car wouldn’t start.

She jumped out. The only saving grace was that she was nearly a half hour early, as she had planned to use a bit of quiet before school to make sure all was in order and anticipate any hitches in the system. She’d been doing this for some time and had it down pat, but she’d learned never to underestimate the ability of people to massively screw things up.

“What’s wrong?” Giselle asked as Cosette came back into the kitchen through the side door.

“Car won’t start,” Cosette barked as she pulled out her cell phone, scrolling to see who she could bother to take her to work. She had to start fast, deal with the stupid car tomorrow, as long as she got to work she could stay there all day and somebody would give her a ride home, Shelly usually stuck around and would more than likely be able to help, but right now getting to work was the top priority.

“Maybe Tom can give you a ride,” Giselle said, watching Cosette scroll her phone.
She looked up, hesitated. Tom was right down the street, close. He might be up, usually running early in the morning to avoid too much attention. And he was here in L.A. for the next month while they started pre-production of the next Sandman movie. It was largely shot in L.A. on the soundstage with a ton of greenscreen – not Tom’s favorite thing to do, but the basis of the movie was too dream-like to realistically use locations, and he was always grateful if he got to stay close to Beatrice.

Desperation pushed her to dial his number. He answered, awake and chipper.

“Good morning. Everything okay?”

“My car won’t start,” she said, just going right for it. “Any way you can drive me to work?”

“Give me five minutes,” he said, and he was actually there in three. He was still in his running clothes, that Legendary shirt he always wore and his black shorts. He must have just gotten back, as he was still kind of sweaty. He even apologized for the potential smell as she climbed into his car.

“It’s fine, I really appreciate this,” Cosette said, although her tone was not that warm, as she was now only fifteen minutes early. Still, it would have to do, she thought as she buckled her seat belt.

“What’s wrong with your car?”

“No idea. It wouldn’t start.”

“Okay. Want me to get it to the shop for you?”

“It’s okay, I can do it tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow you’ll be exhausted, isn’t today graduation?” he looked over at her. “Have you even had your coffee yet?”

“I had a cup this morning but it wasn’t enough to handle this crap,” she grumbled.
“Here, take mine,” he said, handing her a cup that had been sitting in the cup holder between them. “I haven’t drunk any yet, promise. I was waiting to cool down before I did.”

She hesitated, then took the cup. The smell and the taste both did a bit to comfort her.

“I’ll call the shop for you, get it to them today so you don’t have to worry,” he said reassuringly. At her unsure look he added, “It’s fine, Cosette, I’m offering, it’s not a problem.”

She sighed, made an effort to relax her shoulders. “I really appreciate it, Tom. All of this, really, you’re my hero.” She gave him a little smile, which he returned with a wider one.

He dropped her off at school. She had finished her coffee (or rather, his coffee) by then and left the cup with him, at his insistence. Once inside, she went to the room, opened up her computer and went through the report card grades one more time. About twenty minutes in, she heard a tap on her door, and saw Shelly sticking her head into the room.

“You doing okay? You need help?” she asked.

Cosette sighed. “I’m pretty good, actually, but thanks. Just make sure your kids are lined up on time and we’re all fine.”

“Got it covered. Tom dropped you this morning, didn’t he? What happened to your car?”

“It wouldn’t start. That reminds me, do you think maybe, if you’re going to be at the graduation tonight, you could give me a ride home after?”

“Sure, no problem.” Even though her kids only took part in the morning events, Shelly usually like to stick around, as she had taught most of the students when they were younger. So Cosette didn’t feel like she was putting her out.

“Thanks. I swear, after tonight I’m going to sleep for a week. No, wait, damn, have to take the kids to Disneyland on Monday. Okay, well at least for the weekend.”
“Disneyland. Sounds like fun.”

“Last year it most definitely was not,” Cosette stressed. “All they wanted to do was ride the big rides, they spent the whole day in line after line. I mean, there’s so much more Disneyland has to offer, you know? The food, the shopping, the nuances and the fun stuff. I hate going. Except for riding the Pirates of the Caribbean, I would trade with you in a heartbeat.”

“You want to sub in third grade?” Shelly quipped. “I’ll take a day of Disneyland over the last Monday of the school year.”

“I don’t know if I could handle kids that little,” Cosette giggled. “We wouldn’t get anything done, I’d just show them movies all day. Or worse,” she laughed a bit louder, “I’d call Tom and have him bring his Disney favorites to show them! That would be worth the price of admission!”

Shelly smiled at her. “You seem so different now than you were last year at this time,” she mused. “Getting involved with Joseph seems to have done you some good.”

At this, Cosette’s face fell. “Yeah,” she muttered.

“What? What happened?” Shelly came over to the desk, pulling up a chair. As Cosette’s class was filled with nearly fully-grown children, the chairs were a lot bigger and more comfortable than the tiny chairs in Shelly’s room.

Cosette shrugged, hating that she wasn’t more emotional about this than she thought she would be. In the ensuing several days since Joseph had said they needed to take a break, she had expected to be much more depressed over the whole thing. Sure, she liked Joseph, but she didn’t have that strange anxiety that people got when potentially permanently separated from their significant other.

However, she was plenty upset over the thought that it was Tom, of all people, that was causing this. It wasn’t his fault, not by a long shot, but the knowledge that Joseph could sense her feelings for him, buried under miles of denial and defeat, meant that they were still a problem.

She had no idea what to make of herself. She had looked for a man like Joseph her entire life. Now that she’d found him, why didn’t she want him?

But she did want him, she reminded herself. She cared so much for him. It could work. She just
had to figure out how to make this obstacle go away.

“Joseph was asking a lot of questions about Tom over the weekend,” Cosette said. Shelly was perhaps the only person on the planet she had confided in about her feelings for Tom, her regret at not reuniting with him at the wedding reception, and her jealousy when he started to date again. So there was little point in mincing words. “He doesn’t want to be second choice. Specifically to Tom. He kept wanting to know why we weren’t back together, what had happened.”

“He kept pressing that? Asking why you weren’t with Tom?” Shelly frowned, shook her head. “Why would he do that? I mean, surely you’ve told him about all the stuff that happened.”

“I didn’t tell him about almost getting back together with him at Christina’s wedding. Until he asked point blank. He wanted to know my reasons why I didn’t.”

“I don’t understand why a new boyfriend would be so hung up on why you’re not with the old one, I mean, you broke up, it happens. Did you say something that made him think there was something still between you?”

Cosette shrugged again. “He sees how Tom and I are. And he seems to think that Tom is a good guy.”

“Still, it’s a bit…I don’t know…weird?”

“He thinks I’m still in love with Tom. He doesn’t know why I’m with him, Joseph, if I still have feelings for Tom,” Cosette said, exasperated.

“He’s worried you’re going to dump him,” Shelly mused. “Somewhere down the road you’ll wake up and realize you’re with the wrong guy and then break his heart.”

“Basically. Can’t say I blame him.”

“Last year you said you regretted not being with Tom when you had the chance,” Shelly reminded her. “But I honestly thought that this new relationship had meant that you were over it.”
“I guess I did too,” Cosette whispered.

“And? Are you going to break up with Joseph for Tom?”

Cosette shook her head, squeezing her eyes shut. “No.”

“Cozy, I don’t get it—“

“Well then I’ll spell it out,” Cosette snapped. “Tom has moved on. He and I didn’t just fail once, we failed twice. Three times if you count me telling him no at the wedding.”

“You said you regretted that.”

“But I did it and I can’t just turn around and take it back!” Her voice was rising a bit, but Shelly didn’t seem cowed. She blinked, her expression patient, settled, as she let Cosette rant. “I can’t treat him like a yo-yo -- here, I want you -- no, go away!” She stood up from her desk, slapping her palms on its surface in her frustration. “It’s not fair to him! I see how he’s grown up, how he’s matured, how he’s…I don’t know how to put it, like he’s trying to aspire to something better. I see that. And how is that fair to him to suddenly say, hey, you’ve finally changed into what I want! I’ll try again now! That is not unconditional love. I’ve put nothing but conditions on him and he deserves better. He deserves someone who will take him, flaws and all. Someone who will help him grow and not berate and brow-beat him into it.”

Shelly stared at her, silent, eyes wide. Cosette let out her breath, and drew it in again, trying to calm herself.

“Sorry,” she said in a much more subdued voice. “I guess I just…needed to yell.”

Shelly licked her lips, swallowed. “If you still love him, Cosette, even now, after everything…that’s is unconditional.”

Cosette felt her temper rise. A nasty, cutting remark hovered on her tongue, was pressed against her teeth as she opened her mouth, but quietly, Shelly stood up and went to the door.

“See you after graduation,” she said, and left.
Cosette looked at the empty space, her anger suddenly gone.

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Tom slipped into the back of the church, not wanting anyone to see him. It was bad enough he was head and shoulders taller than most people, but he was also walking into the 8th grade graduation, and was bound to be recognized. Fortunately, most of the people were in the front of the church and very few were in the back section, so he was quickly able to slip into a pew—

--next to a familiar face.

“Mind if I sit here?” he whispered to Shelly, who gave a little start as she turned and looked at him. Her smile was nervous.

“Go ahead,” she said, looking back up toward the front, where the priest was starting the Mass. Tom quietly went through the motions, having become rather familiar with them over the many times he’d gone to church with Cosette, her family, and of course, Beatrice.

After the communion rite, the priest stood up and Cosette took to the podium. She looked lovely in a dark blue dress with an irregular pattern of green, purple and pink flowers mottled into the lacy fabric. But she was too far away to see him, and too involved in announcing the names of the graduates, which she did in her clear, authoritative voice.

Tom thought he’d told her he would pick her up, but he couldn’t remember. She had been pretty distracted that morning – a broken timing belt was not something to be taken lightly, and she hadn’t even known what it was at the time. Tom had had the car towed to the dealership, and paid the eight hundred dollars plus change to fix it. She would insist on paying him back, and he would say he would take it out of the child-support fund. Such was the dance whenever he spent too much money on her problems.

Anyway, in case she needed a ride, he was there. He knew how this week exhausted her. She loved her job and he knew the sense of accomplishment it gave her, but it was grueling at times, and some classes were not that grateful, instead succumbing to burn-out and eighth-grade-fever, as Cosette called it, and becoming impossible.
He had not talked to her much about her class this year. As the names were called, the applause given, the diplomas handed out, and the pictures taken, Tom leaned toward Shelly, who started to look like she was getting bored. “So were they a good class this year?” he asked.

Shelly chuckled. “I had them as third graders. They were pretty sweet then. A few came and went but they still seemed that way. Cosette liked them. They gave her a really nice class present; did she show you?”

“No, I just got back a few days ago, I haven’t had a chance.”

“A Waterford crystal pitcher and glasses. Not for alcohol. Somebody had donated it to the auction and some of the parents pitched in and got everybody else to pitch in. It’s beautiful. Although I don’t know what she’ll do with it, with a two-year-old in the house.” She glanced at him. “It’s beautiful, it’s got this dark cobalt blue glazing at the bottom, and it’s from the Dungarvan Barware collection.”

He blinked. “I don’t know what that means.”

“It’s the cut of the crystal,” she explained, keeping her voice at a steady whisper. “It’s very art deco, all these intersecting cuts and linear chevrons.”

He still didn’t quite know what she meant but he nodded politely.

She smirked at him. “When you see it, you’ll know what I mean. Sorry, my mom was a big fan of Waterford so I sort of grew up knowing all the different kinds.”

“I think my mother had a crystal egg at one point, but it was damaged in a move. She was devastated but I didn’t understand why she was so upset, it was just a little crack, the rest of it looked fine.”

Shelly gave a little guffaw. “Spoken like a heathen.” Then she narrowed her eyes at him, but her expression was playful. “You realize that’s the plot of Risky Business, right?”

He blinked again. “I’m sorry?”

“Risky Business? Tom Cruise’s big breakout role? His mother’s Waterford Crystal egg gets stolen
by a prostitute that Cruise brings to the house while his parents are away? And the egg gets a crack in it and is ruined?”

Tom had to think for a moment. “I haven’t seen that movie in years.”

“I just happened to catch it last night,” Shelly grumbled. “Not one of my favorites but I always thought Rebecca De Mornay was an underrated actress.”

Of course Tom knew who she was talking about, he had a cinema vocabulary down like a second language.

“Anyway,” Shelly said, “my mother’s prized possession was this Waterford Lismore red decanter. It looked like something a vampire would keep his blood supply in.”

“I played a vampire once,” Tom said, feeling a bit flirty. Shelly looked at him, and he realized that the weight loss had really smoothed out her features, making her very different from the woman he’d first met over three years ago. Her skin lacked the puffy redness that came with obesity, and she seemed much calmer, more confident.

He realized he was finding her attractive. Possibly for the second time.

But Cosette had told him not to. Had warned him that not everyone could deal with his kind of attention.

Her return smile was knowing, and a bit flirty itself. “Oh, I know,” she said.

His smile widened. “Have you seen it?”

She nodded. “I liked it. Although it was a tiny bit of navel-gazing, your character mooning about the whole time, there were enough hilariously funny moments done in a low-key way that made it quirky. I think I saw it twice.”

“Mmm.” He squinted at her. “Twice?”
“My favorite moment was possibly you and Tilda going on about fungi. Or ‘you drank Ian.’ It changes.”

“Ah, Anton,” Tom said wistfully.

Shelly sobered. “Yeah. Were you close?”

“We were friends. It’s hard to stay close to people you work with, but I like to think we’d have gotten on if we ran into each other again.”

“I first saw him in Charlie Bartlett. Downey stole the show for me, but I think that’s also the time I saw your friend, Kat Denning.”

Tom almost cringed. He was not terribly proud of that bit of his past. He hoped she hadn’t heard the rumors. He decided not to say anything.

“I like her,” Shelly went on, not noticing his reaction. “She’s snarky.”

“She is,” Tom affirmed. His voice was a bit louder on those two words, and a woman from five pews up turned around and shot them a dirty look.

Shelly must have seen it too because she whispered, “Okay, we have to be quiet now.” But they were both smirking in amusement for pretty much the rest of the ceremony.

When it finished, the graduates processed out and went into the portico next door, where pictures of the class were taken and Cosette had to socialize, talk with the parents, and hug her students in congratulations. It would be at least a half hour, if not longer, before she was ready to leave. Tom followed Shelly, where she went to man the boxes where the students would be returning their graduation robes, as they were rented. The front of the church was a wide archway made of stone, enclosed almost like a second room, only with long iron grates in the front, closing it off from the sidewalk. The middle was made of gates that swung wide open during the day, but provided a cement and iron cage at night. It was a lovely piece of architecture, and Tom admired it as he basically hid in the corner, not wanting to catch anyone’s attention and potentially upstaging anyone.
The students came in clusters of twos and threes, a few catching sight of him, but too caught up in their own drama to bother or care about a stray actor, even if he was in the Marvel movies.

“There are still robes missing,” a woman Tom recognized as the person who manned the front desk. The very same one, who, all those years ago, had inadvertently told him Cosette’s first name. “I think three. Charlie, Rose, and Katrina.”

“I’ll go find them,” Shelly said, and just as she was rounding the corner, Cosette came into the enclosure, bearing a robe.

“I got Rose’s robe,” she told the woman, whose name Tom could not remember for the life of him, and he was good with names! As she checked off the name, Cosette looked up and saw Tom standing there. “What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I came to give you a ride if you needed one. I thought I told you but…well, maybe not. I figured I’d come anyway just in case I was needed.”

“That’s sweet,” she said, folding the robe. “Shelly was going to give me a ride, but you’re closer so I’ll let her off the hook.”

“Looks like everything went off very well,” Tom said.

“Yeah, actually,” Cosette agreed. She seemed much more cheerful than this morning. Of course, now that it was all over, it had to be a huge relief. “So what’s wrong with the car?”

“Car’s fine. In your driveway. Ready to go.”

“Come on, Tom. What was the damage? What was wrong?”

“Timing belt,” he said.

She cursed under her breath. “That’s gonna cost a pretty penny.”
“Don’t worry about it.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “No, I can handle it.”

“I already did.”

“I’ll pay you back.”

Tom decided to not say anything more. It would lead to a fight and she was still in front of school families and co-workers. He would just not accept her cheque, or whatever she did to pay him.

“Can I do anything to help?”

“If you want to go to my room, there’s a vase of flowers there I want to take home,” she said. She handed him the keys. “And my bag, the black one with the multi-colored squares on the front? And my purse. If you could get them in your car. Where did you park?”

“On the street, managed to grab a space someone was just vacating.” He pointed. “I think you can see it.”

“Oh, good, it’s close. I should be done in another fifteen minutes or so, if you don’t mind waiting.”

He did as she asked. He found her bag, purse, and the flowers, in a lovely vase that reminded him of a giant water-color-dyed egg. He got everything into the back seat, except the flowers, which he put in the front, and figured she would need to hold to keep them from spilling. He turned on the air conditioning, as it was already getting pretty hot in California in June, and twenty minutes after he left her, she opened the passenger door.

“Thank you again,” she said.

“Have you eaten dinner yet?” he asked her.

“I ordered a pizza when the kids left. Left the rest of it in the teacher’s lounge.”
“When was that?”

“Around two. They got out early today because of the graduation tonight.”

“So it was, at best, a late lunch. Do you want me to get something on the way home?”

“I don’t want to get out of the car,” she playfully bemoaned, “my feet are killing me.”

He chuckled. “That’s why you Americans are so fond of your drive-ups. Isn’t that place that makes the chili fries you adore so much a drive-up?”

Cosette groaned. “A heart attack in a box.” She considered. “Well, I’ve already had pizza today so the day is shot. Yeah, okay.”

They chatted, made light conversation, as Tom went through the drive-through and Cosette was buried under the smell of both flowers and chili-cheese fries. Which wasn’t that bad of a combination.

And all the while, he couldn’t quite shake his conversation with Shelly out of his head.

He’d expected to spend two hours stuck in boredom, maybe scroll his phone, try not to look too disrespectful at least during the Mass part, but instead being around her had been a delight. He’d grown to like her a lot since he had mustered his courage to apologize to her for his behavior when they’d first met, even though he hadn’t directly intended to offend her in any way. At first it had been a kind of pride; she was a former fan, after all, and he had apparently turned her off. But now it was a definite interest.

Although he wasn’t quite sure he was interested in her like that. But there was something now that he hadn’t realized before, especially after both Ashley and Leslie. Shelly was the kind of woman who wouldn’t put sexual pressure on him, not like either of the others had. She was like Cosette, she had a similar world view, and high standards.

Why couldn’t he try? Why couldn’t he see where it led?
Of course, there was no way to really know if she was actually those things – too many times he had been misled by people, thinking they were one way when they were actually another. The facts were, Shelly had just emerged from losing a substantial amount of weight, and in spite of the shallowness of the thought, Tom couldn’t help but feel that maybe she just hadn’t had opportunity. This thought made him feel like an ass, but it also made him worry that she might think he was trying to take advantage of her.

He didn’t want to do that. He didn’t want to be that person anymore.

Shelly was smart, she was kind, she was funny. He needed to get to know someone who wasn’t going to expect things from him that he was used to being required. He needed someone who could look beyond the physical. He needed to be someone who looked beyond the physical. He used to think he was already like that, but recent events showed him otherwise.

He wanted to be more like…like Henry. Like Joseph. Sure, Joseph and Cosette were on the rocks right now, but he was pretty sure both would come to their senses and work it out. Maybe he needed to go to Joseph, offer at least to help – he knew how rough patches with Cosette could be, and even though Tom hadn’t been able to survive them, Joseph was different. Cosette would figure that out. After all, Joseph was exactly the kind of man Cosette had waited for. Tom could maybe show him what not to do. And it would not be difficult for Joseph, who was nothing like Tom. Reserved where Tom was attention-seeking, self-controlled where Tom was indulgent, quiet where Tom was boisterous. And wise where Tom was foolish.

And even if it was too late to try with Cosette, it didn’t mean he still couldn’t try his hand at this new way, at Henry and Joseph’s way, just with someone else. He didn’t make these changes to please her—they had somehow overcome him, compelled him, in spite of his baser nature. Maybe she had inspired him. Maybe being around her and those like her, like Henry, like Christina, Shelly, Joseph, had shown him something that he still couldn’t quite comprehend, not yet. But it was something he wanted for himself. Even if he wasn’t sure what it was.

He just wanted to be happy. Wasn’t that what anybody wanted? And his old way was not working.

Still, there was the potential of being unfair to Shelly. She was there, she was potentially available, and she had some traits he was looking for. No, she wasn’t Cosette – nobody would ever be, he realized – but he couldn’t spend the rest of his life alone, pining for someone who didn’t want him. Not that way, at least. Maybe it was kind of unfair to that other person, being second choice. Maybe it wouldn’t be like that, maybe Cosette would turn out to be the stepping stone to the real person, the one he was really supposed to be with. If you believed in that sort of thing.

He would never know if he didn’t try.
Once home, Tom helped Cosette get everything inside and insisted she sit down and eat, but Beatrice was too happy to see her mother, who she hadn’t seen all day, so Cosette would up with an armful for a while as Tom thanked Giselle and sent her home for the night. Beatrice would not leave her mother’s side as Cosette made herself a plate of the chili cheese fries and sat down on the couch for a short break, instead cuddling into her side the whole time and munching a fry here and there.

“I’ll watch her while you go shower,” Tom said as he cleaned up after mother and daughter.

“Mommy!” Beatrice whined, reaching for Cosette’s face.

“I can take her back with me, get her cleaned up.”

Tom crossed his arms, scowling down at his daughter, and then realized this was not going to be the way to convince Beatrice to let her mother have a little bit of time alone. He softened his features, and then pulled out a trump card.

“Bebe, would you like some chocolate?” he asked.

“Cha-ka! Cho-co-late!” Beatrice squealed.

Cosette squinted one eye at him in skeptic amusement. “Bribery?”

“Whatever works,” he said.

“Okay, this is what’s going to happen,” Cosette said, standing up, in spite of the fact that Beatrice was clinging to her arm. “Mommy is going to take you to get ready for bed, and then you’re going to come out here and eat some chocolate and watch a video or something as you settle down for bed. Okay?”

“Kay!” Beatrice scuttled off toward the bathroom, ahead of her mother.
“And if she gets too riled up because of the chocolate, you’re staying up with her,” Cosette warned him playfully.

“I know. Just like the time I accidentally gave her caffeine.”

It went as Cosette said. Beatrice came out in her little blue Cinderella nightgown and Tom managed to get her on *Sleeping Beauty* while Cosette took a bath. Cosette snuggled with Beatrice for a while after before the two of them wound up dropping off together just as the fairies were making Princess Aurora’s dress, and changing it from pink to blue and back again.

Tom looked at them, curled up in the corner of the couch, immensely happy that he hadn’t left when Cosette had given him the opportunity when it seemed Beatrice wasn’t going to be any fuss that night. Cosette was tucked into the corner of the couch, her cheek against the back cushions and her back against the arm of the couch. Beatrice was lying with her head in Cosette’s lap, her body making an L-shape around Cosette’s knees.

It was hard, in that moment, to reconcile that this was not really his life. This was his daughter, but not his wife, and not in his house. And the bitterness of that pill was difficult to swallow in moments like this, when he wanted all of it, so much, it was a physical ache.

The thought that it would be Joseph who would get this, get to stay in this house, sleep beside Cosette, put Beatrice to bed on nights like this, absolutely gutted him. He pushed it from his mind, and willed himself to at least treasure what little he did get. This night, at least, was his.

After Prince Phillip had successfully defeated the dragon, he got up and picked up Beatrice, being extra careful not to wake either one. He carried her to bed, made sure she was really asleep before leaving her in her crib. Then he went back into the living room and had to decide what to do with Cosette.

Did he wake her? He didn’t want to, she would be disoriented. Yet he couldn’t bring himself to pick her up and carry her to the bedroom. He was pretty sure he could physically do it, but it somehow felt…wrong. To do that. As if it weren’t his right.

Wake her or carry her…he realized he’d been standing over her too long, trying decide, when her snoring abruptly stopped and she looked up at him. “Tom?” she said in her low, sleepy voice. “What…what time is it?”
“A bit after nine-thirty,” he said. He reached down, gently taking her arm. “Come on, I’ll help you

to bed.”

She let him guide her through the dining room, down the hall and into her bedroom. She crawled

into bed and was asleep again rather quickly, and Tom had to wonder, as she didn’t ask about

Beatrice, didn’t give him any directions, just quietly acquiesced to his help and then went to sleep.

Tomorrow. He would talk to her about Shelly tomorrow.

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“We’re planning on a big fourth of July barbeque,” Christina told her as she helped unpack
groceries. “Mom and Dad, you, Tom, Beatrice, some other people, I think I invited Shelly, too.”

“Sounds good. What got the burr in your fur, deciding to have a party?” Cosette asked. Saturday
morning had dawned bright and clear, and she had gotten to sleep in a bit as Tom came by early
and took Beatrice for the day so she could relax. Not that Cosette exactly relaxed, but rather took
care of the dozen things that gotten neglected during graduation week.

“Nothing much, just got a cool gas grill we’d like to try,” Christina said. “Thought it was a good
excuse.”

“I wonder if Tom’s done the Fourth of July thing,” Cosette pondered.

The two sisters exchanged amused smirks. “I don’t think it’s as big a thing on his side of the
pond,” Christina agreed.

“You know something, I’ve always wondered what history lessons are like in Britain, when it
comes to that sort of thing, you know, the empire losing the colonies like that.”

“You’ve never asked him?”
“It hasn’t come up.” She stood and tried to picture it, amused at the thought. “You know, maybe I should ask him to come in next year, if he’s free, and tell the kids how he learns about the Revolutionary War.”

“I’d pay money,” Christina laughed. “Although he’s so polite he’d probably make it sound like it was perfectly fine for America to declare independence, no hard feelings.”

“That and act out as much as he could,” Cosette mused. She heard his familiar step in the kitchen foyer. “Hey, we were just making fun of you,” she quipped as he came inside. Beatrice was already on the ground, rushing over to her mommy.

Tom gave them both a bemused smile. “What for this time?”

“The Revolutionary War,” Christina said.

“I don’t believe that was my fault,” Tom said, playing along.

“We were wondering what you British kids learn about it in school,” Cosette supplied.

“Um…not much, really, I mean, we cover it as part of the history of the empire but we don’t go into it nearly as much as I’m sure you do. But I do remember that we call it the War of Independence. And we’re a bit more focused on the French Revolution than the American one.”

Cosette and Christina exchanged looks. “So are you saying there’s a subject the Cambridge Double-first scholar cannot expound upon?” Christian teased him.

“The double-first was in classics, not history,” Tom returned, going to the fridge and rummaging himself a drink. “Although the ideas your founding fathers used to put together your Constitution were heavily influenced by the Greeks—“

“Mommy, hungry!” Beatrice said imperiously.

Cosette scooped up her daughter. “And what do you want to eat, my darling?”
“Cookie!”

“What did she have for lunch?” Cosette asked Tom.

“Mac and cheese, with some strawberries for dessert,” Tom said, derailed from his impending monologue. “Ate all of it, too.” He pecked his daughter on the head and she reached up, pressing her fingers against his lips, as if silencing him.

“Well, for that alone you get a cookie,” Christina announced, grabbing the bag of Chips Ahoy Cosette usually kept on top of the fridge. Beatrice eagerly accepted the treat, grinning madly at her aunt.

“Okay, I gotta stop by Mom and Dad’s on the way home,” Christina said, shoving a cookie into her mouth.

“Hey!” Cosette cried. “What about the diet?”

Christina gave her a little smirk. “What about it?” she asked.

“Cosette,” Tom admonished. “She can have a cookie if she wants a cookie.”

“Yeah, but…okay.” Christina had been so faithful to eating healthy, the carelessness of her action was surprising.

“It’s about choices,” Christina said. “It’s about one cookie instead of half a bag.”

“True,” Cosette agreed.

“And besides, I hit my weight goal,” Christina said, smiling proudly.

“Oh, fantastic!” Tom said, coming over and giving her a hug. “Congratulations!”
“I just have to make good choices, keep my sugar and fat intake low. I’m not worried,” she said as Tom released her.

“The important thing is how you feel,” Tom said.

“Spoken like a man,” Cosette teased.

He shot her a look.

“All right you two, knock it off,” Christina said with a laugh. She kissed her niece goodbye and made her exit with promises to call later.

“So, are you dropping Beatrice off?” Cosette asked.

“Did you get done with the things you needed to do, or do you need more time?” he asked in return. “Not that I ever mind spending time with my daughter but I think she needs some Mommy time.”

“It’s okay, I was going to make some dinner in a bit if you wanted to stick around.”

“Have you talked to Joseph?” he asked.

The abruptness of the subject change caught her by surprise. She almost dropped the bag of flour she’d been putting in the cabinet. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m just worried about you two, Cosette.” His tone was low, mellow. “I feel like a self-centered tit when I ask this, but…”

“Tit,” Beatrice echoed from where she sat on the floor, playing with the rest of the groceries Cosette hadn’t put away yet, finishing her cookie.
Cosette’s eyes flew wide. “Tom!”

“Sorry,” he groaned, covering his face with his hand.

“We have to be extra careful, me especially,” Cosette said, trying not to laugh. “I know I have a potty mouth.”

“Potty mouth!” Beatrice parroted.

“Beatrice, do you have to potty?” Cosette asked. They’d been working on potty-training her for the last few months, and so far it had been hit and miss.

“No,” Beatrice said with a shake of her blonde curls. She looked so much like Tom, with the color of her eyes and the shape of her nose. Tom, however, said she favored her when she smiled or got angry, with the way her mouth would twist. She also had a lot of her mannerisms, Tom said, but that was probably due to the fact she was around Mommy a lot more than Daddy, unless Daddy was home from filming, like now.

“Maybe we should try anyway,” Cosette said, taking Beatrice’s hands and getting her up. She walked her daughter to the bathroom.

The attempt to change the subject, however, was not successful. When Cosette returned and started to make dinner, Tom was sitting at the kitchen table, watching her in that intense way of his.

“I wanted to ask before, and I’m being paranoid, I’m sure, but tell me and I’ll let it drop,” he said, and his tone made the hairs on Cosette’s arms stand up.

“What? What is it? You’re scaring me,” she said irritably as she pulled out some toys for Beatrice to play with while she worked in the kitchen – at a safe distance from the stove.

“I’m not the reason you and Joseph are having a rough patch, am I?” he asked.

She stared at him a moment, but knew if she didn’t say something quickly he would become more suspicious. “Why would you think that? You haven’t even been here the last three months.”
“Like I said, I’m being self-centered. I know it isn’t about me but…I just wanted to be sure.”

“Nothing you’ve done has anything to do with me and Joseph right now,” she said. That much was the truth. “You’re fine.”

“Because I would never want to get between you, you do know that, don’t you?”

“Of course I do, Tom.” She frowned, wondering what was really on his mind.

Beatrice picked up a small pan and set it on a low box where Cosette kept old newspapers for recycling. “Mommy, cook!” she said.

“That’s great, baby,” she said. She reached into the drawer and gave Beatrice a plastic flipping spatula. Beatrice took it and pretended to flip invisible food in the pan.

“It can’t be easy for him to have to put up with someone like me,” Tom murmured.

“Someone like you?” Cosette echoed, stopping what she was doing. “What do you mean by that?” She turned from the counter, fully facing him.

Tom looked embarrassed, like he’d said more than he should have said. “Well… it’s always a problem dealing with an ex, but when you’re sharing a child…I just worry that sometimes Joseph feels like he hasn’t gotten a girlfriend, he’s gotten an entire family.”

“That’s not necessarily a bad thing,” Cosette said. “At least you’re not someone who wants to make trouble, being jealous and possessive. You don’t give yourself enough credit, Tom. You’re a good father, and you’re a good friend to me, and there’s no reasonable way Joseph could resent that.”

“I hope so. His opinion…is important to me. I’ve come to admire him a lot. I worry sometimes he thinks I’m just a shallow actor who sleeps around.”
“And he would think that, why? Have you been doing that?” she folded her arms, raising an eyebrow. Maybe this was more for her benefit, and maybe she already knew the answer, but it was obviously important to him, too.

“No.” Tom looked down at his hands, and in that moment Cosette knew something big was up. Something in her intuition, or just what she knew of Tom, made her think that he was trying to say something more, but had no idea how.

She pulled out the chair next to him and sat down, facing him. “He doesn’t think that about you,” she said. “He thinks you’re a good guy.”

Tom looked up at her. “Does he?” He sounded skeptical.

“Yes. He’s said as much.”

“Which brings me to something I wanted to talk to you about,” Tom said, albeit he sounded reluctant.

“To me?” she asked. Beatrice came over at that moment with the empty pan with the pretend food.

“Eat!” she said, holding up the spatula to Cosette’s face. Cosette pretended to take a bite, and then Beatrice turned to Tom, and he did the same. He sat back, watching his daughter go as Beatrice returned the pan to her pretend stove.

He sighed, shifted his shoulders. “Cosette,” he started, “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately. About my life, my choices. I haven’t been with anyone since Ashley. And by that I mean—“

His meaningful look told her all she needed to know. “Okay,” she cut him off, suddenly not comfortable knowing his sexual status. But if he was going to go there, she could rally for him. “Due to what, opportunity, desire, availability?”

“Due to the fact that the kind of women who used to interest me, don’t interest me anymore.”
He hoped he hadn’t gone too far. From the look Cosette was giving him, he wasn’t sure if he’d given her just too much information or not. And also realizing how what he just said could have sounded – after all, Cosette was well aware of how interested in her he’d once been. But he hadn’t meant it like that – he’d been drawn to Cosette initially because she was beautiful, and challenging, not falling into his lap like so many others had. And yes, she was smart, he’d always been attracted to smart women, that much wouldn’t change. But he knew, and maybe one day might be able to say out loud, that he’d been a shallow, manipulative cad in those days, and the feelings he’d developed for her were entirely unexpected.

He certainly couldn’t explain that right now. It would come out all wrong.

“All right,” she said slowly, sitting back in her chair. “So what are you trying to say?”

May as well come out with it, he thought. “I want to try something different. I want to try a relationship the way…the way you and Joseph are doing it. The way Henry did with Christina.”

“A relationship where sex is not a requirement?” she said, her tone skeptical.

He hadn’t forgotten how quick she was, how easily she could see through him, but it still surprised him when she did it. “Basically, yes.”

“Why?”

He was stunned by the question. “Why not?” he returned, defensively.

“I’m sorry, that didn’t sound right,” Cosette corrected herself. “I mean, what is bringing this on? I mean, what spurred this…desire, for lack of a better word?”

“What I’m doing now obviously isn’t working,” Tom said. “I felt sort of…used…after breaking up with Ashley, and it just seems that the women I have been around lately all seem to be interested in one thing from me.”

Cosette’s expression softened, but there was something in the way she was looking at him. Not amused, not cynical, but hesitant. “You broke up with Ashley last summer. Almost a year ago.”
“I know. It’s been coming for a while, actually, it’s not that I don’t…” He couldn’t tell her about his sexual needs. She already had her opinions about his attitudes. But he also wanted her to know that they weren’t the same as they used to be. “It wasn’t satisfying, what I had with Ashley. And I look and see people like you and Joseph, and Henry and Christina, and I think of what you’ve been trying to tell me for a long time now, and how maybe I should try it your way.”

Cosette regarded him carefully. “Well,” she said after a thoughtful pause, “I certainly don’t want to discourage you. I just know that a lot of the people you’re exposed to on a regular basis, the pool you get to pick from,” she added with a smile, “aren’t really like…well, us. People in general think sex is for fun, and that if you don’t have a sexual connection in a relationship, there’s no point to it.”

“They’re wrong.” Tom said, and hadn’t thought about it much before he heard the words come from his mouth. “At least,” he added, before he revealed too much (although it felt too late for that), “that’s what I’m starting to think, too.”

“So then.” She seemed rather pleased. “This is good, Tom. I’m glad for you. But finding someone who’d be willing to make that journey with you isn’t going to be easy. I mean, you can’t be the only one in the relationship who thinks that way, it makes it much harder.”

Tom looked at her. This was so strange, having this conversation with her. Before it had been about them, and it had caused so many problems. As much as he understood why it didn’t work between them, he still hated it. And wished desperately that now, maybe, they could try again---

And as quickly as that thought occurred, he pushed it away. She and Joseph were having a difficult time, yes, but that didn’t mean he could root for them breaking up. He couldn’t lie in wait, or worse, make sure it happened. Cosette deserved better. So much better.

“I was thinking of someone,” he said.

“Oh? Who?”

He hated this. It was hard to say the name, knowing the instant disapproval that would re-color this conversation.

“Well, I’m hesitant to say,” he said, sheepish. “I know you wouldn’t approve, but I promise you,
my intentions would be 100% honorable.”

“Who?” Cosette pressed again, narrowing her eyes only slightly.

“Shelly.”

She went blank. Blinked a few times. “Shelly?” she echoed.

“Now, let me explain,” Tom said, throwing up his hand before her confused mind could regroup. “I’m not saying I am interested in Shelly in that way. I like her so far in a friendly way, and I would like to get to know her better. Not in a way that creates pressure, not make her uncomfortable—“

Beatrice, who had been distracted by whatever it was that sometimes temporarily distracted two year olds, reminded them that she was still in the room by coming over again, this time with some blocks and food-shaped toys that she’d scrounged from the living room, in her pan, pushing them around with the spatula. “Done!” she chirped.

Both Mom and Dad had to take a moment to eat their daughter’s offerings, before she ran off again, giving them a few more moments to talk.

“She’d be uncomfortable,” Cosette said, her expression suddenly unreadable. “At least at first. She used to be a fangirl, Tom. A Hiddlestoner, how do you think I knew things about you when we first met?”

“She doesn’t seem to be anymore.”

“No, not after…” Cosette trailed off, looking away.

“I know,” Tom assured her. “I apologized to her about that.”

“She mentioned that.” Her eyes were so sharp, observing him so closely. “So what you’re saying is, you want to get to know Shelly better. See if there might be something there.” She shook her head. “I don’t know, Tom. I don’t know if she’ll go for it.”
“Well, the important thing here,” Tom said, flattening his hand on the table between them, “is making sure that you aren’t uncomfortable with it. Because she is your friend,” he added quickly when Cosette started to protest. “And it wouldn’t be right otherwise.”

She seemed impressed. “You want my permission.”

“Yes. Because you’re friends. You told me that you didn’t want me to be uncomfortable, to feel awkward or unwanted. The same is true for you. So if it’s going to make things awkward or uncomfortable for you, me getting closer to Shelly, then I won’t do it.”

She stared at him. She might have been wondering if he was serious, but Tom had never lied to her before. He wasn’t going to start. He hoped she remembered that.

“Do you like her, in that way?” she asked.

“I’m not sure how much, but I do like her. I was flirting with her a bit at the fundraiser, but it wasn’t just to flirt. I promise I’ll dial it down, be very casual.”

Cosette sighed. “I can’t tell you not to, Tom. I just don’t want you to hurt her. Both our friendships are on the line here. And you could hurt her.” Cosette looked so sad. “You don’t know her very well, you don’t know how delicate she is.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

“All right then.” She nodded. “I’m just warning you, she’s going to be suspicious of your attention to her. She’ll probably come and talk to me. I won’t discourage her,” she assured him, “but so help me Tom.”

“I know,” he said. “I promise. I give my word.”

“Okay.”
Somehow Cosette held it together for the rest of the evening.

She made dinner, they ate, Tom played with Beatrice for a bit more, and then got her ready for bed. Cosette sat in the living room while Tom was on bath duty, trying hard not to freak out.

He was interested in Shelly. But worse, it was the why he was interested in Shelly. Even with her weight loss, Shelly was not glamorously pretty like the women Tom usually dated. If Tom was interested, it was because of who she was.

Tom had finally woken up. Had started to realize the damage he was doing to himself. She didn’t know the intimate details of his relationship with Ashley but somehow it had started to make him think.

Why he was doing this, she didn’t really understand, but somehow it had happened. Tom had been completely sincere as he told her the things he was thinking and feeling, and while she was convinced there was a lot more to it – there always was when it came to him – she knew he was being truthful.

And it honestly didn’t surprise her.

But now...now of all times! And it just made Joseph’s suspicions that much worse. He was convinced she was going to eventually go back to Tom. What he didn’t realize was that she wouldn’t do that to Tom, not again. She would not put him through that. She would not risk his heart, not when it had been through so much, when it had endured so much, because of her. He had grown, and he needed protecting from those who would abuse him.

She loved him too much to risk hurt him again.

Joseph was right.

Tom went home after Beatrice went to bed, but Cosette could hardly sleep that night. She didn’t know what to do. If she gave up her relationship with Joseph, she was sure that nobody else would ever come along. Nobody would ever compare to Tom. She would be forever watching him, with whoever he did eventually find, having a special place in his heart, yes, but not on his arm.
Still, it was totally unfair to Joseph. He was too smart to not see it. He was too good of a man to deserve it.

She had to end it.
Two Years, Six Months Later, Week Two

Chapter Summary

Tom starts talking to Shelly; Cosette deals with a crisis.

Film schedules were never a hundred percent reliable. The problem with the amount of green screen work they were going to be using was that sometimes things needed extra time to be tweaked. Tom’s Morpheus costume was make-up and wardrobe, and not a suit full of blue dots, thank God; but many of the creatures he had to interact with were not human, but gods and faeries and demons and other various preternatural beings, and this made the other actors not so lucky.

The starting of filming was pushed back to the middle of July. Almost a month away. Two weeks longer than he’d anticipated. Which wasn’t, really, a problem, if he was serious about attempting to establish a deeper friendship with Shelly. It gave him more time.

Because he had no idea where to start.

Usually, when he was interested in a woman, he would pay more attention to her, and ramp up the flirting along with the conversation. He would suss out her level of interest in him – which could be hard, because some women found him physically appealing and were up for a bit of sex, but not any deep interest in him as an actual person – and then find out things about her where he could bridge an interest. If she was into a particular author, he would read it and talk about it with her. If she was into a particular style of dancing, or a series of films, or art, or whatever, he would investigate and build upon it. If she was obviously interested in him, and he could easily discern it, he wouldn’t hesitate to just jump in, ask her out, turn the conversation to deeper topics, and let things flow as they would. Tom had always been the kind of person who needed to be mentally stimulated to be physically stimulated – usually, of course, as there had always been exceptions – but Shelly wasn’t like any of those women.

This was more spiritual than anything. This was an exercise in trust. And he had no idea if Shelly would trust him or not.

His first opportunity to find out was pretty much the day after he’d asked Cosette’s permission. He had Beatrice for the morning, as Giselle wasn’t coming in until eleven because she had a doctor’s appointment, and then he was going to swing by the school and bring both Cosette and Shelly some lunch, as the students were out and they were putting their classrooms away for the summer. He would offer to help in the afternoon, and maybe, if it went well, he would ask if Shelly was interested in dinner, either that night or one upcoming.

It was a plan. A plan that distracted him and made it difficult to focus on Beatrice that morning, which made him frustrated. He kept going over it in his head, what he would say, what Shelly might say, how he could avoid as much embarrassment as possible.

The main problem was that Shelly probably had a preconception of him that was – for the most part – inaccurate. As a Hiddlestoner, her previous impression of him was what came from interviews and the various other ways he’d made a fool of himself in front of live cameras over the years. Sure, he had always tried to be authentic, but it was only one version of him. It wasn’t the clumsy side that was always cutting himself in the kitchen when handling sharp objects. It wasn’t
the maniac who would talk to himself as he memorized his lines, saying things repeatedly in
different ways, and sound like a lunatic while doing. It certainly wasn’t the hermit who would hide
with a book for hours on end and stare into space while turning things over in his head. And
currently, it wasn’t the father who could not understand how Cosette kept up with the dervish of
the two-year-old who was tearing up his house as she bounced from one toy to the next, and then
would seem to stall and ask where Mommy was, when is Mommy coming home, and pine
inconsolably for Mommy. Which made him a tiny bit jealous.

She didn’t know the neurotic, insecure person he was, deep down, that he covered with layer after
layer of charisma and self-confidence that was charged with the adulation and attention he
received.

Sometimes he wondered if anyone knew that person. Cosette was the first he felt might have really
understood, but…

He pushed those thoughts away as he made Beatrice an early lunch. Cosette had made him stock
his fridge with pepperoni slices and slices of cheddar cheese, as these were Beatrice’s favorite, and
there was a carton of strawberries he had chopped up, as her favorite fruit. Sometimes Cosette
would just buy groceries for Beatrice and stock his pantry herself to save time, and Tom would find
things he didn’t even know existed before his little girl came into his life. And if they involved
chocolate in any way, he had to try them for himself.

Beatrice dozed off after eating, so when Giselle arrived at eleven, she was in her crib bed, and
Giselle decided to stay at Tom’s. When he left she was tidying up the kitchen and washing his
dishes, which he tried to tell her she didn’t have to do, but Giselle just smiled at him in her wise
way and went about her business. She was a sweet, good-natured woman, but she didn’t talk much
to him outside of her work obligations, and he wondered if she was the same way with Cosette.

The school was so quiet without the students, but Tom signed in to the office, greeting the lovely
office manager and putting on his yellow visitor sticker, as procedures were still in place. Richard
smiled at him as he passed by, still dressed in his work suit.

“Bringing lunch?” the principal asked.

Tom raised the box of pizza he was carrying, along with three salads on top. “Ladies are working
hard, I’m sure they need a break.”

“Sounds good.”

He went to Cosette’s room first, to let her know he was there, but the second he walked through the
doorway, he saw she was on the phone, and with a highly distressed look on her face.

It was a little before eleven when her cellular phone rang. She saw Joseph’s name come up, and her
stomach tightened into a horrible little ball. She wasn’t ready to do this now – but she couldn’t just
ignore the call, either. Something compelled her to pick it up.

“Cosette?” came his voice, rough and serious, as if he’d just been through some physical ordeal
and was struggling to talk.

“Yeah, are you okay?” she asked, that strange feeling lighting a bolt of adrenaline through her
system.

“Something has happened,” he said, drawing a breath and steadying his voice into one of near
deadly calm. “I can’t give too many details, but we had an incident at work, some of my co-workers have been hospitalized and I’m going to have to work extra shifts for the next few weeks, so I’m afraid I’m not going to get to see or talk to you much for a short time. I will call when things return to normal. All right?”

“O…kay. Are you hurt at all? Do you need anything for Hugo?”

“My mom is going to take Hugo, he should be fine. I’m not hurt, but two of the other men were shot.”

“Shot?”

“It’s a risk you run when you’re a bodyguard, Cosette. They had vests on but vests only cover the vital organs. They’re both hospitalized but we don’t have updates on their conditions. I’m sorry, I have to go, things are insane here, but I wanted to let you know in case you saw it on the news.”

“All right, uh…thanks….uh…I hope you’re, goodness, you’re staying safe, right? I don’t want anything to happen to you. I mean, I hope you’ll be…you’ll be safe…”

“Thank you. We’ll talk soon.” He hung up. God, she had sounded like an idiot.

Tom had walked into the room just before he hung up, and he took one look at her face and put down whatever he was carrying to rush over to her. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Joseph,” she said, her thoughts scrambled, jumbled, her head suddenly pounding as she pressed the heels of her hands to the sides of her face. “There was an incident at his work—“

“Is he okay?” Tom instantly asked, alarmed.

“Yeah, he called. Two other men were injured. Shot. I don’t know what happened,” she spread her hands, shaking her head, her tone slightly frantic.

Tom placed his hand on her shoulder and gently guided her to sit down in one of the student chairs that sat nearby. He pulled up a chair across from her and grasped her hand, pressing it between his.

“If he called and he said he wasn’t hurt, then he’s fine. He works security; most of the time just their presence is enough to deter people from trying anything, but there are risks, Cosette.”

She stared at him. She had always known that Joseph’s job was serious, but maybe having been around Isaac and the others for so long, she had forgotten it could be so dangerous. She just thought they kept watch – she forgot they carried guns for a reason.

“He, uh…” she was still shaken, her voice wavering. “He said he wouldn’t be able to see me or talk to me for a bit, because of the…incident.”

“If their team has been reduced, they have to cover for that,” Tom said with a nod. “Plus investigate what happened, and respond accordingly. Sounds like they’re doing the right thing.”

She nodded, her brain spinning.

“I brought lunch,” he offered. “Salad and pizza. I thought we could ask Shelly if she wanted to join us.” He seemed to pause, considering. “I’ll make a few calls, see what I can find out. Blake should be able to direct my inquiries.”

“You’d--” she stared up at him, blinking. “You don’t have to—“
“I know.” He squeezed her hand, gave her a reassuring smile. “He’s okay, Cosette. Whatever happened, it’s over, and they’ll be on guard. You hungry?”

Not really, she wanted to say, but Tom had gone through trouble and she let him bring over the pizza and hand her a salad. She opened it, tossing the ingredients with the plastic knife and fork Tom provided, putting on dressing, but doing it all on automatic.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” Tom said, pecking her forehead. He watched her warily as he left the room, and Cosette tried to bring herself back to earth, if just for him, because he was obviously worried.

He was right. Joseph was fine. Even if she wouldn’t be able to talk to him for a few weeks, at least not more than check-ins and short conversations. She couldn’t bring up them breaking up now, she realized. The timing was awful – but it would be worse to pretend, Joseph would be angrier if he found out later she’d been waiting to do this but had refrained out some sense of…of what? Obligation? Pity? He didn’t want either from her.

She forked through the salad, mindlessly. She didn’t know what made her feel worse – worry about Joseph, or her own selfishness in how this just made everything that much more difficult.

Tom was distracted as he walked down toward Shelly’s room. He had planned everything in his head but now there was a giant monkey wrench. He knew it didn’t really affect him that much, but worry about Cosette always seemed to take over everything in his brain.

He told himself that if wasn’t selfish of him to want an emotional life for himself. And if he was serious about getting to know Shelly, then she had to be first, not his worry about Cosette’s emotional state. She wasn’t hurt, Beatrice wasn’t hurt, and Joseph wasn’t hurt, and things would sort themselves out. He couldn’t get caught up in Cosette’s relationship. He had to separate himself a bit, and that wouldn’t prevent him for keeping an eye out in case he was desperately needed. Which he probably wouldn’t be, he told himself.

Shelly’s classroom door was open. Tom stuck his head around the doorjamb to locate her, and found her standing by her desk. She was sorting through a pile of papers, with more piles waiting. Her face was set in concentration, and he knocked lightly on the wood to get her attention.

“Yeah?” she called in a friendly voice, without looking up.

Tom stepped into the classroom and cleared his throat. “I brought some pizza for lunch, and wanted to know if you wanted to join us,” he said, as she finally tore her eyes away from whatever she was reading and looked up at him, eyebrows raised.

“Oh. That’s sweet, Tom, but, uh…” she looked back down at the papers in her hands, throwing several into the trash and then stopping again to examine one more carefully. “I’m afraid carbs are on my no-no list.” She tossed him a smile. “Thanks, though, for thinking of me.”

“I didn’t want to presume, so,” Tom said, having anticipated her response, “I also brought some salads. One with grilled chicken on it.”

She looked up again, more surprised this time. “Oh. Okay, well, I can’t say no to that.” She gave him a little smile. “I’ll be up in a few minutes, okay?”

He nodded. “Making some progress here, I see,” he commented, looking around. The student desks were stripped bare, having been pushed to the back of the room, and the chairs were neatly
stacked in front of the desks. Above them, the long bookshelf that lined the back of the room was piled with various pieces of equipment, such as paper trays, dictionaries, a few globes, yardsticks, some sport balls, and more boxes.

“Yeah, I have the kids do all the moving before they leave, at least stuff not too heavy for them,” she said, finishing her current pile of papers and moving to the next. “I’ve been stacking stuff back there all week before school let out. Trying to get a leg up.”

“What else do you need to do?”

“Take down the bulletin boards,” she drawled, going to sit at her desk, “and sort through the closet crap, throwing away things I haven’t used and am not going to use. I’m a bit of a hoarder.” She leaned her head on her hand. “You should see my apartment – oh, wait,” she laughed, pointing at him, “you will never see my apartment.”

Tom felt a little twinge of disappointment, but pushed on. “Well, you have three months to clean it up,” he suggested with a smirk.

She laughed. “Yeah, right. And it’s only two, actually. Summer gets shorter every year. Plus, I work a summer job, it starts next week.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, there are these summer camps around the country for gifted kids, I teach Geometry for three weeks at the local one.”

“Geometry? At a summer camp?”

“It’s day school. Some people call it summer camp for nerds, but I hate it when it sounds derogatory.”

“I’ve always been shite at maths,” he said, having slowly crossed the distance across the room and landing in front of her desk.

She smirked up at him, a bit of embarrassment in her cheeks. “I know.” She went back to shifting through her papers, apparently trying to clear off her desk. “I admit, I don’t teach it really math-y. I mean, when most people think of geometry, they think of proofs. I don’t do proofs.”

“You mean like logic proofs?”

“Pretty similar. But I prefer the more fun aspects. Things like fractals and polyhedrons and polyominoes and stuff like that.”

“I speak ancient Greek, and I didn’t understand any of those words.”

Shelly laughed. She was adorable, he realized, in her T-shirt and jeans, hair down, and looking quite trim.

“These are fractals,” she said, reaching behind her to grab a white book that looked like a student workbook. “Patterns that repeat, over and over, but change size and direction. You see fractals all the time, in nature. There’s a kind of broccoli they sell at Whole Foods called fractal broccoli.” She pointed to the picture. “See how it repeats?”

They spent several minutes looking at different fractals. Tom even googled the images and came up with some other examples.
“Is Cosette waiting upstairs?” Shelly said, rather suddenly, as she glanced at the time.

“Yeah, she’s in her room.”

“We should go.” Shelly stood up, shoving her phone into her pocket. Tom got a good look for the first time at her aqua blue T-shirt, which hung rather loosely on her frame. It looked like Charlie Brown-style-art, but the characters didn’t look quite right. Tom tried to stare but he realized it looked like the classic Lucy pulling the football out from Charlie Brown’s feet, and Charlie Brown flying through the air. But there was something like a hammer flying between them and – Lucy was wearing Loki horns?

“I’m sorry, but what is that on your T-shirt?” Tom asked with a curious scowl.

Shelly’s blush deepened. “It’s Charlie Brown dressed as Thor, and Lucy dressed as Loki. She’s doing that football thing.”

“Oh my God that’s brilliant,” Tom laughed. “Where did you get it?”

“It was a birthday present,” Shelly admitted shyly. “I know it’s big but I can’t bear to give it up.”

“It’s not just big, you’re swimming in it.”

“Well, I only wear it when I’m doing work like this,” she said, turning away slightly to go up the stairs, stepping out ahead of him.

“You look amazing, you know,” he complimented her, sensing he had somehow made her uncomfortable.

She glanced back at him as she approached Cosette’s door. She seemed even more uncomfortable now, which gave him a pang. And there was a strange expression on her face – “Thanks,” she squeaked before going into the classroom.

The next hour, however, was consumed by Shelly learned about what had happened to Joseph and comforting Cosette. Cosette had sat there, apparently, while Tom was gone, picking at her salad and staring into space. He was pretty sure he’d only been gone ten minutes, maybe fifteen, which did a little to alleviate the guilt.

“Okay, we need to get you out of here as early as possible,” Shelly declared, standing up to throw away her empty salad tray. “I’m going to take down your bulletin boards, so you can try to get some paperwork done. What do you have to do?”


“Okay. What about putting stuff away?”

“Shelly, you don’t have to do any of that,” Cosette protested. “You have your own room –“

“I’m way ahead, don’t worry about me. Where’s your staple remover?”

“I’ll help,” Tom said, standing up and closing up the leftover pizza. At Cosette’s look, he added, “Beatrice is with Giselle, it’s fine. As long as we get her by four.”

“You should be able to leave by two if we do this right,” Shelly said. “Just tell Lana downstairs, she’ll understand.”
“But I don’t need to leave,” Cosette argued. “I mean, it’s not like I can talk to Joseph. I’ll just sit around thinking and worrying.”

Shelly sighed, exchanging a look with Tom. “Well, we’re taking your bulletin boards down. Whatever you want to do after that, you’re a big girl, it’s up to you.”

“I’m taller, let me do that,” Tom said as Shelly grabbed a short stool to reach the tops of the bulletin boards. She handed him the staple remover – it was a long piece of metal with a rounded tip. All the staple removers he had ever encountered looked like little mouths with sharp canine teeth. He saw an opportunity. “Okay, maybe I’m not that bright, I am just an actor, but how do I---?”

Gently, and with a playful roll of her eyes and shake of her head, she took the staple remover and showed him that the rounded tip went under the staple, and by pushing down on the other end the staple was levered out. However, the staple would stick to the stick, its side just perfect for catching it, instead of going flying.

“Can you handle that? I know it isn’t ancient Greek or Shakespeare.”

“Ha ha,” Tom returned, but winked. She blushed, and he quickly went to work. He handed down the long strips of bulletin board trim, which she neatly piled into their appropriate groups before putting all the stacks into a long cardboard storage container. After the trim was down, then came the paper itself, which needed to be carefully caught and folded, not ripped, so that it could cover Cosette’s bookcases.

It took an hour, but between the two of them they took down all Cosette’s bulletin boards, paper and all, and put everything away in her closet. Then Shelly suggested they cover the bookcases holding the student library, which Cosette didn’t need any more until the new school year, so they taped the paper over the shelves using blue painters tape.

All the while, they bantered and chatted, Tom keeping the conversation going with as much eagerness as he dared to show. He noticed Shelly relax, let her playful side out, and realized how whip-smart she was. It was not surprisingly that she and Cosette were good friends, as they seemed well-matched and able to keep up with each other, mentally and emotionally.

They tried to include Cosette as much as they could, especially when they would catch her staring into space, her brain obviously whirling at a mile a minute. Occasionally she would smile at something they said, and get back to scribbling away in the cumulative files.

“Oh, I’m done with that – wow, you two did a lot!” Cosette exclaimed at around one-thirty. She stood up, rubbing the back of her neck. Tom resisted the impulse to go over and do it for her, knowing that wouldn’t be appropriate for one, and second, definitely not in front of Shelly. “I’m going to take these back downstairs. Shelly, you’ve done enough, really. I appreciate it a lot.”

“Oh, if you’re sure.” Shelly frowned at her. “You going to leave early?”

“Yeah, I think so. I think I’ll stop by Mom and Dad’s, tell them what’s going on.”

Tom felt torn. He wanted to offer to go with Cosette, as he was concerned about her, but also knew that would sound rather awkward. Plus, if she was with her parents, they were probably much more equipped to help her through this crisis than anyone. But still – “Do you want me to come, too?”

“No, no,” Cosette said, with a bit of an edge that told him he shouldn’t press. “You can go get Bebe if you want, or take some time for yourself, you’ve been busy helping. I appreciate it too.”
She pecked his cheek on her way out the door. Tom caught Shelly’s grin, which she tried to hide.

“Okay, then I’m going back to my room,” Shelly said.

“I’ll go and help,” Tom said.

She looked up at him. There was a strange kind of skepticism in her face. “No, you’re fine,” she said, her tone mildly dismissive as she started around him, on the way out the door.

“No, really, you sacrificed a lot of time to help Cosette, and I…” he trailed off, worried about what he wanted to say next. But he was, at times, incredibly impulsive, and the words insisted on leaving his mouth, “I’ve enjoyed talking with you. I’d like to help. If that’s okay.”

She still didn’t trust him, he realized, but she shrugged. “Okay. It’s your choice.” She led him back downstairs.

“Is it that strange?” he said, suddenly feeling very self-conscious. He didn’t want to seem creepy or weird, that certainly wouldn’t make things easier.

“That a Golden Globe and BAFTA winning actor wants to help a little third grade teacher clean up her classroom?” she teased as they walked down the stairs. “No, not weird at all.”

“I’m just a person, Shelly,” he said, a bit of annoyance creeping into his tone.

“That a Hiddlestoner, you aren’t,” she countered as they reached her room. She picked up her staple remover and handed it to him. “You were good at that, if you want to help. I could imagine the response I’d get if I took a picture and posted it on Instagram. So many Hiddlestoners have this fantasy of you as a teacher, more a college professor, really, but I’m quite sure many panties would get soaked over Mr. Hiddleston, Elementary school teacher.”

He walked toward the bulletin board. “Yes, well, you aren’t a Hiddlestoner anymore,” he pointed out.

She laughed. “I’m afraid it was too late for me when I got out. You’d already achieved mythical status.”

He sighed, lowering his arms, tossing the staples clinging to the bar in the trash. “Really, Shelly?” he asked with a wince.

Her expression was shy and guarded again when she looked at him. “Sorry. If you’re looking to hang out with a normal person, you may have made the wrong choice. I may not be obsessed with you like my fellow Tumblrites anymore, but that doesn’t mean the damage wasn’t done. I can’t quite think of you as a…as a real person. Of course, I tried to, regularly.” She sighed. “This is a very weird conversation.”

“We were doing so well before,” he said, stacking the long pieces of bulletin board trim on a nearby table.

“I guess it just feels like…I don’t know. I just don’t know why you’re spending time with me,” she said with a bit of a huffy sigh. “I mean, we’re friendly but we’re not friends, not like —

“We could be friends,” Tom said, seriously.

She frowned. “Okay. I know this is going to sound horrible, but…don’t you have enough friends? I always got the impression you were friends with darn near everyone.”
“Well…” he searched for the right thing to say. “You get friendly with the people you work with, you get close for a period of time, but there’s no…coherence to it. I mean, it’s temporary. Sure, when you run into each other again or work together again, it comes back and you have laughs and share old jokes, but…well, I’m much more solitary than most people think. And I…I like you. Honestly.”

She stared up at him. Blank. “Okay.” Like she thought he was nuts.

“Am I making you uncomfortable?” he asked. “I mean, if I am, I can go, but…I don’t know, I just enjoy your company, Shelly, but if that makes you uncomfortable, I don’t want that--”

Shelly shook her head, her hands going into her hair on the sides of her head. “No, no, I’m sorry, I know, that sounded awful, I just…I guess it just doesn’t compute with me. You just wanting to hang out and help. I mean, I can’t figure out why.”

“Does there have to be a why?” he asked.

“There’s always a why,” she answered. “Always. There’s always a reason why a person wants to be around another person.”

“Could that reason just simply be – they like them?” he suggested.

She stared at him, that blush coming to her cheeks again. “Yeah, I suppose. That’s probably the weird part for me.”

“That I would like you?” he said.

She nodded, mute. Shrugged. This was making her uncomfortable, Tom knew, but he felt he could overcome it. Many times he had had to talk people down from being intimidated in his presence. It had been the absolute hardest thing to adjust to in becoming a celebrity, in acquiring fame. Many people were intimated by it, and over time he had learned to navigate it.

“Shelly,” he said, stepping up to her desk, “we’re both people. People like other people. People become friends with other people. You’ve been listening to Tumblr talk about me for too long. I swear I am just a human being like any other human being, it’s not strange or weird that I would like you, as a person, any stranger than it is that you would like me. Don’t over-analyze it.”

She watched him as he spoke, and he could see the wheels turning in her head. She was smart – and guarded. He was pushing it a bit much and she could see that. But he knew he had a point and she knew it, too.

“Okay,” she said with a sigh.

They spent the next hour or so talking again, as he took down her bulletin boards, she cleaned her desk, and they worked together to cover her bookshelves as they had covered Cosette’s, and her sorting through her closet to throw things out.

“You like superheroes,” Tom said, having seen some of her things. They were sitting on the floor in front of the largest of the cabinets, digging through the bottom shelf where Shelly had shoved things throughout the year, everything all haphazard and needed to be sorted.

“Oh, the kids love that I’m into comic books,” she said. “But truthfully I was always into DC more than Marvel. Even though Marvel does movies much better than DC. But that was a few years ago, actually, before DC went through two major reboots and I lost interest in a lot of the things they were restarting.”
“Is that…um…I hate how this sounds, so egotistical, but that suits him – was the thing with me originally a Loki thing?”

She smiled at him. “Kinda. Not like you think. I thought he was an interesting character but when I saw the first movie I crushed pretty hard on your co-star, Hemsworth.”

“Understandably.”

“But when you did the Loki think at the San Diego Comic Con, showed up in full costume, I thought that made you pretty damn cool. You Tube interviews around that time helped with the rest. And Hollow Crown came out on DVD around that time and that’s when the rabbit hole opened up and swallowed me.” She made a dramatic gesture of parting her hands and then closing them in a circular motion.

“But your heart belongs to DC, then,” Tom said. “Not Marvel.”

“True. I’ve been reading Superman and Batman since I was old enough to read. Batman got too creepy in the eighties so my parents wouldn’t let me read him anymore, gave me nightmares, and the Superman movies stopped coming out – you know, with Christopher Reeve? – so I lost interest for a good long while, until the late nineties.”

“All right, pop quiz then, which one would you save, Superman or Batman?”

Shelly grunted. “I hate that question. Truthfully I always liked both of them when they were together, better than when they were apart. I like the contrast. Throw Wonder Woman in there and it could be magic if it was done right.”

“Big fan of the Dawn of Justice movie, then?”

“Sort of. I loved the idea. I thought some of the fantasies in it were a bit over the top, sort of took away from the main drive of the movie. I loved Jeremy Irons as Alfred.”

“And you still haven’t answered. Batman or Superman?”

She squinted her face at him. “If you absolutely put a gun to my head, and forced me to choose, I would have to say Batman. And then I’d feel awful about it.”

“If you don’t read a lot of DC now, what do you read?”

“Vertigo, some Image, I’m picky—“

“Isn’t that still DC? I mean, Vertigo – they’re the ones who did the Sandman comics.”

“Yes, that’s true. And Fables. God, I’d love to see them do something with Fables, but I guess with Once Upon A Time that’s not really possible.”

“Never watched that show, but it’s about fairy tales, right?”

“Very Disney oriented. Fables is focused a lot on Snow White and The Big Bag Wolf, they called him Bigby, but, uh…since Snow is a big character in Once Upon A Time that’s probably a problem. I loved Sandman, though, when it was in publication. I have all the extra large absolute editions.”

“Ah,” Tom said, finding another opening. “You should have said something sooner, I could have gotten you some merchandise, unless…” he faltered. “Unless, um…”
She smiled at him, reassuringly. “I always knew you’d be a fantastic Morpheus. It was a dream role I had for you. Others wanted you to play Mr. Darcy, Rochester, or even the Scarlet Pumpernickle, but I always wanted Dream from Sandman.”

“Scarlet Pumpernickel? That’s Daffy Duck! You mean the Scarlet Pimpernel.”

“What, you couldn’t do Daffy Duck? I’ve heard all kinds of accents come from you. Thank God you never did general American, though, you sound too nasally.”

“Hey now,” Tom said, immediately launching in to the accent. “I will have you know that my American accent is spot on.”

“Yes, if you’re doing Hank Williams in the South, it’s awesome, but otherwise you just sound flat!”

“Well, yes.”

“Shut up. You know there’s a popular idea going around the internet—“

“Oh, well, it’s probably backed up by loads of proof then—“ still in his American accent, he wasn’t going to let it go.

“Stop it! But the idea is that we Americans are the ones with the original British accent and it’s you guys after we split off from you that developed into what you’re doing now.”

“Preposterous,” he intoned. “Absurd.”

“You know, I’ve been curious – the accent you do for Morpheus. It’s not quite British, is it?”

“No, I toned down my natural accent, tried to do a blend,” he said, finally talking back in his normal tone. “We wanted him to be more universal. But they also do some post-production distortion of my voice to give it that particular quality.”

“And the star eyes, too, right? CGI?”

“Yes. I was so grateful they didn’t make me wear contacts the whole time. That would have been a real pain.”

“You’re starting the new film soon, aren’t you? The second part of the trilogy?”

“Next month,” he confirmed. And then... “Would you, by any chance, like to come over and see some of the pre-production stuff I have?” She hesitated. “I mean, of course you couldn’t talk about it on social media, but if you’re a fan of the source material...maybe you even have a few thoughts about the new script?”

“You can show me the new script?”

“Well, not really, but as long as you were discrete.”

She bit her lip. “I’m not so good on the discretion thing. Fangirl. Kind of can’t help it. But I can promise I won’t say anything on social media. I mean, people would think I was a troll if I didn’t have photographic evidence, and I am not going to take a picture of you to prove you were in my classroom.”

He smirked. “I’m good at selfies—no, no, just kidding!” he quickly defended at her scathing look. “So, when you finish here? Or the weekend?”
“Wow, you were serious,” she said, stunned. “Tom, I’m not so sure you want to be activating the fangirl in me. I thought you just wanted to be friends and not have me think you choosing to be around me of your own free will as being utterly freaky. This is turning into something in fanfiction—“

“Oh, please, do not talk about fanfiction!” Tom blurted with a groan, his hands going into his hairline.

Shelly chuckled evilly. “Oh, come on, do not tell me you’re actually aware of your fanfiction following!”

“If it was just Loki I could have understood, but…the real life stuff? No. Definitely no.”

She laughed. “Then you and I cannot be friends. I read a ton of that shit during my obsession.”

“As long as you didn’t write it—” At her look he stopped cold. “Oh please no.”

“Guilty. Sorry.” She watched him, on her hands and knees, getting ready to get to her feet. Her look was utterly challenging. “So did I finally scare you off?”

He squared his shoulders. “You’re not doing it anymore, are you?”

“Nope.”

“Is it…still out there?”

She chuckled. “I did take it down, after what…happened. So, no.”

“Maybe,” he said, trying to get away from the subject to fanfiction – it really did unnerve him, he couldn’t stand to think about it – “Maybe, not to be an arse, but maybe you shouldn’t mention this…on Facebook or wherever you…”

“Silly man, I totally wouldn’t do that. Like I said, they’d think I was a troll. Some of your fans are…” she grimaced. “Well, I’ve never had anyone do anything to me, but I’ve seen how they get into it with each other. And I have to confess, I did watch the fandom war that broke out when you and Cosette had Beatrice. Many are convinced that you’re still secretly with her.”

Tom gawked, horrified. “Really?”

“You’re pretending not to be in order to protect Beatrice’s privacy. Which is absurd because your friend Benedict is married with two kids and his privacy is just fine because they’re smart about it. Or maybe since I’m not a Cumberbitch I have no idea what I’m talking about. You’re his friend, what do you think?”

“He’s got his own way of dealing with things, that is true.” He got lost in his own thoughts for a few minutes, thinking of things he usually didn’t try to think about.

“Okay, well, I gotta head home,” Shelly said, having gotten to her feet and starting to close up her classroom. “Just a few more things to do tomorrow. Thank you for your help, Tom, seriously, you saved me some serious time.”

“My pleasure. So when would you like to come by?”

She seemed to stop again, giving him that same look she’d given him a couple hours ago, when
she seemed to think he was up to something. “Would Saturday work?”

“Sure. Why don’t you text me what time.”

“Um, I, uh…”

He pulled out his phone. “What’s your number?” She told him, he punched it in and called her. They both heard her phone go off, and he hung up. “Should come up as my number, this is my private line, not work, I only call people I don’t mind having my number with it.”

“Okay then,” she said. She had her stuff ready and was headed to the door. He stepped out into the hallway after her. “What time of day is better for you?”

“Mid-morning to mid-afternoon. Usually Beatrice naps somewhere in there.”

“I’ll let you know in a few days, then,” Shelly said. He walked her to her car, and that was it. For now.

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Cosette walked into her house, through the front door. Which told her she was dreaming because she never went into her house through the front door. She was also in a dress, and school was out so she wouldn’t be wearing dresses for a few months, unless it was Sunday.

Dreams have their own logic. She knew, in this dream, that she was married to Tom. She saw no sign of Beatrice anywhere, but it didn’t matter. She was coming home and he was in her living room, laughing and talking with someone. Her dream-self knew it was work related, some film person in her living room talking to her husband, Tom.

As if it were the most natural thing in the world.

She entered the living room – mysteriously right from the front door, also a sign it was a dream, because there was a hallway there, and in the dream it was absent – and walked right over to Tom, who was in a huge, cushy arm-chair. He smiled up at her, still laughing from a conversation with a faceless film-person, and reached up as she approached, and wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her down to sit in his lap.

Cosette could feel his arm around her so vividly. She reached down and felt the hairs on the lower part of his arm, so fine and soft. He hugged her tightly, and she listened, as if it were background noise, to him talk to the other person in her living room. And then she felt him let go, and could feel his fingers on her shoulders, which were suddenly bare, pinching and massaging the tense muscles she endured from a long day on her feet, walking among the tables, making sure the middle schoolers were learning instead of vegetating and counting minutes until the bell.

Then she felt his lips on her neck, and as she turned to him, she woke up.

Her back was tingling. She could still feel the fine hairs of his arm against her fingertips. She rolled over and grabbed her phone, silencing the alarm.

It was stress, she told herself. She was stressed. That’s all it was.

Yesterday she had spent a few hours at her parents, telling them what she knew about what was going on with Joseph, but she didn’t tell them she was going to break up with him.

Which hadn’t been easy. She always told her parents important things. She hadn’t thought for a
second of hiding it from them when she’d become pregnant with Beatrice. But for some reason, she just couldn’t. And while she was sure they knew she was holding something back, they didn’t press.

More stress, she realized.

She had gone home to her daughter, and in a short time Tom arrived, checking on them, and asking her what her plans were for the summer.

“I’d like to do some things with Beatrice,” she said. “Maybe take her to the L.A. Zoo, the Aquarium of the Pacific in Long Beach, and maybe an amusement park or two. Truthfully,” she added, “I’d like to take her to Disneyland.”

“You can’t go to Disneyland without me!” Tom said, mockingly affronted, but not joking.

“You can come if you want, but I figured…” She trailed off. “Well, it’s Disney, Tom. You’d get swarmed by tourists! They’d think you were part of the show!”

“Well maybe we could bring Isaac,” Tom suggested. “I can’t let you take my daughter to Disney without me, Cosette,” he said definitively.

“All right. Maybe you want to bring Shelly, too?”

Tom huffed. “Yeah. No, that’s way too soon.”

“How did it go?”

“She doesn’t trust me. She’s not wrong. I mean, maybe it is weird.” He grunted, all nervous gestures and twitching eyebrows. “I don’t know what I’m talking about.”

“Well, Shelly has been overweight for a long time, and I know it’s damaged her self-image,” Cosette said. “I haven’t heard her talk about any male attention in the time I’ve known her. Doesn’t mean she hasn’t had any, but…well.” She regarded him. “Do you think she’s pretty?” she asked, suddenly.

“Pretty? She’s…she’s fine, she’s…yeah, I guess so.”

Cosette frowned. “If you’re not attracted to her, Tom, it isn’t going to work. You can’t make yourself like someone you’re not naturally inclined to like.”

“I like her!” He sounded rather insistent, and for some reason, it rankled her.

“As a friend.” Cosette hesitated, and then said, “I was always attracted to Joseph. Even…even before. When he worked for me…for us. I thought he was attractive. I was involved with you so I wasn’t actively attracted to him, but passively…I recognized he was attractive. And we did have a connection.”

“I remember.” It was short, almost blank. Cosette wondered if there was bitterness under it, but didn’t press, instead staying on point.

“If you aren’t attracted to her, this isn’t going to work.”

“I like her,” Tom said, a bit tersely, but not too much, so Cosette had let it drop.

She hadn’t mean to make him feel bad or attack him, she thought as she got out of bed and got
dressed. But if Tom was going after Shelly just because he thought she would “work” for him, it wasn’t going to happen. Chemistry was important, and even in Cosette’s limited experience in dating, she knew that there had to be some kind of primal pull underlying it all. Even if he wanted someone who was moral, someone who was going to develop a relationship built on the values Tom sought to emulate, it wasn’t going to happen if that spark wasn’t there.

Which was why Cosette had been in the state she was in when Tom came along in the first place. She had very little left to do in her classroom, and hoped to get done quickly that day. After Giselle came to watch Beatrice, Cosette kissed her baby girl goodbye and headed over to the school with plans to stay for only a few hours. When she got to her room, she was only at her desk for a few minutes before Shelly was coming through the doorway.

“I’m sorry, I need to talk to you,” Shelly said, obviously agitated.

*Here we go,* Cosette thought.

“What is going on with Tom?” Shelly asked.

“What do you mean?” Cosette returned.

Her tone grew more intense as she spoke. “I mean, why is he trying to hang out with me? Is he lonely, is he depressed, going through a crisis and needs an ego boost?”


“I’m sorry,” Shelly said, hands still going nervously in random gestures. “I’ve just been…a bit freaked out. Yesterday after you left he was in my room for over two hours! He told me he liked me, he wants me to come by his house to see some Sandman stuff. Because I like Sandman. And I don’t get it.”

“What’s to get?” Cosette asked. “He likes you. Is that a problem?”

Shelly stared at her, incredulously. “Did you know about this?”

“Tom mentioned it,” Cosette said slowly, wondering how much she should say.

“He doesn’t…” Shelly stalled, hesitating, as if what she was going to say was unpleasant and felt bitter in her mouth. “He’s not…I mean, he’s not desperate for female attention or something and thinks I’m an easy target because I’m a former fangirl? I mean, that’s awful and I don’t think that but I’m feeling supremely paranoid here, Cosette, and I just need you to tell me it’s nothing, don’t worry, it’ll go away.”

“Okay,” Cosette sighed, feeling an irrational urge of temper. Not that Cosette could blame Shelly for her paranoid suspicions, but they were a bit out of line. When she’d first met Tom, maybe they were reasonable, but he hadn’t shown any indication of those kinds of behaviors for quite some time. “First off, no, he’s not on the prowl. Your virtue is safe. But no, it isn’t nothing. He likes you. I don’t know how much, or if it’s ‘like that,’ (she used air quotes) but if he’s being friendly, just…I mean, do what you want, Shell. If you like him, as a person, as a friend, then he’s just a guy who wants to hang out a bit.”

“No guy wants to ‘hang out a bit,’” Shelly grumbled with echoing air quotes, looking away.

Cosette wanted to disagree, but couldn’t.
“Is he bothering you?” Cosette offered. “Because if he is, I’ll tell him to leave you alone.”

“I just don’t trust it,” Shelly said, her expression extremely pained. “I mean, it took me a supreme amount of effort to get over fake-Tom, now having real-Tom here is just…it’s a cruel twist of fate. I always dealt with it by not having to deal with him directly most of the time, and when I did, it was always in the context of…well, you!” She sighed. “I know you two aren’t together anymore, Cos, but it never, ever surprised me that he was into you from minute one. You’ve always been prettier than average and he’s…well, him. But him and me do not make any sense. You and him do, me and him don’t.”

“I don’t know whether to be flattered or insulted by that,” Cosette mused.

“I didn’t mean to imply you’re shallow, just…very attractive. Gorgeous, actually.”

That made her blush. “Shelly…”

“No, seriously. And I know things aren’t about looks ultimately but people pair up with those who match them. There are levels of attractiveness. Attractive people end up with attractive people. I mean, you and Joseph. And Tom was with Ashley for a while. Tom and I are not going to happen.” She said with a finality that caused a slight flutter in Cosette’s chest. What that flutter meant, she didn’t want to think about it. “I mean, that would be against nature!” Shelly nearly shouted that last part.

“Oh, enough,” Cosette said. “Listen to me. He just wants to get to know you. That. Is. It. Just let things happen naturally, Shelly. You have this broken image of yourself when you are a fantastic, wonderful person, and it is not insane or wrong or twisted that Tom would see that! So if you think he’s a nice guy, get along with him, or enjoy his company, there is no harm in letting that ride for a bit. Is there?”

“No, I suppose not. It’s not like we’d end up in bed together,” she grumbled, and then upon realizing what she said, she stumbled to correct. “I mean Tom would never be so desperate as to try and seduce me…he has much better taste than that, I’m sure.”

Cosette’s patience was getting dangerously thin. She mustered as much as she could to make her next statement. “If he makes you uncomfortable, tell him. He’s going through some…changes, actually. And he would want to know if he made you uneasy in any way.”

“This is completely stupid,” Shelly whispered as she turned away, almost as if she hadn’t heard Cosette. Then she spun back around. “I don’t need this, Cosette! I have enough issues without this making me crazy!”

And she stomped out of the room, leaving a blinking Cosette in her wake.

Tom glanced out the window when he heard a car pull into the drive. It was a little after twelve-thirty on a brilliantly sunny Saturday, and Shelly’s little green Volkswagon bug sat just at the end of his drive, her familiar ponytail streaming behind her as she got out of the driver’s seat.

He felt nervous. He’d planned this meticulously, but hadn’t wanted it to look planned. Cosette had said something to him in the last couple days about playing it cooler with Shelly, as he was making her a bit nervous, and he honestly was not surprised. At all.

“Hey,” she greeted him when he opened the door.
“Welcome,” he said. “Study is this way.” He led her through the kitchen to the spare bedroom on the other side where he had made his study. This little house, with its three little bedrooms and large living room, was not like his house in London, which he honestly missed, but he’d done his best to make it livable. He went more for comfort over style when it came to his bedroom and living room furniture, but when it came to his study, the thing he couldn’t quite live without was his books.

He’d set up an extra chair for Shelly in front of his desk, and sat on the other side, letting her get comfortable with the furniture between them. He showed her the script and she paged through it, and they wound up talking. And talking. And talking.

In some real ways, Shelly reminded him of Lydia. Lydia had had some definitive opinions about Sandman and the character of Morpheus as well, and it stimulated his creativity. Shelly, however, had a more balanced approach to her love of the character, as hers was rooted more in all the mythology that Neil Gaiman drew upon in the series.

“At one point,” Shelly said with a laugh, a few hours into her visit, “I went through a phase where I sought to theologically justify the possibility of their existence. The Seven Endless.”

“Really?” Tom was incredulous.

“Well, they aren’t gods. Not really. And Gaiman’s idea of what makes a god is based more on the power of humans than on a true archetype of God. And God seems to exist in Gaiman’s universe but as a distant and mysterious figure, not as the flesh and blood Messiah of Christ. So yeah, there were massive flaws. But I intensely loved it so much I almost – almost – came to believe in it, a little bit.”

“Were you going through a faith crisis at the time?”

“Not really, no. I just thought, there seems to be some basis for these things. I mean, okay, for example, I dream a lot, and I mean a LOT, about my grandmother’s house. She hadn’t lived there for years when she died, because it was partially destroyed in a flood, and she had to sell it and move to a retirement community, but that place was the most consistent house in my life – we moved around a bit when I was a kid, so the houses we lived in were only temporary until we moved to L.A. So that house was a solid figure throughout my childhood. And I dreamed about it — still do – regularly. And I started to think, it exists in a dream realm, a version of that house, that I return to on a regular basis. That’s why I dream about it over and over.”

“That’s fascinating. I used to dream a lot about my dorm at Eton, but I hadn’t for years, until… I think it was last night, actually. I only remember it because I thought it was strange!”

“Then it’s a dream version of the dorm, probably built by Merv Pumpkinhead.”

“How awful. Do you remember your dreams a lot?”

“Pieces. Usually themes. Either I’m in a high school or a college campus trying to find my class and I can’t, and I haven’t been there for any of my other classes, but I show up on a day they’re giving an exam. Or, I’m in a house that I just moved into, and it has rooms opening to more rooms and going on and on, until there’s someone else living on the other side and I have to stop. That, and shopping malls filled with treasures that I get lost in – usually I’m either trying to find my car and I can’t, or I’m trying to get out and I can’t. I don’t know, all this stuff about buildings. Morpheus’ builders must have a ball with me.”

“Sounds a bit like anxiety dreams.”
"Probably," she sighed, looking away. Her eyes caught on the clock. "Dear God it’s almost four."

"That late?" Tom was only mildly shocked. "Time flies when you’re having fun. I hope you won’t think I’m too forward," Tom said, "but would you like to go get some dinner? It’s getting around that time for me."

She hesitated. It was just dinner, after all. Not a date. He wouldn’t use that word. "What did you have in mind?" she asked. "Somewhere close?"

"There’s some restaurants about a mile down the road," Tom said. "You have any preferences?"

"I’m a steak and salad kind of girl now. Or grilled chicken. As long as we don’t go somewhere Italian or for pizza I should be fine."

Tom offered to drive them, but Shelly insisted on meeting him there, as she was going to leave after they ate. Tom resisted insisting – he had to be careful, she was still skittish, and getting her out to dinner was a big step.

They settled on a Claim Jumpers, where Shelly ordered a starter of a steamed artichoke and a main course of Salmon Oscar, at Tom’s insistence. Being considerate of her, he refrained from getting anything deep fried, breaded, or containing pasta, and got himself a steak with vegetables, which was probably the best choices for him anyway, as he needed to be particularly slim for his second turn as Morpheus. They both enjoyed the salad bar, chatting and laughing as they sat in the partially darkened booth.

The longer he spent with her, the more impatient he became. He got along with her so well, they talked about so many interesting things, he just felt a click with her. It wasn’t necessarily a spark, but what if that was because he was keeping her at arm’s length, out of fear of scaring her off?

Dinner was winding down, and they were in that phase after dinner before the check came, when they were starting to taper off in the conversation. Tom decided to make a critical move.

"I would like to see you again," he said.

"I’m sure you’ll see me before too long," Shelly said. "There’s that big dinner at the Magic Castle Cosette is planning. I get invited to her house regularly enough."

"I mean…not tied to all of that. Like this. You and me, hanging out."

She stared at him. Her expression was mildly amused, slightly skeptical, but generally calm. "Just hanging out?"

"Well, admittedly…" Careful, he told himself, careful. "I guess this situation lends itself to something more intimate."

Wrong word. Wrong, wrong, wrong word.

She almost started laughing. He could see it in the way her cheek muscles flexed. But she stopped herself.

He started talking. It was all he could think to do.

"I don’t want to play games," Tom said. "I’m trying to be more…intentional. I’m not saying we have to jump into a relationship but I would like to see if maybe, possibly, those sort of feelings could exist between us. I have usually been the kind of person who liked to just let things happen
naturally, but I’ve realized that a lot of the people who I’ve surrounded myself with, until the last few years with Cosette’s family and friends, like you – those people are not really…honorable. Is that the right word? I’m looking for a depth that I’m not used to finding, and I know being involved with someone like that requires a maturity and responsibility that I’m trying to portray—“

“Tom,” she raised her hand, her cheeks mildly flushed but her expression calm. “It’s okay, wait, calm down. You’re basically saying you want to be involved with me because you think I’ll be good for you. That you’re trying to --- my God --- court me. Yes?”

He nodded, feeling rather embarrassed.

“You know, a very long time ago,” Shelly said, suddenly growing thoughtful, “when I was in high school, I had the worst crush on this guy that I was friends with. He hung around with my group of friends, was a general bad boy. His name was Dennis.”

“Mm hmm.” Not knowing where this was going, but willing to hear her out. “Go on.”

“I cannot tell you the trouble this guy caused. He dropped out of high school, disappeared for a while. Showed up again when I was getting ready to graduate from college, start my career in teaching. By then we had scattered a bit as a group but we still all knew each other, but he singled me out. He was trying to clean up, getting his GED, wanted to go to college, wanted to make a life for himself. He’d been trying to make it as a musician but God knows that didn’t work out. Still played with a band at a bar not too far from campus a few weekends a month.”

She let out a heavy sigh.

“I got involved with him. Sexually. We slept together, agreed that it was just sex, that we were not exclusive, were not in a relationship. I don’t know how in hell I ever thought I could handle that. It lasted a month before I started to get so depressed I couldn’t even get out of bed in the morning.”

“Friends with benefits,” Tom said, cringing. “I’m familiar with that. It sounds like a good idea but nobody can really handle it, Shelly.”

“Well. I wanted more from Dennis, and tried to make him jealous. He responded by getting more aggressive with me, sexually. Like he was trying to prove that he owned me, or something. When I realized I was getting near suicidal over this mess, I broke it off with him. I mean, changed the locks on my apartment door, wouldn’t answer his calls, cut him off. He whined and cried over it, saying I needed him, only he could make me happy…what bullshit. It wasn’t long after he got the message that I heard he had left town again, dropped out of university where he had enrolled in some music theory. I didn’t see him again. Even though I had taken the initiative, it was a screwed-up time for me. It was when I gained all that weight, how I got to the size I was when you met me.”

“Understandable.”

“A few years down the road, I moved to Catholic school from private school, got in touch with my faith again, learned more healthy ways to deal with my need for love. And…” she hesitated, “it wasn’t too long after that, that I started to become a fan of yours. Sort of fell into the Hiddlestoner club.”

Tom had to blush a little. “If I was able to help you at all,” he started, but she made a shooing motion.

“I think it was because you reminded me of Dennis. Not as he really was,” she added quickly, “but
as I idealized him to be. It might have been Loki, somewhat, but it quickly became you, or fake-you, as I called you. Fake-Tom.”

“Fake?”

“Not that I’m saying you were fake,” she amended, “but that I only had an idea of you. An image. Not who you really were, we only see particular sides that your PR allows us to see.”

Tom felt his cheeks turning mildly pink. That much was true, a lot was done to control his image to the public. “You said it was because of comic-con.”

“Yes, that playfulness was the big slap upside the head. How you got my attention. And I know you think I stopped being a Hiddlestoner when I accidentally overheard you in your trailer, but it had been coming for a while. Not because of anything you had done, but because I started to realize that I was using you. As an object. I had forgotten that you were a real, flesh and blood human being, and I was completely objectifying you. I knew I had to stop but…it was just too easy. You gave me a much-needed kick in the ass.”

Tom knew his mouth was open slightly, and struggled to close it and swallow. “You’re….welcome?”

She graced him with a smile. “I have to tell you that getting to know you is…well, it’s been enlightening. But I’m in the same position again, I feel. I’m still seeing you as an object.”

“You are?”

“This is so hard to explain,” she exhaled. “I had all these feelings for you before, for a version of you that may exist to a certain extent, but certainly isn’t all of you. And they were hard to get over, even if they were all one-sided, even if no relationship actually existed. And now, being friends with you, seeing you like this…it’s weird to say but it’s bringing a lot of that back, which I feel isn’t fair to you.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because it’s too much to put on a person,” she said. “I could fall for you so hard, so fast… and I honestly don’t think you could fall for me, not like that.”

“That isn’t true,” Tom said.

“Maybe you could, but it would be…it’s a gamble I can’t take, Tom. I mean, I can’t help but think that you never glanced at me twice when I was morbidly obese, you only had eyes for Cosette. And I am utterly convinced that you still only have eyes for her, but can’t do anything about it because of Joseph, and I can’t spend the rest of my life thinking I’m someone’s second choice.”

Tom stared at her. He had no idea what to say. It sounded somewhat like what he’s said to Leslie, although the circumstances were of course different.

“I am…I don’t want to say flattered,” she said, “but honored, really, that you’d think of me like that. And I think it’s incredibly brave and mature and responsible to see a need in your life and take the steps, however hard they are, to fill it. You have been so sweet to me and it’s a much-needed boost to my ego. But I have to say, no thank you. I hope this won’t keep us from being friends, but I also understand if it does.”

“No, of course not,” Tom said. He reached out, took her hand. “I appreciate your honesty.”
“Well, you need to talk to Cosette,” Shelly said, squeezing his hand before letting go.

“About what?” As if he hadn’t heard what she said before. Was he still so transparent? “Cosette has moved on, she and Joseph are—“

“Dude, just…talk to her.” She wouldn’t say anything more about it. Tom didn’t either, because he wasn’t going to do that.

What would be the point?
(Joker voice) And here we go.

There was nothing on the news about Joseph, his firm, the people he worked for, or any hint of his “work incident.” Cosette sat through several local news stations and had to hear stomach-wrenching stories that were obviously chosen for being attention-grabbing and borderline sensationalist. That was the problem with such a huge city like L.A., there was just too much to cover.

She checked online but didn’t get any hits there, either.

She sent him a text, telling him she didn’t see any other information about his work on the news, and asked if he was doing okay. She didn’t expect to hear from him, thinking he was still working pretty hard, but maybe he would have a minute to shoot her a message to let her know he was alive.

Today she was taking Beatrice to the Aquarium of the Pacific in Long Beach, and Tom was coming with them. Cosette felt nervous, jumpy. She had had another dream about him.

At first, it was a strange, forced perspective. She was petting someone, stroking the back of his head; soft, short-cropped brownish-blond hair, and a very familiar ear with a distinctive freckle just inside the top of the shell. Whoever it was, was purring like a cat as she scratched her nails against his sensitive scalp.

The perspective pulled back and Tom was gently moving her hand away from his head, a smile on his face and a bright flush along his neck. “If you keep doing that, darling,” he said, “that’s all we’ll do all night.”

He was sitting on a bed, and she was lying across it, her head even with his knees, his feet still on the floor. He was in a rich brown suit, and he looked fantastic. She got the very distinct feeling this was a wedding night, although she had no idea what she was wearing.
“Why don’t we try something else?” he said in a bashful way, and then he was kissing her.

That was all she remembered. But it was the second one and she was getting unnerved by them.

Tom picked them up, Cosette riding shotgun, Beatrice strapped into the back with Isaac beside her. Tom tried to make light conversation in the car, but Beatrice was the only one replying to him. Maybe he thought she was just worried about Joseph, because he didn’t press or ask her what was wrong, didn’t insist she tell him what was on her mind. He found them parking, paid for the entrance fee, and cheerfully greeted the docent who was going to give them the tour. It was always a risk, when Tom went in public, of being approached by strangers wanting selfies and autographs, and he was very tense about it when Beatrice was with them. To help counter this, he had arranged for a behind-the-scenes tour, and Isaac’s main job became to watch and then stand between Beatrice and whoever was aiming a phone their way.

Beatrice adored the aquarium. She ran left, right, and center at all the tanks of fish, her hummingbird-attention-span working in her favor as she was able to go back to things many times and still find them fascinating. Tom showed her how to use two fingers to pet the sharks and sting-rays, and even touch the tops of the jellyfish in the jellyfish display. Still in her phase of wanting Mommy just about all the time, though, Beatrice would always pull Cosette to see whatever she was currently squealing over. Cosette was quick to hand her back, though, telling Beatrice to be sure to show Daddy, to take Daddy’s hand to see the divers as they cleaned the tanks and fed the fish.

Cosette’s favorite was the seahorses, but of all of those, it was the leafy sea dragon that most had her heart. It was the only aquarium she knew of that had them, hiding in a tubular tank in a circular room, standing out from the rest. Beatrice was still going from tank to tank, pointing with her little finger at the multi-colored “fishies” (everything was a fishie, whether it was a shark, a sting-ray, a jellyfish, a seahorse, or even an actual fish). Cosette rounded one large tank and there it was, no fanfare, no announcement, just the most beautiful underwater animal she knew of, gently floating in its aquamarine world.

The leafy sea dragon was named for the long tendrils that hung off it, from every part of its body. Yellow, orange, green, they floated in the water like autumn leaves, a magnificent halo for the tiny creature inside. It didn’t move fast, but it didn’t have to – even standing still, it was a sight.

She didn’t know how long she stood there, staring at it. She was vaguely aware of someone beside her, and when she came out of her daze, she realized it was Tom, holding Beatrice, and for once, the toddler was silent, staring at the creatures in the tank in awe. She had her head resting on Daddy’s shoulder, but Tom was looking at her.

Cosette felt her cheeks flush. “Sorry,” she whispered.
“Not at all,” Tom said with a smile. It was gentle, sympathetic. “We were thinking we were getting a big hungry. Want to go grab a bite in the café? When you’re done looking, of course.”

She nodded. Beatrice, seeing her mother was with them again, lifted up her head and put her arms out for Mommy. Cosette took her, realizing the little girl was getting tired already. She settled against Cosette’s body and buried her head in the crook of Cosette’s neck, her breathing starting to slow.

Tom got them lunch. He ordered and brought over bottles of water and juice and some cookies for Beatrice while they waited for their pizza and sandwiches. Beatrice woke up a bit at the offering of chocolate chip cookies, and even munched a few chicken nuggets before she really started to yawn.

“Maybe the gift shop, and then home?” Tom asked.

“Sure.”

“Bebe, come here, baby,” Tom said, reaching for the little girl. “Let Mommy eat her sandwich.”

Reluctantly, Beatrice went, and Cosette was able to munch her chicken salad sandwich. It was good, but messy, with the little half-grapes sliding out of the over-stuffed filling, and she had to pick them up and pop them in her mouth. Tom had a napkin ready for her, giving her that gentle smile again.

“Am I that messy?” she teased.

“No. I just know how much of handful this little girl is.”

They went to the gift shop, where Beatrice perked up considerably as she examined every single stuffed animal in the place. Surprisingly, for all her enthusiasm about running around the aquarium, their daughter was quite discerning when it came to getting a souvenir. There were so many to pick from, in so many colors, and she seemed to gravitate toward the blue ones.

As Cosette patiently followed Beatrice in her quest, Tom approached with a violet colored T-shirt. Emblazoned on it was the sea dragon, artistically rendered with bits of information written in a
“That’s cute!” Cosette said.

“They have her size too,” Tom said, holding up the toddler size. “You two can match.”

“You don’t have—” His face cut her off. It wasn’t angry, or even teasing – just something about the set of his eyes, the quirk of his mouth. It just stopped her. “Thank you,” she said. “That’s sweet.”

Finally, Beatrice settled on a blue sting-ray with an iridescent-rainbow underside. It was pretty flat and wide, so when she held it to her chest it practically covered her, like a blanket. Tom grabbed a few refrigerator magnets and some post cards at the check-out stand, and Cosette picked up a few clip magnets and a pen for her desk at school.

“I still have those other T-shirts you bought me,” Cosette said as they walked back to the car, Beatrice playing with her new stuffed animal by making whooshing sounds, as if it were flying.

“T-shirts?”

“The ones from Hot Topic. From that day at the mall, when we were…”

Were they together at that time? She couldn’t quite remember.

“Maternity shopping, I remember,” Tom said with a beaming smile. “Loki, Captain America, and Maleficent the dragon.”

“I’m going to wear the dragon one to Disney on Wednesday,” she declared.

“You ever wear the others?”

“Sometimes as sleep shirts, sometimes when I’m cleaning,” she said. She didn’t tell him which.
They caught eyes, and a slight blush appeared on Tom’s cheeks, and Cosette felt it. She hadn’t felt this kind of energy from him or with him since those early days. But this was different. They didn’t have that strangeness now that they’d had then, not knowing each other that well, and the pressure of figuring out their relationship in the midst of a pregnancy. This was easy, sweet, if a bit tense, and she liked it.

She didn’t want to ruin it.

Beatrice was sound asleep within fifteen minutes of being belted into the car. Tom carried her inside, and Cosette took their stuff in. She cut off the tags and set the shirts aside to wash them in the next load of laundry.

“So Wednesday for Disney then?” he asked.

“Did you have someone call?” Cosette asked in return.

“Yes, there should be someone to meet us at the VIP gate,” Tom said. “Although I don’t think we had any problems today, did we?”

“Isaac is good at being invisible,” Cosette said. “Sometimes I feel bad that I don’t pay enough attention to him, but he reminds me that it isn’t his job to be paid attention to. He’s a real sweetheart, when he’s not in guard-dog mode.”

Tom nodded. Then, in that hesitant way of his, he started with, “I know it’s not my place to ask, but…how is Joseph?”

Cosette felt a flush of irritation. “Why isn’t it your place?” she asked, her tone level and smooth, even if she was frowning. “I mean, what happens to our relationship affects Beatrice, and Beatrice is your child. So yes, it is your place to ask.”

“I just don’t want to be nosy,” Tom said.

“Yes, you do,” she teased, inadvertently fluttering her eyelashes at him.
“Okay, but I didn’t to be rude about being nosy.” He had long since taken off the baseball cap he used to disguise himself, and his hair, sweaty and a bit long, was flying in various directions. Cosette wanted to comb her fingers through it, tame it—

She felt her fingers twitch. *None of that.*

“I haven’t heard from him yet,” she said. “But I think he’s okay.”

“I didn’t find any news on him,” Tom said.

“You looked too?”

“I was curious.”

“Yeah, I didn’t find anything either.” She sighed. Again, in the kitchen, her standing against the counter. Him leaning against the little kitchen table.

“What I really want to ask, though,” Tom went on, his eyes guarded, “is how the two of you were. I mean, you were going through a rough patch when…when this happened.”

“You want to know if we’re going to break up?” She felt strange, the way those words didn’t affect her. Break-ups were always hard, weren’t they? But of any man she’d ever dated, however long or brief, the only one who had ever hurt to break up with was Tom.

She couldn’t lie to Tom. She couldn’t lie and give him a false sense of reassurance, just to keep from having a conversation she didn’t want to have. But telling him she planned to break up with Joseph…that felt wrong, too. For what reasons she wasn’t quite sure, but it did.

“I don’t know,” she finally said, after a long, considerate pause. “I really, really don’t know, Tom.”

“You honestly think you could?” He seemed so surprised, so distressed by that thought. It made her feel a twisted kind of jealousy she wasn’t prepared to feel.
“Of course we could, Tom. Anybody could break up at any time. You think Henry and Christina have a smooth ride? My parents sure as hell didn’t, I was convinced for years they were going to get divorced. It was one of the reasons I moved here with Gran, so I could distance myself from it.” She blinked slowly, feeling exhausted. It was only three in the afternoon, and it felt like three in the morning. “Honestly… yes. We may… very likely… break up. I don’t think it’s going to happen with him, I just… I just don’t.”

There.

“That’s just… surprising. I mean, after…” Wisely, he stopped talking. She didn’t need to hear about how high her standards were, and how Joseph had ticked off every single box, except for one, the most important one.

She was not in love with him.

Deciding to turn it on him, but gently, she said, “Okay, so how about you and Shelly?”

She saw every single muscle in his body flex. It was like a ripple of tension that went through him. Then, he met her eyes, and said, “She turned me down.”

“She--?”

“I asked her on a date and she said thank you, but no.” His tone was not angry or terse, but it didn’t really invite a conversation.

And the two of them stared at each other for entirely too long.

Mercifully, Tom’s phone went off. He pulled it from his pocket. “It’s Luke,” he said.

“You want me to call you when she’s up?” Cosette asked. “I could make spaghetti for dinner.”

He winked at her. “Sounds good.” And he left.
“I don’t want you to get your knickers in a twist,” Luke said, “but the rumors have started up again.”

“Did they get any pictures of Beatrice?” Tom asked as he walked down the sidewalk to his house.

“No, just a big head of black curly hair, that guy is good. What’s his name again, Isaac?”

Tom grunted. “I don’t care what they’re talking about.” He was just grateful that Luke had called and the words Shelly had spoken to him hadn’t had a chance to find their way out of his mouth and into Cosette’s ears. “Isn’t it old news?”

“You’ve got a few shipper sects that are determined to see this thing either sail or burn,” Luke chortled. “One of them already has to you secretly engaged and Cosette expecting another child, and the other is the reason you keep the security around her house.”

“Don’t tell Cosette they think she’s pregnant, I don’t want her having a body-image crisis.” He reached his front door, unlocked it and went inside. “Anything else?”

“No, just a check in.”

“Luke, it’s eleven at night there. A check in?”

“Well, truthfully…I saw the pictures that were taken today. Candids. Is there something you should be telling me?”

“Like what?” Tom felt the hairs on his arms start to tingle.

“I don’t know, it sure looks like goo-goo eyes to me. In the gift shop? No?”

“Seriously, Luke?” Tom felt the beginnings of a headache behind his forehead. He rubbed it, as if that would help.
“Okay, right, I know…you’d tell me if there was something to tell. But you are probably going to get asked about this for the upcoming press for the new film, and you just need to be aware.”

“I am. I’ve been through this before, several times. You don’t have any reason to worry.”

“Maybe I’m just a bit worried about a friend. I know the hell you went through. Please don’t do anything stupid.”


*Don’t do anything stupid.*

Shelly didn’t want him because she was convinced she was second choice to Cosette. And if that was true, then every single woman on the planet was going to be second choice to Cosette. That thought made him panic. Any woman who was worth his time and energy was going to see through him. The two options it left was to be with someone shallow and desperate enough not to care and be miserable for the rest of his life, or just realize that there was never going to be anyone else and resign himself to being alone. Did that equate misery, too?

Maybe he needed more time, he thought. Maybe he needed longer than the months that passed after Ashley. Maybe he needed more than the year, or even two. Maybe he should just shelve the whole thing and wait until he was a bit older and wiser and had a better grasp. There was still so much work to do, and he had a daughter to raise.

Of course, the thought of going without sex for that long made him nervous. Was that normal? Henry had waited patiently for his very first time with Christina. Tom highly doubted that Joseph had slept with anyone after his wife passed until he met Cosette, and *they* certainly weren’t sexually active.

How did they do that?

And why the hell was he so stuck on *sex*?
He opened his contacts, and found Christina’s number. He pressed “dial.”

“Hey Tom, what’s up?” came her cheerful voice.

“Do you think you could arrange for me to talk to Fr. Francis?” Tom asked. “I mean, I don’t even know how to go about that, I don’t know if they even talk to people who aren’t…I mean, who don’t go to their church.”

“Of course, they do, Tom, priests talk to all kinds of people for all kinds of reasons,” Christina told him. “It’s not a big deal. He’s a sweetheart, he’s the absolute easiest guy to talk to in the world. You want me to call him and set up an appointment?”

“Yes. Just tell him I need some counseling, I guess.”

“You don’t need an excuse. You just want to talk to him. It’ll be good enough, trust me.”

He felt a flood of warmth for Christina. He loved her and Henry as if they were his brother and sister. He might not say such a thing out loud, but he felt it. “Thank you, Chrissy,” he said.

It took no time. By that evening, after he returned home from Cosette’s spaghetti, Christina called him back and said he had an appointment for Friday afternoon at two. Of course, this just gave Tom time to think, and worry, and confuse himself in his own head.

Wednesday, however, provided a nice break. He, Cosette, and Beatrice had a brilliant time at Disney. Park security coordinated with Isaac in case there were any problems, and for the most part there were none. He was sure they were being photographed, but he chose to ignore it.

The park was kind enough to let them have access to the Disney princesses that day just before the women were scheduled to be out for the crowds, so Beatrice got to meet Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Elsa from Frozen. All three were in blue gowns, and Beatrice was ecstatic. When they took her for a princess make-over, she chose Cinderella. She spent the rest of the day twirling in her sparkly blue gown, and was very careful not to get anything on it, even though they ate every kind of treat imaginable and there was sugar and chocolate everywhere.

Tom knew he was going at it a little fiercely, but he was determined to have a good time, and it worked. Every single confection that was Mickey-shaped was purchased and consumed. Cosette in
particular wanted to visit the New Orleans quarter for the beignets, and they were also Mickey-shaped, which Tom found hilarious. Beatrice had a fine dusting of powdered sugar on her cheeks and nose, which Cosette wanted to clean with a wet towelette from her purse, but Tom insisted on a picture first.

The wildest ride they went on was the Pirates of the Caribbean ride, which was Cosette’s favorite. Beatrice was wedged between them and squealed in outrage when she was sprinkled with water, and it took a bit of consoling and sun-drying to convince her that her dress wasn’t ruined. She was eventually distracted by a pair of blue sequin-studded Minnie-mouse ears. She got tired of them after a few minutes, though, and Cosette playfully removed Tom’s baseball hat and placed the ears on his head.

He didn’t remove them. He kept them on while they rode through the Haunted Mansion, Beatrice between them again, and kept them on most of the afternoon, until they stopped for a break at the Disney Villain café.

"She has even more energy than she did at the Aquarium,” Tom said.

“Shes on a continuous sugar high!” Cosette laughed. “Wait until she crashes, she’ll be a dead weight when we’re carrying her out of here.”

Tom couldn’t help but think Cosette looked particularly adorable that day. Usually, she was more formally dressed for school, and as much as he loved her figure in a nice dress, her jeans and Maleficent-dragon T-shirt were particularly flattering and refreshing. Her curly hair was pulled in a high pony tail to keep it off her neck, and she had a sun visor that said “Disneyland” across the brim. Tom had re-donned his traditional baseball cap and Ray-Bans, but this did not stop two girls from recognizing him and approaching the table, hesitant and shy.

Cosette spotted them first. She looked to Tom, who caught sight of them when they were already at the table.

“Hi Tom!” the first chirped, obviously the bolder of the two.

“Hello,” Tom said. Not overtly friendly, but polite.

The second girl was looking at Cosette. Nervous, licking her lips, and kind of pale, she hung on her friend’s arm, a touch green around the gills.
“We were wondering if we could, maybe…get a selfie?” the first girl asked.

Tom hesitated. If he took the selfie, it could cause a chain reaction. If that girl put it on social media, it was going to drag everyone else in the park who might be a fan into his orbit and could turn into a bit of a clusterfuck.

“On one condition,” Tom said. “You don’t post it until tomorrow morning. I am trying to enjoy a nice day with my daughter and her mother and I really don’t want to draw a crowd.”

“Oh, we promise!” the girl said, crossing her heart. Tom stood up, but Cosette extended her hand.

“I’ll take the picture,” she offered.

The girl handed her phone to Cosette, and Tom slung his arm around both the girls’ shoulders. The second one hadn’t spoken, but let out a little squeak when his hand closed around the bare skin of her shoulder. Cosette took several pictures, and then handed the phone back over. “I hope that’s okay,” she said.

Beatrice was watching all of this with only the kind of rapt, curious attention a two-year-old can sustain. She was in an adorable dress, sitting in a high chair, and would smile and preen at the girls every time they glanced at her. Tom could tell that they were trying not to give Beatrice too much attention. The more outspoken girl wanted to say something, wanted to give Beatrice a compliment, but she refrained, instead smiling and winking at Beatrice, who returned it with innocent glee. Tom felt a twist of dread – if Beatrice became as attention seeking as him…

Oh hell.

“Thank you,” the first girl gushed, knocking off his train of thought. She dragged the second girl away, who was still looking at Cosette, still with that strange expression.

Tom shook it off. Fans were weird, sometimes. They quickly paid and left, having gotten some looks and caused some whispers. To make it worse, Beatrice was waving at anybody who gave her attention – a few points, a few little waves that people usually gave to an adorable and friendly two-year-old. Tom wanted to be sure that they wouldn’t get any more selfie requests so they headed into the nearest line for a ride, which was It’s A Small World.
They wanted to stay until the fireworks, but at about seven o’clock, poor Beatrice couldn’t keep her
eyes open any more, and dozed off on Mommy’s lap during a show. They finished the show, and
Tom took Beatrice and carried her as they made their way back into the main square.

“So shall we go?” Cosette asked.

“Are you tired?” Tom replied.

“I’m fine, but she’s asleep, Tom,” Cosette pointed out.

“She might wake up!” Tom said hopefully. “And besides, isn’t there something you’d like to do? I
know you were eyeballing that ice-cream parlor when we were coming in.”

“Isn’t she heavy?”

“She’s fine. Let’s go get ice-cream.”

There was a bench, and they laid Beatrice down with a Disney beach towel that Tom had bought to
pillow her head.

“I don’t know how I can possibly want more sugar,” Cosette groaned, looking at the menu. “But I
do.”

“Sugar makes you crave it more,” Tom said. “But once in a while isn’t so bad. It’s not like we do
this every day.”

She smiled at him. Her inky curls hung down along one shoulder, showing her slender, pale neck.
Her eyes were a bit bleary from exhaustion but she looked so beautiful. He felt his throat tighten
and his stomach flutter with nerves.

“Thank you for today,” she said. “This has been enormous fun.”
“If by fun you mean chasing two kids around the park,” he teased, “then yeah.”

She laughed. “You’re not as bad as you think. And you can make it up by carrying her to the car.”

Her phone chirped from her purse, and she pulled it out. A cloud passed over her cheerful expression, and she tapped something into the phone, probably a text.

“Everything okay?” Tom asked as she stared at the device, waiting for an answer.

“Joseph just texted,” Cosette said, not looking at him. “He wants to come by tomorrow morning.”

“That’s good! That means things are calming down.”

“Yeah.” She tapped her thumb against her teeth and then apparently got a reply, because her shoulders shifted in resignation. “Okay then.” She smiled at him, but some of the sparkle was gone.

Tom wanted to ask her what was really wrong. He was certain that she and Joseph were going to break up, and he had no idea why. Why would she do that? Was it her or was it Joseph? Maybe it was mutual, but for the life of him he couldn’t understand it.

A thought struck him a bit later while they were finding a spot to watch the fireworks. Beatrice woke up a bit and sat in his lap, resting against his chest, watching the world go by, all the costumes and the colors. It wasn’t until the parade started and she perked up, clapping her hands and cheering, that his thought was able to coalesce.

What if it was because of him?

He looked at this thought, examined it. It was not necessarily unreasonable. Joseph had his own expectations, Tom was sure. Having Tom around could not have made things easy. He didn’t know what Joseph and Cosette talked about when they were in private.

What if he thought that Tom was somehow in the way?
These thoughts wouldn’t leave him alone. He tried to shake them off, watch the fireworks, smile with Cosette and their daughter. He dutifully carried Beatrice back to the car and insisted that Cosette just let her sleep in the dress when he put Beatrice in her crib bed that night. He told Cosette to go to bed and locked the kitchen door behind him after watching her stumble toward the bathroom to take her shower.

He decided to ask Henry to give Joseph his number, and ask Joseph to give him a call. Henry seemed to find this odd, but to his credit, he didn’t pry. The fact that he didn’t made Tom a bit more uneasy, but he knew he couldn’t do anything until he could talk to Joseph.

He just hoped that wasn’t a mistake.

Cosette sat outside on Thursday morning, watching Beatrice, who had slept in particularly late that day, run around in the back yard. She was in her little swimsuit and was playing in the sprinklers that had been set up specifically for her. Cosette hadn’t really used her backyard that much until Beatrice had started getting a bit older, and now she appreciated it. It had walls on three sides and the garage on the fourth, with some space between the end of the garage, which was separate from the house, and the edge of the house. It would be easy, she realized, to put a short fence in, if they decided to get a dog or needed to make sure the area was completely enclosed.

She had set out two adult canvas chairs, and a smaller, child-size chair for Beatrice if she wanted it, which she didn’t, as she bounced from sprinkler to sprinkler, squealing, “Lookit, Mommy, look!” Cosette hardly took her eyes from her daughter from her position on one canvas chair. Until she heard a car pull into her driveway, and turned her head to see the familiar face appear around the corner.

“Hi,” Joseph said.

“Hi,” she returned, standing.

He kissed her cheek, but it was polite. It hurt, feeling this distance from him. It hurt, knowing what she had to do.

Joseph settled himself into the chair, looking exhausted and careworn. He watched Beatrice
playing, a little smile playing at his lips.

“How’s Hugo?” she asked.

“He’s okay. Would barely let go of me this morning, but I promised him I would be back soon.” He turned his brown eyes to her. She found herself remembering that he was a handsome man, with his high cheekbones and pointed nose and smouldering dark eyebrows. He wasn’t going to have any shortage of takers –

But he had Standards. Like she did.

Her throat started to close and her eyes filled with tears and her mouth opened to say the words somehow, but—instead a gasping sob erupted and she was covering her face with her hands, embarrassed and humiliated at her sudden emotional reaction.

She heard Joseph give a small sigh. “I wish I could say I was surprised, but I’m not.”

“I’m…so…sorry,” she managed, wiping her eyes. She grabbed at the towel she’d brought out for Beatrice and pressed it against her face. “I feel awful.”

“I know. I do too.”

She burrowed deeper into the towel. She couldn’t bring herself to look at him. She couldn’t see the disappointment there. He’d tried to distance himself from her once because of Tom, and this second time felt entirely like it was her fault, like she had pulled him in just to toy with him, to hurt him. She felt like a user.

She felt his warm hand close over her shoulder and was finally able to look at him. “You’re being too hard on yourself,” he said, his voice holding an edge to it she couldn’t quite recognize. “I can’t say we didn’t give this a fair try. It’s easier now, believe it or not, before things went any further.” He rubbed her upper arm. “I’m not angry at you.”

“Then you’re a fucking saint,” she growled into the towel, still pressed against her chin.
“Mommy!” Beatrice cried, running to her mother. Hastily Cosette wiped away the rest of the tears and shoved her wet hair from her brow. “You okay, Mommy?”

“I’m fine, sweetie,” Cosette lied. Beatrice wasn’t having any of that, though, and in her two-and-a-half-year-old wisdom, she insisted on crawling onto her mother’s lap.

Cosette half expected Joseph to leave then, but he didn’t. He seemed to have more to say, and although sheer instinct made Cosette brace herself for impact, she knew he wasn’t going to berate her or tear her down. He wasn’t going to have some kind of tantrum. Yet she couldn’t imagine what was left to say.

“You need a cookie, Mommy,” Beatrice said sagely.

“Do I?” Cosette asked with a snuffle she couldn’t quite help.

“Yes. Cookie make it better.” She got off Mommy’s lap and headed for the kitchen door, and Cosette followed, motioning for Joseph to join them. Inside the kitchen, Cosette found some chocolate chip cookies that were left over from the Aquarium, munched one, and gave Beatrice the other.

“Cartoons, too!” Beatrice said. She tottered off into the living room, and within a few seconds they heard the television switch on – Beatrice was very good at turning on the TV, although she couldn’t change the channels, but cartoons had been the last thing on anyway, so the theme song from Doc McStuffins came sailing happily down the hallway into the kitchen.

Cosette looked to where Joseph had sat down at the little kitchen table, and moved to sit across from him, seeing on his face that he was nearly ready to say whatever was on his mind. She looked at him expectantly.

“You need to talk to Tom,” he said.

Instantly, Cosette felt herself closing down. She sat back in the chair, her hands going to her lap as she glared down at them. Not this again.

“Cosette,” Joseph pressed, “you and I both know the reason this didn’t work between us.”
“I don’t see why you should be particularly concerned about that,” she said, exasperated.

“That’s not fair. You know that we agreed in the beginning that a strong friendship had to come first in our relationship. Just because we haven’t successfully made it to the next stage doesn’t mean that friendship isn’t still there, and as your friend, I’m telling you, I’m urging you, you have to talk to him.”

She got up, went to the counter. It was getting close to lunch and she started to get out leftovers from the fridge. Beatrice would probably want leftover spaghetti, she always asked for it, even if there was none. Sometimes Cosette could appease her with spaghetti-o’s…

“There isn’t any point, Joseph,” she said as she spooned some spaghetti out onto a plate.

“Why not?”

“Because Tom and I don’t work!”

It was Joseph’s turn to be exasperated. She heard it in his exhalation of breath. But true to his personality, he pulled himself together and went on, relentlessly. “You keep telling yourself that, but you know it isn’t true anymore.”

“Jesus,” she snapped, and saw his offended look at her language, but was determined to finish her angry thought, “I swear to God you’re as bad as those internet shippers! If you wanted me to be with him so badly why did you ever pursue me in the first place!”

He stared at her. She swore he was about to burst into laughter. “Your denial is quite impressive.”

She clenched her fists. She was ready to throw the spaghetti at him. Seeing her seething rage, he got smart and put his hand up, signaling a truce.

“Is it because Tom still wants a sexual relationship?” he asked calmly.

Cosette could hardly believe this was happening. But Joseph didn’t know about Shelly. He didn’t know about Tom’s confession to her, sitting in just about the same spot Joseph was sitting in right
now, that he wanted to try things the way Henry and Christina had done, the way she and Joseph were supposed to have done. And she heard herself answering, “No. I don’t think he expects that anymore.”

“All right then. I know he isn’t Catholic. I know it isn’t exactly ideal to be in a relationship with someone who doesn’t share your deepest beliefs, but from what I’ve seen, Tom is open to them, at the very least. He’s gone to Mass with you many times, and he hasn’t objected to your raising Beatrice in the Faith.”

“No,” she said, practically spitting the word.

“And I’ve seen how you are together. You get along. Maybe you didn’t get along so well then, but things are different now. If you sat down, if you talked about your fears, if you—”

“Stop.”

She didn’t recognize her own voice. It was too quiet, too quiet for the things boiling in her head, her heart, her gut. She looked at him, pleading.

“Please stop.”

Joseph looked so worried. “What is it?”

“How can you ask me these things?” she said, confused. “How can you push me at another man after…I don’t know how any human being could be so… selfless. It’s just not…it’s not natural.”

“Cosette,” Joseph said, his voice warm, compassionate. “You are dumping me because you are still in love with Tom. If I’m going to have to bow out, I want to make sure it’s worth something. What, am I going to sit here and think you’d rather be alone than be with me?”

“You’d rather I be with you than be alone?”

“Not if you don’t love me.” He stood up. “But you do love him, and if I have to go through this, I want to at least comfort myself with knowing it was for something rather than nothing.”
They stared at each other.

“I can’t talk to you about this,” she whispered.

“Can’t you? We’ve talked about so many other things about Tom. This is just one more. I know you don’t have any intention of talking to Tom, and I just want to know why.”

“I— It’s hard to understand, let alone explain,” she said, sinking back into her chair. She put her head in her hands, feeling so heavy.

“Try,” he said.

She closed her eyes. “I’ve hurt him so much, Joseph,” she said, her voice on the brink of tears, but she refused to let them go. Mercifully, somehow, Beatrice had become so engrossed in the cartoons she was watching that she hadn’t yet come barreling down the hallway for Mommy, and Cosette felt somewhere in her mother-instinct that she had a few more minutes, at least. “I was the one who kicked him out that awful morning after we…and again, in London, after I promised him I was with him, thick and thin…I broke that promise five minutes after I made it when I found out his past was darker than I liked it. And when we were at the reception for Christina’s wedding, I tried to take advantage of him again, and when I realized how much he had changed, how we could actually try again that time for real… I was such a chicken shit. I regret it so much, but I can’t take it back. He’s moved on, he’s been trying to find his own path, and I just can’t risk going through that again, putting him through it, putting myself through it. It’s better off the way it is. We get along, we’re doing so well raising Beatrice, and---” She finally put her hands down, the tears dripping down her cheeks. “I just don’t feel good enough for him. I don’t feel like I’m what he needs. I feel like I’ve always put conditions on him, and when he doesn’t meet them, I yank back my affections and punish him for it. And now that he finally meets my requirements, what kind of a bitch does that make me to pounce on him now?” She spread her hands, shook her head. “I just can’t. I. Can’t.”

Gently, Joseph reached out and grasped her hand. “You can’t let the past define your future,” he said, his voice low, kind. “One of the reasons I’ve always been sensitive about Tom isn’t just because of you – but it’s also because of him, Cosette. You think he’s moved on, but I don’t think he has. I think he’s just resigned himself, wanting to step back so you can find whatever it is that will make you happy. I know, I’ve done that myself.” He gave her a sad little smile.

She couldn’t return it. She sniffed her runny nose and wiped at her eyes with her free hand.
“You think you’re protecting him by not dragging him back in,” Joseph said with a shake of his head, “but I’d be willing to bet my life that it’s too late for that. He’s already there.”

“Then he’s a fool,” she muttered.

“Yeah, well.” Joseph let go of her hand. “That’s par for the course.” He stood up. Cosette heard Beatrice’s little feet tapping down the hallway, ready to come demand her lunch from her mother. Joseph handed Cosette a nearby hand-towel to wipe her face. “You need to pray on this, Cosette. You think you can hide in your tower and protect the prince, but you can’t.” Joseph stepped past the hallway, heading toward the door, and Beatrice stopped, looking up at him as he passed.

“Bye-bye!” she chirped.

Joseph waggled his fingers at her and let himself out.

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At about two o’clock on Thursday afternoon, Tom’s phone had a mild explosion.

First, Fr. Francis called. “I’m so sorry,” he said, “but I’ve got a scheduling problem. I’m not going to be able to meet with you on Friday. I have some time right now, but I don’t want to make you rush over here.”

“That’s all right,” Tom said, feeling disappointment, but something more. Thwarted, more like. “Actually, do you think we could talk on the phone for a bit?”

“That would be fine. As long as that’s okay with you.”

Truthfully, Tom was a bit relieved. He was not the kind of person who easily confided his deepest thoughts to someone he just met. His way of dealing with problems he wasn’t able to talk about had been to use his acting skills as a catharsis for them. If he could talk, he stuck to those who he knew and trusted best. He didn’t know Fr. Francis, even as much as he knew and trusted Christina and Henry, and the thought of telling this man his most troubling issues….it caused him great discomfort. Almost a sense of worry and dread.
The certain amount of distance being on the phone gave him seemed to offer a shield. At least he wouldn’t have to look this man in the face and reveal his darker side.

“Well, I just want to give you an idea of why I wanted to speak with you,” Tom said. He was pacing the small living room of his Los Angeles house, having slept in this morning, and not having made his way over to Cosette’s yet, was a bit anxious to go and see Beatrice for a while. Cosette hadn’t called, indicating she would need him. He knew that Giselle was scheduled to come later in the day, from around four to eight, so that Cosette could get some things done around the house and not worry about Beatrice.

“Sure,” Fr. Francis said.

“I just…well, I’m not Catholic, Christina probably already told you that.”

“Yes.”

“So I’m not really used to…I know that there are some Catholics, not all of them, who subscribe to some of the older beliefs about being celibate, about not having sex outside of marriage.”

“Yes. The Church teaches it, but admittedly not all priests teach it as well as they should. The Church herself absolutely teaches that sex is for marriage, and because our culture is the way it is, that belief is considered old-fashioned. The Church has always taught it. But people are sinners. They make their own choices.”

“Right. Now, I was never taught that, you know. I mean, for a very long time I had my own ideas about sex that I thought were pretty commonly accepted. I mean, I know they are. Um…uh…well, recently, I’ve sort of started to reconsider them.”

“All right. Can I ask why?”

“Well, it’s hard to explain.” He fumbled. He was usually so good at picking the right words. “Ah…er….I hope you’ll pardon me if I take long pauses, I’m trying to order my thoughts.”

“That’s fine. I’m pretty patient.”
Tom drew several breaths. “Okay. Well, I know that Cosette has spoken to you about things, and maybe she’s mentioned me and our relationship, and of course I know all of that is confidential, of course, but being with her, at first, was what even made me aware that anybody believed in that. That sex was only for marriage. Now, you probably know we aren’t together anymore, and I’ve been trying to move on and find someone else, but I’ve discovered that what I’m looking for in a relationship isn’t what it was before.”

“Because of Cosette?”

“It was at first, truthfully,” Tom said. “I know it was because I missed her, but the first relationship I had after her ended sort of abruptly, and I had been…I had been sexually active with her, and when it ended I sort of felt…used. I mean, it had been a few years since I’d had a relationship like that, and I’d been having them all my life before. Before Cosette, I mean. And I found that kind of relationship didn’t satisfy me anymore, but all the women I met all seemed to be that kind of woman, they all seemed to view sex as a priority, or at least mandatory to a relationship, and I started to be…uncomfortable with that.”

“Do you have any specific reason why you felt that way?”

“I’ve thought about it.” Tom sighed. “I mean, Cosette always talked about the intimacy and bonding nature of sex, and of course we made a child together, and I started to realize that maybe I was bonding with people that I couldn’t either make that full commitment to, or weren’t going to make that commitment to me. It’s like…” he had to laugh at the thought in his head, “it’s almost like eating a food you’ve always loved, always fully enjoyed, and then one day you bite into it and it tastes the same, but at the same time, it still doesn’t taste right. And it hasn’t changed, it’s still made with the same ingredients, but for some reason you don’t like it anymore.”

“Plus you find out how horrible it is for you,” Fr. Francis quipped, and both chuckle. “But that is interesting. How many relationships did you have after you broke up with Cosette?”

“Only the one, but I thought it was serious, and then there was a woman I knew in London…” It hurt to talk about, but somehow he managed to get the story about Leslie out. “And the thing is, I might have been fine before, having sex with her, and I couldn’t understand why I was reacting so strongly to something I would have been fine with before. And I came to the conclusion that something in me had changed. Some perspective. Plus I saw how Henry and Christina were doing well, having just gotten married, and Cosette started dating a really good and upstanding guy, his name is Joseph, and I thought, that’s working for them, maybe I should try that. Does that make any sense?”

“Yes, absolutely. But it’s a pretty serious mentality switch. Have you attempted a relationship of that nature since?”
“I did try with someone I knew, someone I wasn’t sure how I felt about, who wasn’t sure about me, either…she turned me down, though. Said it was too complicated for her.”

“Mmmm.” The tone was concerned. “Rejection isn’t easy to take.”

“I don’t want to sound like a prat about it, Father,” Tom said, “but it was very hard to take. I am not used to being turned down.”

“Well, it can be good for you. There isn’t any humility without a little humiliation.” The priest paused, thoughtfully. “So what are you looking for, Tom? I mean, from me? You want relationship advice from a chaste point of view?”

“Maybe a bit, but…well, truthfully…” God this was hard. “I am going to be brutally honest, Father. I hope you….”

“I know, Tom. It’s okay, you can tell me.”

“I want to know how do people live without sex?”

He almost expected the priest to laugh. But he didn’t. “It’s not easy, Tom, not at all,” the man replied. “Truthfully it is easier for people who have never experienced it, because you can’t really miss what you’ve never had. Not that it’s easy for them, not at all. In a very real sense, it’s like giving up an addiction. And I’m not saying you or anyone is addicted to sex. But we all use crutches in our lives, to help us along. For some people it’s food, for some it’s worse, like porn or alcohol. People who use crutches to extremes form addictions, but all of us have some kind of habit we use to help with the stress. A television show we watch, or even a hobby. A lot of them are harmless, but some of them aren’t. And this one isn’t.”

Tom let out a heavy breath. This was good. He needed someone with a distanced perspective on him. Someone who wasn’t too close. “So, what do those of us do who have had it and are…well, it’s not that I’m afraid of it happening again, I mean, I don’t have quite the same beliefs about it that you and my friends do, but I just feel that if I did…it wouldn’t be the best thing for me. It would be a setback, not moving forward. Which is very, very weird for me because I’ve never felt that way about it, never in my life.”

“You’re not hopeless, Tom, not by a long shot. Truthfully, it’s done the way anybody overcomes a
habit they want to break. One day at a time. I do caution you, though, that you need to have a very focused reason to remind yourself why you’re choosing this path. Admittedly, for many people I’ve counseled, it’s a matter of faith. They believe it’s wrong and want to avoid falling into sin. You need to come up with a list of reasons as to why you want to abstain from a sexual relationship. If you want to talk to me about what we Catholics believe about sex, about its nature, and help you gain some perspective and understanding, I would be happy to help you. I am assuming that the reason you wanted to speak to me is because you want, on some level, to understand our beliefs about sex a bit better, and that knowing them might help you with your resolve. There are some great books I can recommend to you, if you’re a reader—”

Tom laughed. “Oh yes, Father, I am.”

“Okay, good. Well, I can leave a few books in the front office for you so you can look at them over the weekend if you like, but first I want to explain a couple of things to you, just some basic vocabulary, do you mind?”

“No, sure, of course.”

“Okay, first of all, there’s a word that keeps getting misused. Celibacy. Being celibate, in the state of celibacy, is actually about marriage. Being celibate means you aren’t married.”

“Okay.”

“Abstinence is the word we use to refer to not having sex at all. You can be married and have to be abstinent for whatever reason, medical, psychological, whatever. Now the word I’m really going to use a lot is chastity, or being chaste. That word is about having the right relationship with sex. Chastity is considered a virtue in the Catholic faith. What it really means is you are doing what is proper to your state in life.”

“So, if you are single, then being chaste means you aren’t having sex?” Tom asked.

“Yes! And if you are married, you can be chaste and still have sex. It’s about respecting your partner, being self-giving to them, treating them with value and care and not using them as a body that was put there to serve you. Unfortunately, a lot of husbands and wives have this attitude that their spouse owes them sex, and that isn’t being chaste. Of course, being chaste could also mean not having sex at times, if your spouse can’t or needs to wait for a good reason. Not just because they’re punishing you for something, that isn’t being chaste, either.”
“Okay, I think I understand. I---” Just then, his call waiting went off. Tom barely managed to keep from swearing as excused himself for a moment and pulled his phone from his ear, and saw a number he didn’t recognize on his screen.

Joseph. Somehow, he just knew. Nobody ever called him on this phone that didn’t come up with a name, because this number was known only by those closest to him. He’d never had a phone solicitor call him on it, or anyone unidentifiable. It had to be Joseph.

“I’m so sorry, Father,” Tom said, “but I have to take this other call, it’s urgent. Can I call you right back?”

“That should be fine, if you want to.”

“I do! I had a few questions, and I don’t want to forget them. This won’t take long but it’s important.”

“All right.” Tom hastily said goodbye and barely managed to answer the other call before it stopped ringing.

“Hello? Hello?”

“Tom?” came Joseph’s voice. Tom had never heard him on the phone so he sounded odd to him, but it was him. “Henry told me you needed to speak to me. Is something wrong?”

“No, I, uh...I wanted to talk to you for a minute.” He drew a breath, pressed his fingers against the bridge of his nose, trying to calm his racing thoughts. It was hard to refocus himself, he’d been pretty into his talk with Fr. Francis, having found it much easier to talk to the man than he’d been afraid it would be. “I’m sorry, I just got off the phone with Father Francis---”

“If this is a bad time...I’m sorry, did you say you were talking to Fr. Francis?”

“Yeah.” Tom shook himself. He had to focus. This was very important and he didn’t want to fuck it up.
“Is everything all right?” Joseph sounded more alarmed than ever.

“Yeah, I just had some questions, about some things, and he was answering them for me.”

“Questions about---?”

Tom felt suddenly tense. Why was Joseph taking such an interest? He wanted to talk to the man but he wasn’t quite sure how much he could tell him. Joseph was Cosette’s boyfriend, for lack of a better word, and it wasn’t really proper for him to be too personal with him. “Um, it’s…some theological stuff. Just having some curiosity about you Catholics, is all.”

There was silence, and then he swore to God he heard giggling. Muffled, as if Joseph were desperately trying not to, but could not, absolutely could not stop himself.

“Joseph?” Tom said, wondering if he was hearing things right.

“I’m sorry,” Joseph said, breathing heavily, shaking it off, “I’m so sorry, please, no, you wanted…you wanted to talk to me. Please. What can I do for you?”

“Well, I, uh…” Shit. “Look, maybe it’s not my business, but I wanted to talk to you about Cosette.”

“About Cosette?”

Tom ran ahead before his sense could tell him better. “I can’t help but know that things have been rocky between you lately, and she hasn’t said that it’s about me, and I’m not at all assuming that it is, but I have wanted to say to you for some time…” This was coming out all rubbish. He was massively cocking it up. He had to finish and do damage control later. “I just wanted to say that I know it can’t be easy, having to deal with me. I mean, being Beatrice’s father, I want to raise her, be around her, and by extension I have to have a good relationship with Cosette. I care about her, enormously, but I promise you, I give you my word as a gentleman, as an Englishman,--”

“Tom, wait—”

“=--that I support the two of you one hundred percent. I would absolutely not in any way do
anything to interfere—"

“Tom!”

“-- with your relationship. So, if you two are having any problems because of me, if my presence is making things awkward, I know that I can’t disappear, but I promise, its—”

“Tom, Tom!” Finally, Joseph got his attention. “I know what you’re trying to say. I do. And, I really hate to be the one to tell you this, because it isn’t my place, but since you’re saying this to me, I should tell you --- you’re too late.”

What? “Too late?”

“Yeah. She broke up with me this morning. Don’t worry, it was amiable. It was really the best decision. I’m not angry with her, or you, I promise. And it wasn’t…you didn’t do anything wrong, Tom.”

Bloody hell. “But why? You two were…I don’t understand! I don’t understand why she would do that? I mean…I got the impression that…. But had Cosette said that Joseph was upset with her? That he was considering leaving her? Those thoughts had all come from his own head, his own neuroses and worries and fears. His desperation to see Cosette happy when all he had done for the last three plus years of her life was make her miserable…

“Tom,” Joseph said, and there was a strange tension in his voice, “you should go talk to her.”

“I--.” But nothing else came. Shelly had said the same thing. And he would bet good English pounds that if he could see Joseph’s face, he would be giving him the exact expression that Shelly had.

“Go talk to Cosette.” And Joseph hung up.

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“What the hell is going on?”
Cosette spun from where she was putting folded sheets away in the linen closet in the bathroom. She’d heard Christina come in, heard her bellow her name, and even though her sister, when she was really flustered, had all the delicacy of a bull in a china shop, Cosette was honestly surprised.

“What are you talking about?” Cosette asked.

“What’s going on with Joseph?” Christina demanded. She waved her phone at her sister. “I texted him to make sure he knew when my fourth of July barbeque was and he said he wasn’t going to be able to make it. I said it was still early, maybe he could request a day off if he did it soon enough, and he said that wasn’t the problem, and that I should talk to you. I asked what had happened between you and he wouldn’t answer. He let my call go to voice mail. Did you break up? What is going on?”

The corridor where the linen closet resided was right outside the bathroom, in a little alcove which was large as alcoves went, but the space was too small with Christina flinging her arms around in her frustration and panic. Cosette got around her sister and into the main hallway and walked toward the kitchen. Giselle had just arrived and was cleaning up Beatrice’s toys in the living room, and helping fold stacks of laundry while watching her charge. Hopefully the noise would inform the nanny that Beatrice needed to be kept out of the kitchen for the time being.

“Yes, we broke up,” Cosette said, standing in front of the sink, arms folded.

Christina just gawked at her. “I can’t believe that!”

Cosette shrugged. “It happens.”

“Bullshit it happens,” Christina said, really revved up now. “Did he do something? Did you do something? Who broke up with who?”

Cosette wanted to say it didn’t matter, but seeing the state Christina was in, she knew the truth couldn’t make things much worse. “I broke up with him.”

This seemed to knock all the wind from Christina’s sails. She sagged, staring at her sister. Christina’s hand went to her abdomen, as if physically made ill by this statement. “Why would you do that?” she whispered.
“I realized that my feelings for Joseph were not developing into ones that would carry into marriage,” Cosette said, as if she’d rehearsed it. Truthfully, she hadn’t. She thought she would have at least until tomorrow before she had to tell anyone. Of course, Tom would probably pop by sometime today and ask, and maybe she’d have to tell him. She certainly couldn’t imagine him taking it worse than Christina was.

“Your feelings?” Christina said.

“I wasn’t in love with him, Chrissy,” Cosette said, honestly. She wished, how she wished she could just unburden herself, but she knew what Christina would say, what she would tell her to do, and Cosette had already had that fight once today and didn’t think she’d survive a second round. “I know that you liked him, that Henry liked him, everybody liked him, but the chemistry just wasn’t there.”

“Of course not. Because you already have chemistry with someone else. You’re already in love with someone else.” Christina stated these facts so plainly, with the calm confidence of a first-grade teacher telling her class that two plus two equaled four. Her hysteria seemed to have passed, and this paradoxically unnerved Cosette even more.

“Not this again,” Cosette whispered.

“It’s a sin to lie,” Christina countered.

Their eyes met, locked.

“Don’t do this, Cosette,” Christina said, a deadly tone in her voice, which was getting louder but not as feverishly pitched as before, “don’t go down this path again. It isn’t working for you and it’s just plain stupid, and when you say it you make me think that you think I’m stupid. Just admit it! You are still in love with Tom!”

What happened next, Cosette wasn’t sure. She didn’t remember planning to speak. It was like some hand had pushed at her diaphragm and forced air into her throat and sound over her vocal chords. “So what if I am?” she said.

Wide-eyed shock came first, and then, inexplicably, Christina burst into tears. Not loud, wailing sobs, but breathy short gasps, as tears started to form in her eyes and stutter down her cheeks.
“I can’t…God, Cozy, I don’t know what to do anymore. I don’t know what to say to you. I feel like there’s been this brick wall between us ever since that fucking trip to London. You don’t talk to me like you used to, and for a while I told myself it was because you were trying to give me space because I was married and I was with Henry so much, but I just can’t buy that anymore. And now you tell me, you’re still in love with him, you admit it, and you say so what? Who the fuck are you? What happened to you?”

“What happened?” Cosette growled, anger and hurt and pain pushing its way from her throat, “London happened, Chrissy! You saw it! You saw what I did, how I was, the way I acted, heard the things I said! And that wasn’t it, that was only what you saw – I was horrible to him after the night he and I spent together, when we made Beatrice. I was horrible to him again in London, and…and the night you got married, we almost got back together, he said that he loved me and still wanted to marry me, he even stopped me because I was feeling lonely and depressed—”

“Wait, wait, what are you--? When did this happen, at the reception? You almost got back together?”

“After you left. We were in one of the side rooms. I came on to him, he stopped me. Like he promised he would. And we could have gotten back together that night—I saw it, I saw how he had become someone, someone who got it, you know? And he’s done more besides since then! But I chickened out, I don’t know what the hell I was thinking. And when he got together with Ashley I was so fucking jealous.” Her voice had gotten growly, like a tiger, she could hardly recognize it. “It’s just a line of dominoes, Chrissy, they all fall and I can’t…he’s better off without me. I’ve been nothing but a millstone around his neck—”

“That’s bullshit too,” Christina said, having gone eerily calm again. She’d stopped crying, wiped her cheeks dry. She grabbed a tissue for her nose.

Cosette rolled not just her eyes, but nearly her entire upper body with them. “Jesus, Chrissy, you were there in London! You were so pissed at me for what happened, you barely talked to me for days!”

“I wasn’t pissed at you because you were…” Christina shook her hands, trying to gather herself. “Okay, yes, I have been upset with you. I admit that. But not for the reasons you think. Cozy, you are…you have always been… dammit… you’re so proud. Soooo fucking proud. And not the overt kind of way, shoving it in people’s faces, but you get…I don’t even know how to explain it.”

Cosette had folded her arms again, glaring at her sister. She really didn’t need a litany of her sins. “You were pissed at me for being proud?”
“Because you were hurting yourself!” Christina cried. “You were so miserable without Tom, I saw it, I saw how unhappy you were. Not two days before you were fucking glowing and you…you knew you had fucked it up but you thought you had picked your path and couldn’t veer from it. Henry tried to explain it to me, that you were faced with a contradiction you couldn’t reconcile. You loved this man who was everything you thought you weren’t supposed to love. But what you loved was deeper down, the parts you were bringing out. You weren’t in love with Tom the womanizer, you were in love with Tom the man, Tom the father of your child, the person he was in his heart, the person he was supposed to be, and, quite frankly, I think, has finally become!”

“You were projecting,” Cosette said. “You were seeing yourself in Tom, and you were angry at me for rejecting him, as if I were Henry rejecting you. Because of your past.”

“Your past doesn’t determine your future if you don’t want it to. People can change. Grace makes it possible. People can work to be better. Tom was struggling so hard to do both and you were letting your pride and your fear get in the way.”

Cosette felt herself nodding. “I’m not denying I was awful, Chrissy,” she said. “That’s why I don’t want to drag him into this again. I was so terrible to him and I hurt him so much, not just once but repeatedly, and I can’t risk it again.”

“Then don’t hurt him again!” Christina said, as if it were obvious.

“I’m trying not to!”

“No, you idiot! This time, be different! You are just as capable as anybody else! That’s what our whole religion is built on, isn’t it? The idea of fighting the good fight? ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me?’ Why are you giving up? Fight the good fight, Cosette!”

And then, at that moment, the kitchen door opened, and Tom walked into the room.

One look at his face, and Cosette knew. He’d heard.

Chapter End Notes

If you are good little commenters I will post the next chapter next Saturday. (insert
wicked grin)
Chapter Summary

I did promise. Here we go.

Tom realized that between Fr. Francis (whom he had called back only briefly) and Joseph he had not been to see his daughter all day. He locked up the house and headed down the sidewalk, his brain a mess of thoughts that he couldn’t sort – so he started to run.

It wasn’t more than a block, and he wasn’t even out of breath when he got there, but it definitely shortened the time and the action itself always calmed his brain. He went to the side stairs that led to the kitchen and saw that Christina’s car was in the driveway and she had left the heavy kitchen door open, only the screen door shut.

Which meant he could hear everything anyone in the kitchen was saying.

He hadn’t even gotten up the stairs when he heard Christina’s voice, filled with intensity that only Christina seemed to be capable of, so frustrated and thundering at her sister.

“---and when you say it you make me think that you think I’m stupid. Just admit it! You are still in love with Tom!”

He froze. On the second step. He stared at the door, into the kitchen. All he could see was the table. He couldn’t see Christina, he couldn’t see Cosette. His brain struggled to untangle the words he just heard, with no context. A second later he thought he was hearing something he shouldn’t be hearing, but then came Cosette’s strained answer.

“So what if I am?”

What? Had he heard correctly? He wanted to rush in there, demand to know what they were talking about. The old expression about ears burning made him realize how hot his had become, flush with sudden emotion.

Christina started to reply, but it was runny and it sounded punctuated by tears. The two sisters were
having a serious row and his name had come up and he wanted to go in and help but it felt wrong, he couldn’t, he shouldn’t be hearing this—

He stepped down off the stairs and into the drive, just staring at the stupid door, stunned into silence. He considered going around to the front door, using his key to get in, and pretend he hadn’t heard.

No good, though. He was a shit liar. They’d take one look at him and they’d know.

Then Cosette’s voice came, angry and filled with pain, and much louder than her sobbing sister. “What happened? London happened, Chrissy! You saw it! You saw what I did, how I was, the way I acted, heard the things I said! And that wasn’t it, that was only what you saw – I was horrible to him after the night he and I spent together, when we made Beatrice. I was horrible to him again in London, and… and the night you got married, we almost got back together, he said that he loved me and still wanted to marry me, he even stopped me because I was feeling lonely and depressed—”

“Wait, wait, what are you--? When did this happen, at the reception? You almost got back together?”

“After you left. We were in one of the side rooms. I came on to him, he stopped me. Like he promised he would. And we could have gotten back together that night—I saw it, I saw how he had become someone, someone who got it, you know? And he’s done more besides since then! But I chickened out, I don’t know what the hell I was thinking.” Then Cosette’s voice changed, and Tom could hardly recognize it – or maybe he did, and it made his balls shrivel, it sounded so much like that tone of voice she’d used in London, when she had torn him to shreds— “And when he got together with Ashley I was so fucking jealous. It’s just a line of dominoes, Chrissy, they all fall and I can’t…he’s better off without me. I’ve been nothing but a millstone around his neck—”

“That’s bullshit too—”

Tom had to walk away. He walked down to the end of the driveway. He pressed his hands to his cheeks – his hands were always cold, and his cheeks felt so hot. He tried to calm down. He tried.

Cosette was still in love with him.

This knowledge did not exactly surprise him, he found. Somehow, he had always known. Or at
least suspected. The night she spoke of, the reception, she had not pushed him away out of lack of interest. She had pushed him away out of fear.

And she regretted it. She’d been jealous of Ashley. This was surprising. And at the same time, not. Cosette was a master at suppressing her feelings.

His fingers clenched. No, this was too much. He knew he shouldn’t have heard but he had, and he had to do something about it.

She thought she was a millstone? What the fuck--? No, admittedly their relationship had never been smooth or even remotely peaceful but…had she ever really been wrong?

Had she been wrong about him in London? Wrong about his attitude, wrong about his bad decisions?

Maybe then he would have thought so. But not now. Now he could see the damage he’d done to himself. How it had ultimately led to his misery, and made all the changes he wanted to make that much more difficult.

Still, the thought she would think that he wouldn’t want her, that he was better off without her…

That was unacceptable.

He turned and walked back up the drive, up the stairs, and walked right through the kitchen door. Both sisters stopped their argument as he came into view, and instantly everyone knew exactly what had happened.

That he’d heard.

Christina took in a heavy sniffle and wiped her face. “Yeah, well, I’ve made my point.”

Cosette looked from her sister to him, not knowing what to do. She was totally caught off guard, Tom could see it, and a heavy red flush was driving up her neck and into her cheeks. It was a very rare sight to see Cosette knocked off her kilter but there it was. Tom didn’t take his eyes off her.
Without another word, Christina turned and left. They waited until they heard her start up her car and back down the driveway.

Cosette squirmed. Tom didn’t mean to glare at her but knew his heavy gaze was going to become that. He blinked several times, looked away. He turned, walked down the hallway into the living room and greeted his daughter. She came flying at him, babbling about yelling in the kitchen, and Tom told her – he would never quite remember what he said, only remember the worried look on Giselle’s face and Beatrice’s wide-eyed stare – to please stay in the living room, Mommy and Daddy had to talk.

When he came back, Cosette hadn’t moved. Her arms were wrapped around herself, as if to shield herself. He couldn’t figure out the look on her face – fear, pain, a million other things were there.

“Cosette,” he said, his voice a croak. He cleared his throat, tried again. “Will you…will you tell me why you broke up with Joseph?”

She looked startled, and then seemed to gather herself, squaring her shoulders, although she did not release her arms from where they were wrapped in front of her, crossed so tightly he could see her fingers getting paler. “We, uh…I am not in love with him. I am not going to fall in love with him.”

“Because you’re in love with me.” He said it simply, not an accusation, he already knew, he just needed to see her say it. He was desperate for her to say it.

She gave a simple little nod.

“So…what are we going to do about this?”

She drew a shaky little breath, let it out, like a sigh. Her eyes darted everywhere except at him. “I…I honestly don’t know.”

“You don’t want to be in love with me.” It was a statement, not a question.

Her eyes finally went back to him, blowing wide. “No!”
He gave a little shrug. “That’s how it sounds.” He was suddenly so sad. So very, very sad. Yet again, he was the cause of her misery. He just couldn’t seem to get anything right when it came to her. And he found himself saying it. “I don’t know what to do anymore, to make things right by you. I try to make it work, you’re unhappy. I stay away, I don’t pursue you anymore, and I make you unhappy. You have to tell me what to do, Cosette, because I don’t know anymore, I have no idea—”

A sob was erupting from his chest and he clamped down with all his might on top of it. The sadness became frustration, and the frustration became anger.

“No, Tom, please!” she cried, but her arms still didn’t move, although her body gave a little jerk in his direction. “It isn’t—you haven’t done anything bad or wrong in any way!”

“And yet…you don’t want me. Which I don’t blame you for, but you seem to have this fucked up idea that…what was that, that I heard?” The anger started to bubble out, creeping into his voice, as he flung his arm toward the door. “You think you’re a millstone around my neck? What the hell is that?”

She scowled at him. “Well aren’t I? Look at you! You just said you—”

“What the hell would you think?” he snapped. “To hear that the person you love more than anyone in the world is in love with you back but says, so what? What am I supposed to think, how am I supposed to react?”

She recoiled, face open in shock. Those damn arms tied tight. He wanted to reach out and yank them away from her.

“You’re still…” she started.

“Of course I am!” Now he was irritated that she was surprised by this information, when it hadn’t surprised him at all, her feelings for him. She was supposed to be smart. “This whole time…why in the hell would you ever think I would be better off without you? Why would you think that? After the things I’ve told you? That’s just insane.”

The scowl was back. “Oh yes, because I made you so happy before,” she snarled, leaning forward a bit. “Telling you one minute that I was with you and you could let down your guard. And the
second you do I’m all over you for shit you did long before you knew me—”

“You were right,” Tom said, baffled.

She froze, uncomprehending.

“In London. You were right about everything. You know you were. And I proved you right. I turned around and slept with someone else. For no more reason than I needed a warm body. I used…I can’t even remember her fucking name, Cosette, that’s how bad it was.”

“Lydia,” she provided. There was no emotion in her voice.

“You forgave me,” he said. “For no other reason than the fact that it was the right thing to do for Beatrice. You forgave me and let me back in with no conditions except the most obvious one. And you were afraid that night at the reception, I know you were. You weren’t…you were protecting yourself, which you had every right to do.”

She shook her head. “I wasn’t fair to you.”

“You weren’t nice, there’s a difference,” Tom corrected her. “That kind of thing…we can work on that. If I can change, anyone can change,” he said.

She shook her head, closed her eyes, released a stream of tears down her cheeks. “I don’t want to hurt you anymore, Tom.”

“Well,” he said with a chuckle that wasn’t humorous, “then forgive me for being uncouth but the only way to do that is to….” He paused, realizing what he was going to say. He saw her flinch. “I can’t win with you,” he sighed.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“I know, you’re always sorry, but you don’t---” The anger was back. “You don’t practice what you preach, Cosette.”
“I know.”

“Well, then that’s something you have to change!” Tom snapped, throwing up his hands. He slapped them on his thighs. “I mean…what else do I have to do? Don’t you know why Shelly said no? Why Ashley broke up with me? Why I can’t even…it’s because of you! Because they all know that they will forever be a second choice. I’m done fighting this, Cosette. It’s a reality that I have to accept. I am in love with you and I’m not going to fall in love with anyone else. You are it. And you don’t want me.”

“It isn’t that!” she cried, her arms – finally! – unclenching and reaching forward, but stopping. “It isn’t…Tom, I’m not blind. I know what you’ve done, I know what…the conversations we’ve had, and even that night at the reception, I saw it then. It isn’t because you aren’t good enough, I promise it isn’t that—”

“Then what is it?” he demanded.

“It’s because I’m not good enough!” she cried. “It’s because I am proud and narrow-minded and controlling and judgmental and…and all those things! And I thought…I thought you needed someone who would support you—”

“You wouldn’t support me?”

“Of…course I would,” she stuttered. “But I would suck at it.”

“You really think so?” he narrowed one eye at her.

She shrugged a shoulder.

“You’re afraid,” he stated.

She looked down at her feet.

“This is just pride, Cosette,” he said. “I know you’re stubborn but you demand that you be perfect
and if you can’t be perfect then…then you just don’t even try!”

She pressed her hands to her face. He stepped closer. He wanted desperately to touch her but he didn’t dare, not yet.

“If you think you’ve done me some irreparable harm,” he said, “I’m here to inform you that you haven’t. You. Haven’t. Whatever wrong you think you’ve done me, I forgive you. Just like you forgave me. And I will support you, in trying to let go of your pride, which I know you want to do, because you’re not so blind as to think you don’t need to. You’re flawed and imperfect…even though I still think you’re better than me, I’ll try not to let that go to your head.”

Inexplicably, they both let out a chuckle. Strained but genuine.

“This is why you’re better than me,” she said, peeking at him from behind splayed fingers.

He shook his head. “Cosette, this is stupid. You don’t want to hurt me, I don’t want to hurt you, but that’s always part of any relationship. And besides, what would the point be of it, if we didn’t? What good would you be to me or would I be to you if we didn’t test each other? If we didn’t have to make the other be patient or understanding or compassionate? We wouldn’t make each other better people if we were both perfect and never did anything wrong. I need you. And if you need me, that would make me happier than anything.”

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Cosette lowered her fingers. He loved her, of course he loved her, he had always loved her, she just didn’t let herself know it because that meant her stupid reasoning that he was happier without her would make no sense.

He forgave her. He accepted her weaknesses and flaws and was prepared to deal with them. He had never, not any time, ever driven her away. Every time it had been her who left him. All three times. Yet he wanted her back – how could he?

“I don’t deserve you,” she said.

“No, you deserve someone better.”
“No,” she said, with more force. “Enough of that. You sound—”

“Stupid? So do you, whenever you say it. This is ridiculous, Cosette. We have to stop this. We can’t keep going like this.”

“And if it doesn’t work this time?” Cosette asked, still terrified. Was she seriously considering this? If they failed, she didn’t think she could survive it.

“It will,” Tom said. “Because this time you won’t walk away from me. Promise me.”

“I want to. I’m afraid.”

“I know. But this time I’m not messing around.” He got down on one knee. He grasped her hands. “Marry me, Cosette.”

“I—”

“This isn’t a trial run,” he said, determined, his face almost hard. “This isn’t a ‘let’s see how this works this time,’ kind of thing. I am done with that. I have always wanted you. In the beginning, I confess, it was lust. I wanted you for your body, but I fell in love with your heart. I did everything wrong, I didn’t treat you like the valuable thing you were, and I paid for it. And even the second time, I wasn’t honest enough with either you or myself and I paid for that, too. I should have fought harder that last time but I saw you weren’t ready. I don’t know if you’re ready now, to be honest, but I can’t…I can’t let you get away again. This time, it’s forever. I’m not saying you have to marry me next week, even next year, but I want it official, I want us to be together with the intention that we are going to be together for the rest of our earthly lives.”

She stared at him. So afraid. But she did want him. Something in her knew that if she walked away from this, it would be the end for her. Nobody would ever be Tom. And she would get the chance to make it up to him – all the awful ways she had treated him. Christina was right. She had to make a decision to change.

And that he still wanted her after all this time…if the only way for him to be happy was with her…if she truly loved him, how could she deny him that?
Seeing her hesitation, he finally said, “If you don’t say yes now, I’ll keep asking. Tomorrow. Next week. Until you say yes. I’m not walking away this time. You aren’t pushing me away, Cosette.”

“Yes,” she said. “All right.”

He lit up from inside. It wasn’t so much the smile, but the way his eyes glowed. Then he seemed to jerk, and his hand went to his pocket, and if remembering something. He shoved his hand inside, and pulled out a shimmery gold object.

A ring. It was the ring that Christina had given her in London, the skyline, which she had lost on the way back home, and just figured it was a sign. It was in Tom’s hand.

“Where did you get that?” she asked.

“The housekeeper found it and gave it to me the last time I was in London,” he said. “I shoved it into my pocket and forgot about it. Think it’s been through the wash a few times.” He slipped it onto her finger. “This is not your engagement ring,” he added as he rose. “I’m going to put a real ring on here when the time comes. But I think it’s a good place holder.”

She felt more tears coming on. Happy tears this time. They felt so different. She put her hand on his shoulder, bringing him closer to her. His arm went around her waist, his hand on her back, the other on her cheek. They were chest to chest. “It’s perfect,” she whispered.

He nodded. “I love you,” he said. Then, he looked almost pained. “Will you say it?”

Confused, she could only stare at him for a moment, then realized. She hadn’t said it. She rarely said it. And he wanted so much to hear it.

“I love you, Tom. I always have. I’m sorry for—”

He pressed the thumb of the hand holding her cheek to her lips, shh-ing her affectionately. “Just the first part, please. And often, if you don’t mind.” His eyes were still glowing, his expression so tender. She felt herself melting.
She smiled at him. She arched herself up on her toes, knowing he was going to kiss her, and he bent a bit, but then pulled away.

“No,” he said.

“No?”

“The next time I kiss you is when you’re my wife,” he said, a strange light in his eyes. His hands slid away, putting air between them. “We...we have to be careful, Cosette. I don’t know how...but maybe Fr. Francis can help us.”

“Fr. Francis?”

“I’ve been talking to him,” Tom said. “Maybe we should both go. I can’t fu—mess this up,” he said with a hint of amusement. “I want to do this your way. The right way.”

If it was possible, she fell in love with him a little more.

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Raymond stared at him, a bit flabbergasted. Tom could hardly blame him. He had just asked for Cosette’s hand in marriage.

Isabella, for her part, just pressed her hand to her mouth. She looked at Tom with her wide brown eyes, as if she had not seen him before. It was the first time Tom ever really noticed Cosette’s resemblance to her.

He wished Cosette had come, now. She wanted to but he had told her he needed to do this alone. He needed to man up and face them. She had been there last time and things hadn’t gone terribly well, and her parents needed to know this was serious. If she was there, she would start talking and then possibly an argument would have broken out, but as it was, both her mother and father stared at him in silence.

Finally, Raymond cleared his throat. He stood up from his chair, facing Tom squarely. He seemed
to be considering his words, a deep frown on his face, but he didn’t seem angry or agitated.

““When I met you, I didn’t trust you,” Raymond said. “I had a very clear vision of who I thought you were. And in the beginning, you lived up to that. But, since Beatrice was born, you have surprised me. I saw it the night she was born. There’s no way you would have stayed around like you had if you’d been as superficial as I thought. And I suspect that you’ve changed a bit on us, in these last few years.”

“I’ve tried to, sir.”

Raymond looked to Isabella. “What do you think?”

“I’ve been waiting for them to wake up for a while now,” she said, fighting a smile.

“If it’s our blessing you want, you have it.”

Tom wanted to throw his arms around the man and lift him off the ground in a hug. But instead he reached for the handshake Raymond was extending to him. “I can’t thank you enough.”

“Do you have a date?” Isabella asked.

“We have an appointment with Fr. Francis on Wednesday,” Tom said. “We’re not official at this point, but I’ve asked her and she said yes. I want to make sure we do things right.”

Raymond nodded his approval. “Then I’m sure you’ve got better things to do than stand around here.”

“I do want to invite you all to dinner, though,” Tom said. “I’ve made reservations for Sunday night. I hope that’s possible?”

“Just let us know where,” Isabella said, giving him a brief hug.

Tom headed back to Cosette’s house, but he felt like he could fly there. He’d felt like he was
floating since yesterday. Since she admitted she loved him. That she wanted him. That she saw him for what he was trying to be.

He knew she still had qualms, but they weren’t what he expected them to be. She had confessed to him, quietly the previous evening as they watched Beatrice playing, that she felt she hadn’t loved him unconditionally, the way a person was supposed to love another person. She couldn’t quite understand how he could accept that, how he couldn’t help but feel she was only taking advantage of the changes he’d tried to make in his life.

“Are you?” he’d asked her.

“I don’t want to be, but I’m afraid that I am, anyway,” she said.

“Darling,” he said, taking her hand, “who I was before—I don’t know exactly when things changed —”

“I know,” she said quickly. “That night at the reception.”

“Well, it was the first inkling, yes,” he agreed. “But it wasn’t until much later that I started to realize it on a much deeper level. I thought I was good enough for you, for anyone, for that matter, before then, but…I guess I had to realize how unhappy I was making myself. I don’t hold anything against you, please remember that.”

“I’ll try.”

“You were jealous of Ashley?” he said a short time later.

“I regretted not getting back together with you at the reception.”

“Then you’re not being conditional. If you’d been anyone else I would have readily taken you to bed. But I knew you better then.”

“You did it for me,” she said. At his nod, she reached over and pecked his cheek. “Yeah, I was jealous.”
“You shouldn’t have been. What we had wasn’t a flickering candle to what I felt for you.”

“You were so good about Joseph,” she returned. “You weren’t jealous—”

“I was terribly jealous. But I thought he was what you wanted, and I saw how good he was to you. I wanted you to be happy.”

She got a little teary then. He reached over, lifting her chin up with his crooked index finger.

“What?”

“I’m just berating myself for how selfish I’ve been,” Cosette said with a watery little sigh.

“Well you are going to stop that this instant,” he commanded, his voice low but unmistakable. “I want to make you happy, Cosette. Not flog you for your mistakes – even if I think they’re imaginary.”

She nodded, giving him a little smile. Her beautiful violet eyes shimmered at him, and he had seen how much she loved him, in that moment.

He knew he was driving a little too fast for the speed limit on his way back to Cosette’s. He knew it wasn’t all going to disappear in a puff of smoke, but he couldn’t help that strange, clingy feeling in his chest. It was bad enough those dreams were back --- the dreams he had of her a long time ago, when Beatrice was still inside her and their relationship had been a tentative, combustible thing, were back. Dreams of her in that sea side villa with a wedding ring on her finger and her warm and writhing underneath him. It had a feeling he was going to be taking a lot of cold showers between now and when she officially became his. He had to remember that this was a marathon, not a sprint.

——

Cosette paced the living room. Tom had insisted on going alone, and she was nervous. She knew how her father could be, and her mother, at times, could be worse, but Tom said if she came, it could just make things much more tense. She had a tendency to argue with her parents and that was
the last thing he wanted.

It was hard, to give in to him. The first part of letting go of that pride. Trusting Tom. But she said she would, so she did. And it was making her a bit nuts.

Friday afternoon had turned into some strange dream after their mutual declaration. Exhaustion and exhilaration seemed to walk hand in hand. It had taken a supreme act of will not to fling herself into Tom’s arms, but instead he’d gone into the living room to reassure Beatrice and Giselle that everything was fine. After that, things settled into a domestic pattern that was both familiar and strange.

They were together now.

They’d turned into stupid, dreamy-eyed teenagers that evening, staring at each other for long moments, just smiling, not saying anything. This had led Beatrice to frustration more than once when she realized neither Mother nor Father was paying attention to her. Her voice had risen to a demanding squawk when she wanted them to look at the tower she’d built with her blocks, or the colorful scribble she’d drawn. She was mollified when Cosette put on Moana, but wanted her Father to sing “Your Welcome” with her, and when he was still gazing at Cosette, starry-eyed, she slapped his cheek with her little hand with a cry of, “Daddy, look!”

Dinner was unusual. Beatrice seemed surprised that both Mom and Dad were sitting down to eat, even though this sort of thing was not out of the ordinary. Tom often ate dinner with them at Cosette’s invitation. But instead of concentrating on her, which she was used to, they continued to focus on each other, talking about silly grown-up things until she got impatient and started banging her spoon on her high chair, demanding ice cream. Plus Daddy kept reaching for Mommy’s hand.

“We have to tell Christina and Henry,” Cosette said. “I feel kind of stupid calling her up on the phone and saying, ‘hey, that thing you were yelling at me about? Yeah, you were right, we got back together.’”

Tom just chuckled. “Well, I’m going to go talk to your Dad tomorrow afternoon. After that, we can call Christina and Henry and see if they’re home and drop by. Tell them together.”

That was when the argument – although it wasn’t terribly heated, as Tom very calmly stated his case and Cosette forced herself to acquiesce without too much of a fight, determined to be the change she talked about – started. It ended fast, and then Beatrice made her demand for dessert.
“Bebe,” Tom said, leaning closer to her chair, “you need to wait until we’re all done, okay?”

“Want ice cream now!” Beatrice cried, impatient and agitated.

“You need to wait,” Cosette said in a soft voice. “And eat three more bites.”

Eventually Beatrice did as Cosette wanted, as she was really a very good little girl and used to being obedient. Tom rewarded her with a scoop of chocolate ice cream, and put a few in a bowl for Mommy and some for himself.

“Bebe,” Tom said, his voice softer this time, “you know how Mommy lives here in this house, with you, and Daddy lives in a different house down the street?”

Beatrice nodded, her big blue eyes – her father’s eyes – watching him above a giant mouth of chocolate cream.

“Well, what would you think if—”

“Tom, it’s a bit soon,” Cosette started.

Tom just raised one finger at her. **Wait.** “If Mommy and Daddy both lived together, in the same house, with you?”

“Here?” the two-and-a-half-year-old asked.

“Would that be okay?”

“We live together?” she asked. She looked to Mommy for confirmation.

Cosette nodded with a smile. She felt herself getting a little teary again.
“Daddy be here all time?”

“Well, you know I have to leave sometimes because of work, but yes.”

“Yay!” She tossed up the spoon filled with ice cream, splattering it a bit across Tom’s shirt, but they had been laughing. “We live together!”

Her little two-year-old mind couldn’t quite comprehend the unity of this statement, Cosette realized as she continued to pace. Tom had gone home early that night, kissing her forehead before leaving, promising her he would come by tomorrow before he went to see her parents.

Which he had. And they’d talked – a bit intensely – again, about him going alone. And a few hours ago, he’d gone alone.

She heard the familiar roar of his car in the driveway. She was in the kitchen doorway before he even got one foot on the steps. He was beaming.

“They asked if we’d set a date,” he said.

She flung herself at him, and he caught her around the waist, twirling her in the driveway before setting her back down on the steps. He didn’t hug her long or hard, which was disappointing, as she very much wanted him to, but Tom was determined to keep himself under control.

Keeping herself under control, however, seemed to be another matter.

She knew that they could easily argue about how little signs of affection were not bad or dangerous. But the pull between them was strong, and now that their relationship had taken the next step, it felt harder to not want to touch each other constantly, and touching in small ways would lead to bigger ways. Kissing her lightly would lead to kissing her passionately, and then who knew where it would stop? Last time they lasted weeks before things went too far. That wasn’t going to happen again.

“Maybe we should set a date,” Cosette said as Tom came into the house, his hand in hers. She looked at him over her shoulder, expecting a shocked expression, but instead saw something smoldering there. The way he looked at her made things shiver deep in her belly and slide farther down, and she had to take a step away from him to contain them again.
“Don’t tempt me,” Tom said. “But we have to pace this. It’s a marathon, not a sprint.” In a lower voice, he said, closer to her ear, “I’m not marrying you so we can have sex, Cosette.”

“No, of course not,” she replied, although the thought of being with him again sent a flush to her cheeks.

“Although it’s an excellent fringe benefit,” he teased as he helped himself to her coffee.

“If this is how it’s going to be until we get married,” she threatened, heading into the living room to get Beatrice, “I’m going to need a better chaperone than our daughter!”

It was a bright and beautiful Friday. It was difficult to think of how much had changed in just a span of two days. Wednesday they’d been at Disneyland, Thursday she’d broken up with Joseph in the morning and reconciled with Tom in the afternoon. And now her parents were on board. That left only Henry and Christina.

“We’re going over after they get home from work,” Tom told her. “I called this morning, asked if we could come by this evening.”

“That leaves us the entire afternoon,” Cosette said as she brought Beatrice back into the kitchen with her. “Did you have any plans?”

“I’d like for us to spend some time,” Tom said. “Starting Monday I’ll be running back and forth to the studio getting ready for filming.”

“You know, we hadn’t set a time to go visit your Mom,” Cosette reminded him. “We said something about going right before filming started, but it kind of got lost in all the other stuff going on.”

“That might be a good idea. You want me to make some calls, set it up?”

“After we figure out what we want to do. I mean, usually I take someone with me, and you come and go as you please, but…”
At this point Beatrice wanted down, so Cosette put her down.

“Bebe, you want to go visit Grandma in England?”

“Yeah!” Beatrice cried. “Show my dress!” She spun around, dressed in a sweet yellow and pink sundress that someone had bought her, Cosette was pretty sure it had been a gift, sometimes it was hard to keep track.

“I guess if we’re going to as a couple then some arrangements need to be made,” Tom mused. “You think your parents would want to come to England?”

Cosette couldn’t help her laugh. “We could talk to them about it, at the least. Mom would probably be up for it more than Dad, but I don’t think he’d want to stay behind alone. Well, maybe.”

“I invited them to dinner on Sunday,” Tom said. “We can mention it then.”

“How was Dad?” Cosette asked as Beatrice started to set up the stuffed animals Cosette kept in a basket for her in the corner – as far away from the stove as it could get – and line them up like an audience. Then she proceeded to spin around, as if performing a little dance. Cosette hadn’t meant the basket to contain stuffed animals, but Beatrice insisted on keeping her surplus in there, and every time Cosette turned around the assortment of purple cats, blue bunnies, and green dogs had shifted from a new one going out and an old one coming in. Beatrice had a massive thing for stuffed animals, and now Cosette was starting to figure out why.

“It was like it wasn’t the same man,” Tom mused, breaking her train of thought. “At least not the same man who came at me with a baseball bat three years ago.”

“Three years is a long time—” at the strange look on his face, Cosette frowned. “What’s wrong?”

Tom gestured with his coffee mug at what Beatrice was doing. “She’s been doing that more, hasn’t she? Making herself a little audience.”

Cosette looked at her daughter. “Sometimes she makes me play music from my i-Pod and dances around the living room in front of the long sofa. She won’t let me sit there, she tells me that’s where so-and-so is sitting, usually someone from television. If she hasn’t already put her stuffed animals there, lined up in a row.”

“When she gets old enough, I’ve been considering putting her in dance classes,” Cosette said. “She sings to herself, too, more often than not, especially in the car, and most especially if I’m playing music.”

“When I was a kid I acted out sketches that my sisters and the neighborhood kids would write,” Tom said. “I pretended to be a radio DJ and do all these different voices. I was a massive attention whore.”

“Was?” Cosette teased.

Tom clunked his coffee mug down a little too hard and gave her a look. “Keep it up, and we won’t need a chaperone.”

“You’re worried about her following your footsteps?” Cosette said, ignoring his taunt. “Why?”

He gave a little, uncomfortable shrug. “It’s a lifestyle that lends itself a lot to…well, you remember why you wanted nothing to do with me in the first place. I mean, it’s not high on morals.”

“Jim Caviezel manages,” Cosette said.

“He’s one out of a million,” Tom countered.

Cosette walked closer to him. She wanted to put her arms around his neck and reassure him that the two of them would be sure to raise Beatrice right, would teach her to respect herself, and would instill in her a strong sense of right and wrong. She wanted to reassure Tom that what was meant to happen would happen, and God would put Beatrice where she belonged, like He did for everyone.

It amazed her, how fast things changed. How natural it felt to want to do that now. But she had to settle for telling him those things at arm’s length, squeezing his arm soothingly when the doubt crept onto those fine English features. His blue-green eyes gazed at her with a growing sense of trust. She wanted to lose herself in them.
How had she suppressed these feelings for so long?

They spent some of the afternoon planning where they could take Beatrice when they were in London – he mentioned the V&A Museum of Childhood that had a gigantic collection of teddy bears and doll houses, as well as the Horniman Museum and Gardens and its gigantic overstuffed walrus. Tom was particularly enthusiastic about the Natural History Museum and the dinosaurs.

“When do you think is an appropriate age to show her Jurassic Park?” Tom asked.

“When she’s eighteen,” Cosette quipped. And then laughed at the look Tom gave her. “We’ll see how big a tolerance she has for big scary dinosaurs and decide then!” she declared.

In the meanwhile, they baked chocolate chip cookies and tried not to gorge themselves before dinner that night. Although between both Tom and Beatrice stealing the chocolate chips, there was hardly any left for the cookies. But Cosette enjoyed the feeling of them doing something together – as a family, it felt, genuinely, in a way it hadn’t ever before – too much to really care.

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Tom was nervous as they got out of the car at Christina and Henry’s house. Not quite in the sense he’d been nervous when he went to Cosette’s parents, but definitely tense.

Mostly because he was a bit annoyed with Christina.

Not entirely annoyed. He was mostly extremely grateful to her. If whatever had happened between the sisters in Cosette’s kitchen hadn’t happened, he never would have found out how much Cosette still loved him. She would have never found the courage, never gotten the push to admit it, to face her fears. She’d needed to be called out and confronted. Badly.

But still. He had told Christina to forgive and forget. It felt like a long time ago, on that beach at his mom’s. Maybe it was only last summer, but he had thought things between the two women were settled.

Apparently not.
He shook hands with Henry, kissed Christina’s cheek, but the sisters regarded each other awkwardly. This did not help Tom’s tension. The newly married couple saw how he and Cosette were holding hands, maybe because Tom gripped Cosette a bit tightly, feeling her own strain. As Henry stepped closer to Cosette to kiss her cheek, Tom caught Christina’s eye.

“We all need to talk,” he said, sounding much more confident than he felt.

Christina nodded. “We’ve got a table set up outside.”

Their little rented house consisted of two bedrooms, a kitchen, a living room, and one bathroom. However, they had a fenced in yard that was perfect for barbeques, and they’d purchased a considerable amount of very nice lawn furniture, complete with a large table and a huge overshadowing umbrella. Christina led the way outside, Tom and Cosette following, and Henry behind. They settled around the table, and Tom made Cosette sit where she was just around the table corner from Christina, so they could face each other without being too direct.

Henry looked guarded. Tom didn’t blame him. Cosette seemed to be unable to stop looking at her hands, checking her nails for the inevitable chip or fracture. The whole atmosphere was anything but relaxed, but it wasn’t unfriendly. Nobody was angry.

“Okay,” Tom said, knowing he had to step up, “well, first off, you two should know that Cosette and I are officially together.”

The others nodded. Tom looked at Christina, who seemed to want to smile, but hesitated, her eyes going continuously between him and Cosette.

“And we have you to thank, Christina,” Tom said.

This seemed to work. The tension started to melt from her face and she let her smile grow a bit more. But still her eyes were on Cosette, unsure. Waiting for her sister to look at her.

“Yes,” Cosette said with a deep sigh, finally looking up and at her sister. “You were right. I never said you weren’t, though.”
At this point, Tom wasn’t sure which sister he was annoyed with more – being annoyed at Cosette, however, was considerably blunted by their newfound status. “Okay, this thing between the two of you has got to stop. It hasn’t been right between you since…since before Beatrice was born, when I brought you two to London so Cosette could meet my family.”

Cosette looked down at her lap again. Christina’s face considerably darkened.

“Maybe we should talk about what happened,” Henry said, observing quietly but by no means willing to let Christina go undefended, if it was necessary.

“You two were fighting when I came in,” Tom said, his tone carefully neutral. “What happened?”

Cosette stole a glance at Christina. Something passed between the sisters – Tom had seen his sisters exchange a similar look. Information unspoken but understood. “I had called Joseph,” Christina offered. “I found out something was wrong, I thought maybe they had broken up, and I went to Cosette to confirm it.”

“Confirm it?” Henry said with a little raise of his eyebrow.

“You yelled at me,” Cosette murmured. “Not that I didn’t deserve it.”

“And you two had a fight over it,” Tom supplied.

“I didn’t understand why she would…” Christina trailed off, composing herself. “Anyway. Yes. We were fighting.”

“Was that really necessary?” Tom asked, watching Henry carefully out of the corner of his eye. He knew that if he said anything too harsh, Henry would not hesitate to put him in his place. He knew this because he was keenly aware, at that moment, of how protective he had become of Cosette. He had already been, but this was worse. Much worse.

Christina gave him a sharp look. “It worked, didn’t it?”

“It did, and I’m grateful, but you two—” he gestured between then with his hand and sighed,
frightened.

“I’m not mad at her, Tom,” Cosette said, looking to him.

“You two used to be a lot closer than you are now, though,” Henry said. “I saw it. But I think… Tom, I honestly think it goes a little farther back than London.”

“Back?”

“To my engagement,” Christina said. “That’s when I started to feel the distance.”

Cosette looked at her sister, finally meeting her eye to eye. “I didn’t feel it until we were leaving London. You were so angry at me.” Her voice shook a bit, and Tom instinctively reached for her hand.

“And you know why,” Christina said, her voice contrite. “I was projecting. I was personalizing what happened, I know that.”

Cosette nodded. “I was wrong, I know that too.”

“You weren’t wrong,” Tom said. “You just…handled it badly.”

“You forgive me because you love me,” Cosette countered. “But it was still wrong.”

“Well, you have to forgive yourself. And you have to forgive her, too,” Tom added, looking at Christina.

“I do!” Christina protested, her eyes gleaming. Henry reached for her hand. She looked at her husband. “I do,” she insisted, a bit softer.

Cosette shook her head. “No. There’s something I have to say.” She looked first at Tom, and then at Christina. “I have been keeping you at arm’s length. First when you got engaged, because I was jealous. And then after Tom and I…well, after London, because I knew if I kept you close you
would inevitably push me toward him again, and I was afraid of that. I don’t know how you stayed so loyal to me during all that awful stuff—"

“If you mean when I cheated on you,” Tom pointed out, “it’s because I was an ass and I didn’t deserve you then.”

“But she still talked to you,” Cosette sighed, “and I was angry about that, and I was worried, because I still felt if we were as close as we had been before, somehow it would get us back together faster, and I was afraid of that. But I didn’t want to admit it because I felt admitting it would just make everything explode.”

“I wasn’t trying to put you two back together out of some evil scheme,” Christina said, wiping her eyes, as they had begun to drip, “It was because I saw this. I knew this was right.” She motioned to where Tom had his fingers entwined in Cosette’s. “It was because I knew he made you happy, Cozy, even in all the conflict and the confusion. I’d never seen you with anyone like I saw you with him.”

“You had the best intentions, Chrissy,” Henry said, squeezing her hand, “but was it worth all this?”

Christina sighed. “Maybe not. I just…I didn’t mean to hurt you, Cozy. I never did.”

“I shouldn’t have shut you out,” Cosette said. She let go of Tom’s hand, and stood up. Christina was on her feet in a second, and the two were hugging, tightly, and crying.

Tom sighed, sitting back in his seat. “I hope this is settled, then,” he said softly, to Henry.

Henry was smiling. “I think it is.”
Two Years, Seven to Eight Months Later

Chapter Summary

Announcements made, and fluffy nonsense, and some serious stuff too. Happy Thanksgiving!

“I’m pregnant.”

Cosette stared at her sister, having already known what Christina was going to say before the words had finally left her mouth. She had exchanged a look with Henry before speaking and Cosette knew, from the way she held his hand, what was going to come out of her mouth.

She thought she was going to cry.

It was the Fourth of July, at the barbeque that Christina and Henry had meticulously planned. Only last week she and Christina stood in this yard at this table, which had only contained the two couples then, and was now surrounded by more tables holding their parents, and whatever friends the newlyweds had invited. And now Christina was announcing a monumental change.

“So this time next year, we’ll have another little one among us,” Christina finished, although the commotion had begun. Her mother was crying, coming over to hug her, Raymond took it with the same stoic attitude he had taken Cosette’s own pregnancy (although, as Cosette wasn’t married, it had been with a much more somber kind of stoicism than he took Chrissy’s, as he was starting to smile much faster) and Tom was just plain shocked speechless.

Cosette couldn’t help it. She was laughing. Christina had wanted this so badly. Even going through the effort to lose weight, which had apparently succeeded in its purpose.

Oh, this was going to be so much fun. In spite of whatever had been going on between them, Chrissy had been a rock during her pregnancy. She’d helped with maternity clothes and putting together the nursery---

“Wait,” Cosette said as she grasped Christina’s hand. “How far along are you?”

“About twelve weeks,” Henry answered for her. “We didn’t want to tell anyone until then. They said that’s when you can, when it’s safer.”

“So, you don’t know the gender yet,” Cosette said.

“Oh, I don’t care about that,” Christina said.

Cosette blinked at her sister. “Then how are you going to know what to get?”

“Trust me, she’ll want to know when the time comes,” Henry assured them. The two exchanged a look that was part wink, part grimace. Christina blew him a raspberry. He returned it with a peck on her cheek.

The barbeque had been great fun. A welcome relief of tension. After all the things that had gone on last week it was wonderful to just relax and enjoy food, friends, family, and some good news.
Not that there hadn’t already been good news.

They climbed into the car well past sunset, her parents had already gone home an hour ago and they’d been sitting around, talking, dreaming about the future with the few who had stayed late. Beatrice snoozed in her car seat, already having been asleep on a bean bag on the patio for the last twenty minutes.

“Do you want more children?” Tom asked her as they pulled into the drive.

“I do,” Cosette said.

“How many more?”

She looked at him. They’d talked about this a bit but not in depth. She knew Tom wanted more children, but they’d never really discussed it. Hadn’t had to, really, in the last few years. “How many do you want?” she asked, her voice mildly teasing.

He shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t care. I mean, as many as we’re given, I’ve always thought. I didn’t think some outrageous number, like five, but—”

“Five is outrageous?”

“Well…” he got a little flustered. “Isn’t it? You want to give birth five times?”

“I know women who have seven or eight.”

“That’s…a bit extreme, don’t you think?”

“No. True, I don’t relish the thought of eight labors, but…well, if we did have eight. Would that be a problem?”

He didn’t think about it nearly as long as she thought he would. “Of course not. I’d take ten or twelve, but…it just seems like a lot. Financially, I’m fortunate that I can support a family like that, but…that would put a lot on you! Not that I wouldn’t be there every step of the way, but motherhood is always more physically taxing than fatherhood, wouldn’t you agree?”

She was watching him with one eye narrowed, and he seemed nervous by her silence. One corner of her lip was pulled tight, but she wasn’t angry.

“I’d be doing the breast feeding,” she said. “And yes, the labor. True. But other than that, the rest we can split, can’t we?”

“True. But…are you serious?” He seemed seriously alarmed now. “You honestly want that many?”

“No, not really. I was just testing you.” She said with such casual humor that he let out his breath.

“Did I pass?”

“Sort of. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have…” she shook her head, a little smile on her face. “It’s just an attitude thing. I mean, people used to have so many children—”

“Because the mortality rate was high and most of them didn’t live,” Tom said. “But we’re much better off now.”

“Still…I don’t want to limit the number. I just don’t think…I don’t think we’ll have the time, really.”
“What do you mean?”

“I’m thirty-six, Tom,” she said. “I’m already in the danger zone for having babies.”

“That’s not really true. Women in their forties have babies all the time.”

“This world has such a fear of Down Syndrome babies,” Cosette said. “And if – or when – we have another child, that’s a possibility. Would you be able to deal with that?”

He was quiet for a few moments. “I never thought about it that way.”

“Men have a much longer shelf life than women do,” Cosette sighed. “I mean, the feminists can rant and rave about it as much as they want, but we can only reproduce for so long. Men can reproduce at any age, even if they shouldn’t. Or at least for a lot longer than we can. Even looks wise, women are only attractive for so long. Yes, I know beauty is more than skin deep, but I see it all the time, women who were so pretty in their youth and the second they get a wrinkle they’re off to the plastic surgeon. I’ve seen pictures of Elizabeth Taylor in her youth and she was gorgeous, but personally I thought her looks only lasted a little while, they caked her with so much make-up…maybe someone will accuse me of being self-hating but I know when I get older I’m not going to be this pretty.”

She had talked herself into a pit, she realized. She hadn’t meant her thoughts to go like this but once she started, there they went. She hoped she didn’t sound vain. She had always been praised for her looks. She knew Tom had originally wanted her because of her looks, fulfilling some kind of naughty-teacher fantasy. She was one of the few women who was actually confident about how she looked. She hoped it would hold up to the scrutiny she would be put under when she became Mrs. Hiddleston.

She felt something touch her chin, and realized Tom had turned her face to look at him.

“You will always be beautiful,” he assured her.

“No, you will always be beautiful,” she corrected. “I’ve seen pictures of you when you were younger, and you were a bit of an awkward little geek. Adorable, yeah, but not the sex-bomb you are now. You’ve gotten better with age, like wine. Me? I know how it goes.”

He frowned. “I don’t think I like this sudden lack of confidence, Cosette.”

“It’s not lack of confidence, I know how people see me. It’s not always easy to be the pretty girl, you know, because looks don’t last. They just don’t.”

“You’re beautiful because of who you are, not what you look like,” Tom said.

“Without my looks, you would never have noticed me,” she told him.

That startled him. She felt it in his touch. His fingers jerked away from her, not violently but distinctly. “Okay,” he said, a touch of anger darkening his brow, “would you have noticed me, then, if I hadn’t been a, what did you call me, a ‘sex-bomb?’”

She smirked. “That helped, yeah. It wasn’t an accusation—”

“Sounded like one.” He looked away, troubled.

“I was just…I don’t know, I forgot my point,” she sighed. She reached out, grasped his wrist. “Tom? What’s wrong? I’m sorry I upset you—”
“It’s not you, not really,” he murmured. “Something…something Shelly said to me.” He looked out the windshield. They’d been long since parked in her driveway, neither in a hurry to get out of the car, it seemed. “She said I never noticed her when she was obese. When we all first met. I only saw you.”

Had he mentioned it before? It sounded familiar. “Yeah, well…” she shrugged.

“Are we really that shallow?” Tom asked her, turning his eyes to meet hers.

She considered her answer. “If it started that way,” she said, “that’s one thing. But it’s certainly not what got us to where we are right now, is it? Something that shallow couldn’t last.”

He gave a little nod, seeming to absorb her words.

“And,” she added with a squeeze of his wrist, “at least we’re both that way. Keeps the playing ground even.”

He gave her the tiniest of smirks. “So I’m a sex-bomb?” he asked.

“Lord, I knew you’d get back around to that,” she sighed dramatically, throwing the car door open. She got out, walked to the other side of the car, where Tom was standing behind his open door, blocking her way to the stairs that led to the door into the kitchen. He was smiling at her lazily.

“I’m a sex-bomb, I knew it. You only love me for my looks.”

He was so fucking adorable, and he was just damn lucky the car door was between them. Of course, that was probably why the car door was between them. Tom was too smart for his own good and entirely too good at keeping them at the right distance. Maybe she needed to start pushing the wedding a bit harder because this tension was going to give her a stroke.

“And your money, too, don’t forget,” she said dryly. “Now please get the gorgeous daughter of two gorgeous parents out of the car. Those muscly arms of yours can carry her a lot easier than I can.”

“Mmmm…only if you say please.”

She leaned close to him, almost at kissing distance. “Please,” she said, making her eyes look up at him in such a way that she knew drove him mad.

His lips twisted a bit, but he started to turn to obey her command.

“Tom,” she said, very softly.

He turned, looking a bit harried and vulnerable in the light from the porch.

“I love you,” she said with utter sincerity.

Something about those words…so simple and yet she saw how they lit him up. “I love you more,” he answered, as he turned to take their daughter inside.

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“I meant what I said about you having a proper engagement ring,” Tom said.

“But I like this one,” Cosette insisted. They were side by side in the very nice berths of first class. Her parents were across the aisle from them, Raymond – rather surprisingly – having wanted to
join them on this jaunt across the pond. He was not fond of international travel and had never set foot in any part of Europe in his life, but since his upcoming son-in-law was British, he said he wanted to see where Tom came from. Currently the man was asleep with a two-and-a-half-year-old across his chest, also asleep.

Tom held Cosette’s hand, admiring the delicate lines of the ring on her pale skin. It was flattering, yes, but the ring was cheap metal and wouldn’t last the test of time.

“You are going to get photographed,” Tom said, his voice low and reasonable. “And if we play this ring off as our engagement ring, the public is going to think I’m a cheapskate. Or worse,” he added at her scornful look, “they’re going to want to know the story behind it, and I think it’s personal and we shouldn’t share it. And this thing isn’t going to last ten years, let alone fifty plus.”

“I’m not getting rid of it,” she said, that steel in her voice he knew too well.

“I’m not saying you have to,” Tom assured her. “But it will fit another finger. May I?” He gently cupped her hand in his other and slipped the ring from her left ring finger to her left middle finger. “See? It was a bit loose as it was.”

“Put it back,” she requested. “At least for now.” She laced her fingers back through his as they rested on the armrest between them. “I just don’t think anything else is going to appeal to me like this one does, because of the sentiment.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Tom conceded, and then hesitated. Should he tell her?

“What?”

Damn. That psychic connection obviously hadn’t gone anywhere.

“It’s just that I…”

“What, Tom? You already bought a ring? When did you do that?”

He didn’t know if he wanted to tell her with the way she was scowling. It was confusion but it looked dangerously close to disapproval. “A long time ago. Around…around the same time I bought you your necklace.”

The amethyst choker which was packed in her luggage. If he had his druthers she’d wear it every day with every outfit she owned, but knew that wouldn’t fly. She was going to wear it with her wedding dress, he hoped, but that was too far off to contemplate.

She seemed to absorb this information silently. He expected her to look more shocked than she did, but at least the scowl was gone. “Where is it?” she finally managed.

“In my safe in my London home,” Tom said.

“Can I…can I see it?” she asked. There was a strange eager light in her eyes.

He gave her a playful twist of his lips. Mock disapproval. “No. You can’t open your present before Christmas, and you can’t see your engagement ring before we officially become engaged.”

She huffed, folding her arms, effectively pulling her hand from his grip. He gave a slight childish whine at his withdrawal of contact, but was too amused by her pouting to really object. “Big meanie,” she grunted.

“Maybe it will give you some incentive,” he said lowly, his tone mildly wicked.
“Bastard,” she hissed under her breath.

“Nope, my parents were married.”

“I hate you.”

“You love me.”

“Rub it in.”

“Oh, I plan to. A lot.” He got out one of the magazines and pretended to be unfazed by her.

She gave him a long, angry side-eye. Tom was enjoying her little display entirely too much. It kept the long, dreary plane-ride from becoming too exasperating. It would amuse him for at least a few hours if he played this right.

“Jerk.”

“Aha, here comes the abuse,” Tom sighed, weary. “I buy you expensive jewelry—”

“And refuse to let me see it.”

“—and you call me names. The Hulk treated Loki with more kindness than this.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Mr. Big Celebrity. I should be more appreciative.” The playful tone in her voice was edged with something, and he liked it.

“You should. Considering you’re with a sex-bomb.”

“Who doesn’t put out.”

He shot her a look. His head swiveled so fast he heard his neck crack. She had a smirk on her face. He wanted desperately to kiss it away. She damn well knew it.

“Maybe we should start discussing the need for a chastity belt,” Tom said, that edge now in his voice, too.

“We could get matching ones,” she returned. “They make them for men, too.”

He arched an eyebrow. Then, an absurd thought occurred to him and he couldn’t help himself. “How in the hell do you pee in a chastity belt?”

They stared at each other for a moment and then burst into giggles.

He wanted to kiss her even more. Instead he had to settle for pulling her hand up to his lips and kissing it. He rested his head close to her seat and gazed at her adoringly.

“God, I love you,” he breathed.

She lay her head on her seat as close to his as she dared. “I love you more.”

It was probably disgusting to an outsider, he considered, how they were just gazing at each other, being obscenely in love. He didn’t care if anyone was watching, although he doubted anyone could see them, as the way their seats were arranged, it afforded them some privacy. He couldn’t look at her enough, and at this distance he could see her eyes so clearly, her lashes, the colors of her cheeks, the plumpness of her lips, the fine hairs of her eyebrows.
“I love staring at your beautiful face,” she said.


“Beautiful,” she insisted in a murmur. She reached up, tracing her finger along the line of his nose. He wrinkled his nose, and she pressed her finger to the tip. “Even this little divot. I think I like it best.”

He pulled his head back a bit and brushed his lips against her finger, kissing it with a smack. Then he playfully made to bite it and she crooked it down with a giggle.

The trip went much faster, the two of them being silly, being in love, saying whatever stupid thing came into their heads. It occurred to Tom later that they hadn’t been like that before. They had never been at ease, never been relaxed with each other to that extent.

It was a good sign.

If it was possible, Cosette was even more nervous now than she’d been the first time she’d ever gone to Diana’s house. And Tom sensed it. He didn’t ask what was wrong. He didn’t have to. She kept playing with the ring on her finger, and he would reach over and grasp her hand as much to stall her as reassure her.

Beatrice was happy to see her Nana as always. Although Diana was a bit disappointed that they initially stopped at Tom’s and dropped off all their luggage, and didn’t plan to invade her home as they had in the past. She argued that she looked forward to their intrusion, and it was agreed that they would stay at Tom’s for the first few nights, but then come spend the rest with Diana.

There was no sense delaying it, though. After the initial greetings and arrangements were made, Tom took his mother aside and motioned for Cosette to join them in the kitchen. Leaving her parents to relax in the main room and letting Beatrice show them what treasures were to be found at Nana’s, Cosette obediently followed.

“We have something we want to tell you,” Tom said. He reached for Cosette’s hand. “We’re going to get married, Mum.”

Diana looked from her son to Cosette. At first, her face was blank, but only for a moment, and then it split into a wide, knowing grin.

“Dear,” Diana said, reaching up and cupping Cosette’s cheeks with her soft, plump hands, “I’ve been waiting for this for some time. You think I haven’t seen the changes in my own son? I’ve been waiting for him to become a grown-up for a long time. As much as I’ll always love him, I’m not blind to reality.”

Cosette blushed, deeply. “I’m no prize either,” she murmured.

“Somehow I think this time things will be different,” Diana assured her with a wink. She turned and let Tom give her a kiss and hug. “Have you picked a date? I imagine you’re going to want to have the wedding over there, but maybe we could arrange some kind of reception here? Not all of
your relatives will be able to hop over to the Americas, even for an occasion like this.”

“It’s a bit soon,” Tom said. “We haven’t set a date yet. We just…this,” he motioned between him and Cosette, “just happened a few weeks ago. And when I go back I have to start filming. We’re just easing into it.”

“Are you?” Diana cocked an eyebrow. “Well, you’ll want to head up to see your father very soon. Give him the good news.”

“How is he doing?” Cosette asked.

Diana sighed heavily. “Not well, not really. Getting tired easier. Honestly, I don’t think he’s ever really recovered from his heart attack. Right now, he has a nurse coming in to take care of things for a few hours a day, but he just told me he wanted to contract her longer. I wish he would get full-time care, he can afford it, but you know James, he’s stubborn.”

“It’s not easy to accept your limitations,” Cosette said. “When should we go?” she asked, looking at Tom.

“We could go in the morning,” Tom suggested. “Would your parents want to come?”

“Dad might want to just relax at your house,” Cosette said. “It might just be the three of us.”

“Sounds like a nice trip,” Tom said, squeezing his arm around her waist. Cosette blushed, smiled at Diana, who winked at her again.

She knew her parents, and just like she predicted, her father wanted to stay at Tom’s house and relax. He wasn’t adventurous on most days, although Isabella was more than happy to join them and help with Beatrice.

Cosette had seen James briefly the last time she was here in the UK, but he’d been a bit under the weather and blamed it on a cool summer. Now, as Cosette entered his modest home, she wondered if it hadn’t been a front, that his health was failing.

The nurse was visiting, giving James a brief check-up, and a home-care worker was there, dealing with the various business of the upkeep of a home, even for an old, single man. Tom went in first, calling for his Da, and they found him reclining in his chair in the den, looking like maybe he’d fallen asleep there for some time.

“Oh, I lost track of time,” James said as Tom kissed his cheek. “Been a year already? Ah, Cosette, some time you should come for a winter holiday.” She bent and kissed him, too, but didn’t rise again, instead pulling up a footrest and squatting on it beside James’ chair.

“How are you?” she asked gently. He patted her hand, which rested on his arm.

“Getting older. Seems it’s a lot more work and requires more sleep than being younger.”

“Hmmm…” she eyed him. “Been seeing your doctor regularly?”

“What, so he can tell me I’m getting old? Happens to everyone.”

“Da,” Tom said, arms akimbo. There was a warning in his tone.

“I go for my check-ups,” James said with mild irritation. “Not much they can do. Except tell me I need to exercise and watch what I eat.”
“And do you?” Cosette prodded gently.

“Where’s my granddaughter?” James asked. Beatrice had been running around outside on the neatly manicured lawn, admiring the flowers that the landscaper had installed in James’ yard. Isabella had been watching her but a commotion in the doorway signaled that Beatrice had lost interest in that activity and wanted to come into the new, exciting house.

“Answer the question and you’ll find out,” Tom said, his tone mildly teasing but not entirely.

“Oh, blackmail now!” James huffed, but his eyes were twinkling. “I watch what I eat. I watch it go right into my mouth.”

Tom gave a little groan and pinched the bridge of his nose as Beatrice toddled right on up to her grandfather. Cosette pulled her up and put her on her knee so she could see the man better.

“She can sit on my lap.” James said as his hand grasped Beatrice’s, who let him with a bright smile. “She’s got Tom’s curls, don’t she?”

“Yeah. You sure about your lap? I mean, she’s a bit of a firecracker.”

“I’ve seen the videos. Some days it’s the reason I get up in the morning. Yes, it’ll be fine.”

Beatrice was delicately deposited on her Seanair’s lap. She didn’t call him that, simply because it was a bit too difficult for her to say – SHENNAR was a mouthful for someone not yet three. The most she could say was “Shen!” which always made James chuckle.

Cosette glance up at Tom. She wanted to tell James, but wanted to wait until Tom was ready. Right now Tom was looking down with a rather tired expression at his Da, one arm crossed, the other upright from where he’d just stopped rubbing his forehead in exasperation.

“So when the hell are the two of you going to make this little cherub legitimate?” James grumbled.

Cosette’s jaw almost dropped – but James had never been one to pull his punches. Ill health had apparently loosed his tongue.

“We were thinking sometime next year, if that fits your schedule,” Tom said drily.

James looked up at him, ready to be the butt of the joke, but at Tom’s expression, he froze. “Aye right. Yer at it.”

“No, Da, seriously,” Tom said, a smile starting to form. His eyes drifted to Cosette and brightened.

“Finally dug yer heads outta yer asses, then,” James chuckled.

Cosette had to laugh. “Love it when you get your Scottish on,” she teased the old man, squeezing his arm. “Yes. Tom and I are officially together this time, and this is it. No casual dating, and definitely no break-ups.”

“The old-fashioned word for it is courtship, the part that leads up to the engagement,” Tom supplied.

“Gonna do that whole death-do-you-part thing right?” James sighed deeply. “Yeah, I expect if any two can, it’d be you. Spent long enough laboring over the decision. Of course,” James added, leaning toward Cosette, “if this one takes too much after his own Da, don’t hesitate to clock him one good over the head to bring him to his senses. Always knew you’d be the one to get him to see sense.”
“So you’re okay with it?” Cosette asked. “We have your blessing?”

“I guess he didn’t tell you,” James sighed, seeming to forget Tom was standing right there. “After you saved my life, while I was in that hospital bed, I pretty much told him not to let you go. So yeah, you’ve got my blessing.”

Cosette looked to Tom, surprised. “I didn’t save your life, James,” she started, but the old man wouldn’t hear it. Instead he started tugging at his granddaughter’s curls, which earned him a squeal.

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“So. You going to tell me what that was about?”

They were driving back from his father’s house after a long afternoon, with tea and conversation and Beatrice showing how much she did actually take after him, putting on a performance for her Scottish grandfather, singing her own tunes and making up her own little dance. It was something she’d been doing more and more lately, and Tom started to wonder if maybe they shouldn’t start looking into lessons a bit sooner than they’d planned.

Beatrice, of course, was exhausted now, snoozing in the back of the car, and Isabella was also dozing lightly, as the trip had been a bit draining. It gave Cosette the opportunity to look at him with those expectant violet eyes and pry from him a few answers.

“He had nearly died, Cosette,” Tom said. “He was a bit emotional.”

“But he said something about you and me?”

“He told me not to let you get away. No matter what.” He glanced at her. “What was I going to do, throw you over my shoulder and carry you off to my castle, where you’d be guarded by my fire-breathing dragon?”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t think it,” she said with the barest hint of a teasing smile.

“Thinking and acting aren’t the same thing,” Tom said. “Besides, I couldn’t find a fire-breathing dragon on the internet.”

She snorted a chuckle.

He felt himself smiling. It had been only a few days since coming here, but it felt so different than the first time. The tension between him and Cosette was gone – or at least replaced by a new, delicious kind of tension, the kind that promises good things to come.

Good things coming to those who wait, and all that.

The next few days passed in a relaxed state of bliss. His entire body felt languid at the end of each one, the kind of rewarding sort of exhaustion that is too good to waste on things like sleep. They took Beatrice to all the places they’d discussed, and Isabella and Raymond were content to either come along or relax on the beach. Isabella loved the beach and she and Raymond went on several walks, holding hands like teenagers. Diana was a queen of a hostess, treating them to all manner of delights from her cooking. Isabella insisted on helping clean up, unable to be idle and let herself be waited on.

A part of him knew that this would not last, as the only constant of life was change. But he was determined to savor it as much as he could. Sometimes he would lament having lost so much time
with Cosette, but then he would remind himself that things happened when it was the right time, and that they would not have this harmony between them without all that had led to it.

A bad day makes you appreciate a good one, as his mother had taught him.

On a quiet afternoon at his home in London, the day before they were going to be flying back to the States, he snuck into his study while Cosette was busy packing and Isabella and Raymond were trying to wrangle Beatrice so Mommy could do it undisturbed. He opened the safe, and found the royal purple velvet box containing the ring.

It had been part of the same purchase as the necklace. He had wanted them to match, and at that time, he had still naively believed that Cosette would not want to be unwed and a mother, and would eventually give in and realize how much he had to offer her. The ring had sat in this safe for over two years, and the purple box was a tiny bit dusty, so he carefully wiped it down it with a cloth. Velvet was a bitch to clean.

He had no idea what exactly he was going to do with it.

When it came to romantic gestures, age had caught up with him – age and disappointment. Meeting his then-girlfriend in Paris and scaring the holy hell out of her, and then to have the whole relationship disintegrate within a few months, was the first, mortal blow. It had taken a while for the rest to ebb out, but every now and again, some impulse would surface, and some insane plan would manifest. Taking Cosette onto the Eye and giving her that choker had been one such moment. He didn’t regret it, but he somehow felt that some over-the-top gesture would be somehow…wrong.

Too much like old times.

He hoped he wasn’t getting boring in his old age, but he wanted it to be serious. Sincere. Heart-felt. The moment had to be right, but how in the hell did one wait for such a moment? Choose it when it came? He couldn’t play the waiting game. If it didn’t come by Christmas, he was going to drop to one knee in front of a Christmas tree – hers, her parents, hell, Christina and Henry’s, he didn’t care. He didn’t think he could wait that long, though. Halloween, maybe, at the lastest. He could do something with the whole trick-or-treat angle, maybe…

“Tom?” Cosette called to him. “Do you know where those clothes are your mother gave us for Beatrice?”

“I put the bag on the dining room table,” Tom called back, walking from his study with a book in hand, covering the ring and preventing questions about what he was hiding. “Want me to get it?”

“Can you?” Her eyes shone at him in gratitude. It was going to be damn hard to say no to her as her husband, if those eyes were his reward when he said yes.

Husband. The word didn’t terrify him so much as ground him…hard. He wanted to be her husband. But he wanted to be a good husband, and he had no fucking idea how to do that. His father had not done a good job for his mother. He couldn’t think of a single man in his life he could look to as an example. Chris and Elsa seemed to get along well, but not a single other male actor he could name had a serious, lasting relationship that led to a committed, loyal marriage. Not even Raymond, honestly, considering the stories of his and Isabella’s early years. Henry was still brand new at it.

“You okay?” she asked him, taking the bag from his hand. She immediately noticed his distant expression, of course. He’d stuffed the ring into his satchel on the dining table where it would go through customs with him tomorrow, so at least he didn’t have to worry about that anymore.
“Yeah, just…things on my mind.”

She stepped further into the bedroom toward where she had the suitcase spread out on the bed. She began carefully folding the little dresses and jumpers his mother and sisters had given for Beatrice, and then tucking them into the corners of the case. “Anything to do with those scripts you picked up?

“Oh, thanks for reminding me,” Tom said, darting from the room to grab the stack of three scripts from his desk and take them to the satchel. “I will probably need to read one of them on the plane. Should only take a few hours, though—”

“Not a problem, I’ll probably wind up taking a nap,” Cosette replied.

“Unless…” Tom stopped, considered. “Unless you want to read one, too?”

“Me?” she frowned, stopping her folding.

“Well, maybe you could give me some input.”

“I don’t know anything about that sort of thing, Tom.”

“You don’t watch movies?”

“Well, yeah, watch them, not read them. I mean, scripts are written with all those notes and camera direction, right?”

“No, this is just the screenplay, not the shooting script. They’re not technical. They kind of read a bit like plays.”

She considered him. “You want me to read them?” she asked, her voice a bit smaller.

He shrugged. “I won’t force you, but…well. I consider you to be a good judge of…character.”

“And you want me to judge the characters you want to play?” She half-frowned, half-smiled, squinting one eye.

“Maybe I just want your opinion.” He felt a bit more bashful about it now that he could hear the words out loud.

She smiled at him, a low, slow smile that showed she was thinking. “Um…is this something that…that you ask your girlfriends to do? I mean, is it a thing with you?”

He wasn’t quite sure what she was trying to figure out. How important it was to him? What exactly he wanted to get out of this? “A thing with me?” he echoed dully.

“I’m sorry,” she tried to correct herself, “I don’t mean…it’s just…Tom, I know how seriously you take your career. You don’t have to humor me.”

“I’m not,” he said, finally finding the right tone of voice to convey his feelings. “I just want to know what you think of my choices.”

I want your approval, he heard himself say in his head, but the words did not make it to his lips. I want your approval for these choices, which are – or used to be – the most important choices in my life.

She gave a small nod, almost as if she’d heard his thought. “Okay. I’d be honored. But I apologize
in advance if I suck at it.”

He couldn’t help a chuckle. “I doubt you will.”

Cosette’s eyes were starting to ache.

For the first couple of hours of the flight, Beatrice had been particularly fussy. It had taken a combined effort of her and Tom to keep her happy and content. Tom walked her around the plane, and she smiled and waved at the strangers, accepting their compliments at how adorable she was.

She so took after her father, it wasn’t funny anymore.

When Beatrice was tired of that, she returned to her mother and wanted to be read to. They looked at picture books for almost an hour, while Beatrice enjoyed various snacks, and finally the big yawns came and she dozed off. Tom gently took her, having spent the time off from his shift looking over scripts, and currently the very young toddler was snoozing, sprawled across her father’s broad chest. Tom had a script in front of him, his long arms able to reach around his daughter easily to make marks as needed.

Cosette had tried to read one of the scripts but her eyes kept drifting shut. Finally, she couldn’t take any more, and she set the thick bundle of papers down on her chest.

Tom chuckled beside her, his voice very low, so as not to bother their daughter. “That bad?”

“No, I’m just tired,” Cosette whispered back.

“Then sleep.” He smiled at her. With his hair un-gelled, his dark-rimmed glasses on, in a comfortable T-shirt, with Beatrice’s head just below his chin, he was breathtakingly beautiful. His broad hand was spread out on Beatrice’s back, long fingers extended, and she found herself imagining a gold band against his skin – or maybe platinum? They’d had yet to get that far.

“Okay,” she sighed, and dug out her sleeping mask. She drifted off rather quickly, lulled to sleep by the deep hum of the plane, the presence of Tom beside her, the security that comes with being where you’re supposed to be.

And then she dreamed. She must have been more deeply asleep than she thought capable on a plane, because it was vivid, and detailed, and she woke up with a bit of a start, finding Tom beside her, Beatrice gone, over with her grandparents, Isabella feeding her dinner from the dinner service on the plane.

“Are you okay?” Tom asked, leaning forward in his seat, reaching for her hand.

She blinked, shook herself, then nodded. “Yeah, I am. I think…I had a nightmare,” Cosette said, letting it come back to her. “Beatrice was a teenager, and we weren’t together, I don’t know if we were divorced, but you were getting married for like the third time.”

“Third time!” Tom exclaimed. “Wow.”

Cosette thought hard, trying to remember what exactly had shaken her awake. “I was at your house, I was living here in London because for some reason you had custody of Bebe. You wanted me to meet your new fiancée and I did, but I didn’t understand why you were so eager to get married again as it never seemed to work for you. You had an ex-wife you didn’t get along with and a second child, a little boy, he was so adorable. I loved him and he really liked me.”
“Why would I have custody of Bebe?” Tom pondered. “I would never take her away from you.”

Cosette shrugged. “It was a dream. And the weirdest part was that we were still in love, we just wouldn’t admit it to each other, we had all this history and all these feelings, but we just pretended we didn’t. You were having doubts about this new woman and I wanted to tell you not to marry her, but I felt it wasn’t any of my business, so I just kept my mouth shut.” She sighed, running her fingers through her wild dark hair. “It was just…a highly emotional dream.”

“That sounds awful,” Tom said quietly. “It sounds like…what might have happened if we hadn’t… if we hadn’t come to our senses.”

She shrugged. “It was awful,” she agreed.

“It’s not the future,” he said. “We aren’t getting divorced. I don’t care how much counseling we have to get, if we need it. If we have problems. We aren’t getting divorced. This is it for us, Cozy.”

She nodded. “You know, Joseph said to me once…he said that people make promises that they end up not being able to keep. They promise they’ll love someone forever, but those feelings, those high-pitched emotions, they don’t last. And people get married too soon before those feelings wear off and they end up disillusioned and unprepared for the reality of being married.”

Tom nodded. “We aren’t getting married too soon. And we are going to be prepared.”

“How do you know?” she asked, her distress coming through.

“Because…haven’t you told me that marriage is a sacrament? Haven’t you said that its three people, not just two? Doesn’t God give the grace to sustain something like that? You’re a person of faith, Cosette. Where is it? Where’s your faith? Do you have…faith in your faith?”

She stared at him. “That was pretty profound coming from you.”

“I’m very profound.”

“Not about religion, you aren’t. I’ve seen some of your interviews, Tom. Especially those Crimson Peak ones…you said this life was it. It almost sounded like you didn’t believe in an afterlife.”

“I meant in terms of reincarnation,” Tom corrected. “But truthfully…no, I’ve never given much thought to a hereafter. I’ve always focused on now.”

“Well, what’s the point of now?” Cosette asked.

He gave a little shrug. “I guess it’s naïve to say, but…I guess the point was to be happy.”

“And what is happiness?” She rested her hand over the back of his, giving it a light squeeze. “Do we even know was it is?”

“Well, right now, it’s being with you.” His head was getting perilously close to hers, and she was pretty sure he wanted very badly to kiss her, and she couldn’t disagree.

“Yes, but,” she chuckled, “we both know it’s not going to be like this all the time.” She gave a heavy sigh. “I’ve always thought, and I’ve told my students this many times, that the reason we’re not happy is because we look to the wrong things to make us happy.”

“The wrong things?” His little frown was adorable.

“I’d agree with the first three, not the last.”

“That last one can be tricky, though. People always disappoint us. I don’t expect you never to hurt me, Tom, just like I can’t expect myself never to hurt you.”

He seemed to ponder this, and then nodded slowly, biting his lip. “I guess the grace comes in dealing with the hurt correctly. Letting it teach us instead of pushing us apart.”

She nodded. “You’ve grown up so much,” she said, and then blushed a little. “I wish I could say the same about me.”

“You didn’t have as much growing to do as me,” Tom said, his hand turning under hers and grasping hers, palm to palm. “I know you’re worried about breaking promises, Cosette, but when I vow to you that it’s till death to us part, I mean it. I’m not going to break that promise.”

“Neither am I,” she said.

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The next six weeks passed quickly.

Principle production began. Tom spent the time in L.A. in front of a green screen, dressed to the nines as the Dream King. Thankfully, they had developed the technology to fix his eyes in post, using CGI, so he didn’t have to wear those awful contacts. However, Morpheus was always bare-chested, with a long, draping black robe, and he found himself looking forward to a time when he wouldn’t be half naked on a drafty set.

Truthfully, it had never bothered him before. And there was so much make-up – Morpheus was far more complicated a character to create than Loki when it came to the physical aspects. He’d had to lose as much weight as he had for Hank in order to achieve the right look, so he doubted his chest was that attractive at this moment, but he knew the women still looked.

They always looked.

He felt different this time. Usually on a set he was single-minded and invested on a personal level, but his mind and heart were divided. He was chatty, he was friendly, he was involved, but he also didn’t mess around when it came time to go home. Long, sixteen-hour days were not on his agenda anymore.

Even though he was up at four to get to the set by five and in make-up to begin filming by eight, by eight p.m. he was cleaned up and headed to home, to pass by Cosette’s, talk with her for maybe an hour, and play with his daughter who Cosette allowed to stay up late and see Daddy. By ten, Beatrice was in bed with a story, and Tom made his way to his house to fall into bed and wake up at four the next day. He was getting by at maybe five and a half hours of sleep a night.

There were the occasional days off. He would sleep as much as he could – at Cosette’s insistence – before spending the rest of the time with his daughter and future wife. Mostly lazy afternoons spent in Cosette’s living room, dozing occasionally on the couch between watching videos and playing with Beatrice, or talking with Cosette about a million different things.

At the end of the six weeks, production would move to Greece. Tom would be away for almost a month, and for the first time, he wasn’t looking forward to it. He wished, desperately, that he could get Cosette and Beatrice to come with him, but knew it wouldn’t be right, not with him and Cosette being unmarried yet. Besides, by then it would be a week before she had to report to school to start up for the coming year.
And still, there were the new scripts. None of the ones that he’d had in London had been terribly impressive, which Cosette agreed with, and it was disappointing. He didn’t want to work just for the sake of work. It had to be meaningful, it had to be important, if it was going to take him from the two people he loved most.

It had been bad enough when it was just Beatrice. Tom couldn’t help but recall with guilt how neglectful he’d been most of the first year of Beatrice’s life. It had been part of him dealing with the knowledge that he and Cosette were not going to work – but they were, he reminded himself. Things were different. Things were good.

Then he was messaged a package. Inside was a single script with a bright pink post-it on it from his agent. “I really think this is what you’re looking for,” it said.

It was late that night. He had just crawled home from putting Bebe to bed, and Cosette had been particular fetching that day, and all he’d really wanted was to sink into her arms and kiss her lips and feel her everywhere…

So this script, which he hadn’t even had time to look at that day when it arrived, as he’d been so busy, remained unread for the next few days, when he finally got some time off.

He sat on Cosette’s couch, listening to Beatrice humming along with the music on the television. She seemed to like imitating the songs in commercials and danced around when a particular one she liked came on. She couldn’t get the words, but she would catch short phrases and sing along when she could. Tom had recorded her several times on his phone and had bored his co-workers to tears showing her off, and they all shook their heads and said she was a natural-born performer.

Which honestly scared the shit out of him.

The script caught him unawares. It was a thriller, and it was dark and edgy. It wasn’t terribly depressing, not so dark that he cringed at the thought of going to the places it wanted, but it had a uniqueness to its theme that made him take notice.

He hadn’t really done a thriller like this. But there was one problem.

There was a rather graphic sex scene at the end of the second act.

Doing Sandman would keep him busy for a while longer. The movie wouldn’t come out until the follow Halloween, and he was sure he would get caught up doing a third, as they were already talking about trilogy.

He didn’t have to take this script, but….he wanted to.

“You okay?” Cosette asked. Tom looked up at her, and realized he was frowning pretty hard. He forced his face to relax.

“Fine,” he said.

“Hmm.” She looked at him skeptically but didn’t push. “Did you want to think about dinner? Have a taste for anything?”

He gave a little grunt. “I really want pizza,” he murmured.

She laughed. “I can just see the Dream King now, with a pot-belly.”

“A few slices won’t hurt,” Tom said, but he hesitated.
She winked at him. “We’ll get you a salad to go with it.”

“With chicken,” he said. “And avocado. And bacon. Protein is a fat burner!” he called a bit louder as she left the room, shaking her head and chuckling the entire way.

He tried to brush it off. He let it sit in the back of his head, let it stew, but didn’t pay active attention to it. He had to know how he really felt about the script, and the only way to do that was to let it do its own thing in his mind. Either it would take hold and he would commit, or it would sizzle and fade. There would always be more scripts…

…although most were more bad than good.

A few more weeks passed. Greece loomed closer. He would be leaving soon and he didn’t want it hanging over its head.

What was she going to say? Of course, she wasn’t going to like it. She hadn’t even watched Crimson Peak for a very long time because of the sex scene, and even then she’d skipped over it. She’d flat out refused to watch The Night Manager. In fact, the only things of his she seemed perfectly okay with were Kong…and Return to Cranford. Oh, how she’d made fun of his hair in that one!

But…she had to understand that this was his job. And it was fake, he wasn’t actually having sex with anyone. It was acting. An actor had to be willing to go through all the range of human experience, and what experience was more human than sex?

He had a few days between the end of filming in L.A. and leaving for Greece. It was as good a time as any.

“Cosette?” he called as he came into the house.

“In the spare bedroom!” she called back. Tom trod down the hall to the room he had stayed in when Beatrice was born. She was airing it out, changing the sheets, which she did once a month. Sometimes, Tom wondered what else she did with her spare time – other than maintain the house, which she did heroically, in his opinion.

“I’m thinking,” he said, really without thinking much, “that when we get married, we should hire someone to keep the house.”

“You mean like a maid?” Cosette asked. She was fluffing the pillows after shoving them into their new cases. “Why?”

“Because,” he grinned mischievously, “you’re going to have your hands too full with me.”

She laughed. “Oh ho! Well, it’s good I found this out now.” She continued making the bed, only taking him half-seriously. “And what do I do in the endless weeks and months when you’re away at exotic locations like Greece? Sit on my hands?”

“Do things you like to do, maybe?” Tom asked.

She seemed to slow as this thought turned through her head. “Hm,” she grunted.

“What?”

She shrugged. “Not really sure what any of that is, anymore.”
“What was it before…before I met you, I mean? Or before Beatrice was born?”

“I don’t know. Odds and ends. I never really focused on anything.” She had a funny look on her face. “I was pretty dedicated to teaching. It took up all my time. I would write and post my own lessons, I would create things and put them on Pintrest…I don’t even remember the last time I was on Pintrest,” she grumbled.

“Really?” he had to chuckle. “I was pretty career-minded, too, when we met.”

“Oh, I know,” she shot him a look over her shoulder.

“But I still took time when I had it for other things. I learned how to surf. Not that I’ve done it in…”

“So seriously, Tom,” she said, turning, “where is all this leisure time going to suddenly come from? I mean, between raising children, working, being married to you. Even now Giselle does half the house work, it’s the only way I’m able to balance things.”

“Well…” he paused, considering. “I just want you to be happy, Cosette,” he finished, realizing he’d talked himself into a corner.

She gave him a warm smile. “Why do you think I’m not?” she asked.

“Well, I…” he fumbled. “I don’t want you to feel…trapped.”

“Trapped by what?”

“By me, by the kids,” he walked closer to her, knowing he’d never intended to start this conversation but it was necessary, he realized. “Or the kids we will have,” he amended at her amused look. “I mean…don’t you want more from life?”

“A happy marriage, raising good, responsible, moral human beings, and a meaningful career,” she listed. “Yeah, where is my head at, anyway? What could I be thinking?”

He shook his head. “But you need ‘you’ time too,” he pointed out. “I just want you to know that you can have it. I want to support your…interests.”

She chuckled at him lightly. “Oh, Tom. Well, that is good to know. I suppose we all need recreation. I know the first year of Beatrice’s life I had a very hard time adjusting, and making all those photo collages helped.”

“See? That might be fun to do.”

“Actually, I was thinking…I know I didn’t do a lot of pictures of us. I was thinking of going back and rectifying that.”

“You should do it.”

“You wouldn’t mind? I was thinking about the time we spent in London…before…” she sighed, deeply. “There were some good times.”

“There were,” he nodded. “I wouldn’t trade them for anything.” He took her hand, looking at the skyline of London on her ring.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled.
He frowned. “For what?”

“For ruining it.”

He shook his head. “I thought we’d closed that door.”

She looked up at him, her violet eyes wide and bright in the afternoon sunshine. Her pupils were small, making the purple seem even more brilliant. “I should have handled things so differently—”

“No, stop,” he said, his voice firm, low. “First off, that might be true, but it doesn’t change the truth of what you said.”

“But it wasn’t who you were trying to be,” she said. “I can’t get angry at you for your past—”

“No, but you have every right to be skeptical of the future because of the past,” Tom said, his fingers entwined with hers. “You were afraid, you were protecting yourself and our child. If I had handled it better, if I’d been more patient…but everything you said was true.”

“I didn’t have to say it so cruelly.”

“Well. I forgave you for that, so we need to let it go. I didn’t make things better by what I did. I proved you right. If I hadn’t, we might already be married by now. And no,” he added when she started to speak again, “I don’t want to hear one word about you blaming yourself. About anything.”

She let out a puff of air. Giving in to him. She only nodded, saying nothing for a moment. “They’ve been circulating those pictures of us, from London. You in that grey suit and me in that purple dress. The night the paps caught us in that flashstorm.”

“Yeah, Luke’s been telling me the rumor mill is churning,” Tom said, still playing with her fingers. “There were pictures of us at the airport going to London and coming back, and the fact that we were holding hands. Everyone is talking. He wants to know when I want to make a public statement.”

Her sigh this time was decidedly annoyed. “I have to admit that I’ve been pretty lucky when it comes not being harassed.”

“Well, you don’t go on the internet…” he frowned at her. “Where did you see those pictures of us?”

“At the store. On the tabloids,” she gave a half shrug. “With the headline ‘Back Together?’ in big red letters.” She gently pulled her hands away to dramatize the motion of a headline, then turned from him to finish laying the blankets across the bed. Tom grabbed the other end of the duvet to help her flatten it quickly.

“It’s not like we haven’t been through this,” Tom said.

“I know,” she said. “It’s just…part of the reason I flipped out last time was because of all the crap on the internet. Not just about us but about you. Not that I don’t want to marry you, but it was easier, just being the mother of your child – the spotlight wasn’t on me. I appreciate how you’ve been able to protect Beatrice, and I know you will with the rest of our children, I just…I’m pretty determined to turn a blind eye to the media this time. Our marriage has to be about us, you and me, and no one else. I don’t care what anybody else says or even what they know, or what they think they know.”

“I agree.”
“I’m just afraid of what will happen when this resolution weakens, gets broken, or gets shoved into my face.”

“When that happens, we’ll deal with it.”

“Sure, sounds easy.”

“You think I think it’s easy?” He walked around the bed to approach her again. “Sure, everyone thinks they want fame, but there is a far cry between being a celebrity and being the significant other of a celebrity. You get all the backlash and none of the perks. I think that’s one of the reasons that actors don’t have the best track record when it comes to marriage, but I’m determined to be different. I’m as determined as you are that this marriage will be between you and me, and no one else.”

“I know. It’s nice to hear you say, but I know. But it doesn’t stop me from being scared. Marriage is scary enough on its own.”

“Do you not want me to make a statement, then?” Tom asked. “I mean, I don’t have to. When Benedict got married, he put it in the papers. He said nothing else. I don’t have to tell anyone anything, except our families.”

“You would do that? Wouldn’t that kind of…irritate everyone?”

“Someone will be irritated no matter what I do,” Tom replied dryly. “Cosette, I love you. I used to think that I could just shout whatever I wanted from the rooftops, but I don’t have to prove it to anyone, I don’t have to justify it. My job is to act in their movies, not invite them into my life.”

“So maybe we just live our lives, and let the chips fall where they may,” Cosette said. “I’m not sure about that, either, Tom.”

“Well, you have time to think about it,” he said. “You can change your mind at any time. About that…not about marrying me,” he amended.

She giggled at him, then grew serious. “I get the feeling there was something else on your mind, before,” she said, stepping away from him to finish her cleaning of the guest room, picking up a duster to run over the wooden furniture that decorated it. “Does it have to do with that script?”

“How did you…”

“You left it on the dining table last week. You had marks all over it. I didn’t recognize it as one of the ones you asked me to read.”

“Did you read it?”

“Just glanced to figure out what it was. I figured if you wanted me to read it, you’d ask.”

“You could have read it,” Tom said. “I wouldn’t have minded. I don’t have secrets.”

“I’ll remember that for the future.” She picked up the sheets she’d taken off the bed and put them in the hamper. “Is it something you’re seriously considering?”

He sat down on the freshly made bed. “I am, except for one problem.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, there’s a pretty graphic sex scene in it.”
She stood in the doorway, hands on her hips. “Oh. Well…can’t you just tell them that you don’t want to do it? I mean, that one woman from Game of Thrones got it put into her contract that she didn’t have to do nudity—”

“That lasted a while, but didn’t stick,” Tom said. “And I have a bit of a rep for being willing to…show my English countryside.”

“Ah.” Her eyes drifted away from him, thoughtful. “So, you’re saying that if you want to do the film, you have to do the sex scene?”

He nodded. “I’m not happy about it, but it is part of the story. I didn’t used to have problems if I felt it was significant to the plot.”

“And you have a problem with it now?”

He was confused. He had thought she would have the problem, but…now that he thought about it, yes, he did. “I think I do. I mean…I guess I wanted to know if it was okay. I mean, it’s not like actually filming sex scenes is anything less than embarrassing and awkward. But once they put it in the film it can be rather titillating.”

“Yes.”

“And I know you have problems with that in movies. I figured you would have a problem with me doing it, since we’re together now.”

For a moment, Tom saw her eyes change. Something in them flashed. And he braced himself.

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“Actually,” she said, “it’s not up to me.”

She saw Tom blink, surprised. He had been expecting something else.

She didn’t expect an overnight change from Tom, but the fact that he hesitated to take a film because there was something in it she wouldn’t approve of was impressive. Of course, ideally, it should be because he didn’t approve of it.

“It’s up to you,” she said. “I’m not your keeper, Tom. I’m not in charge of you. I mean, if you took this project, I would support you. At the premiere I’d ask you to tell me when the scene was coming so I could excuse myself to the bathroom, but I wouldn’t…I mean, I can’t tell you what you can and can’t do. All I can do is support you.”

“Even if you thought what I was doing was wrong?”

“I would hope you would realize it was wrong and not do it, not out of some desire to please me. And if you did take it, I would hope you could convince the director or whoever that it wasn’t necessary, that you weren’t that crazy about doing love scenes, and see if they could compromise, if they wanted you badly enough. But I also know you have different beliefs than I do and that I have to maybe…tolerate a few things. Not that I’d tolerate them happily. I will always have to accept the fact that everyone who wants to can ogle your naked ass anytime they want.”

Tom flinched. Cosette drew a breath and measured her tone. Was she being shrill? Sometimes she didn’t know. Sometimes she could tear into a student and not realize how harsh she sounded. She
knew she didn’t always fully realize the impact of her words, and was suddenly worried that maybe she was walking down a dangerous path again.

“Tom,” she said, walking closer to him where he sat on the edge of the bed. “It has to be your decision. Not mine.” She deliberately kept her voice low, almost sweet.

He looked up at her. He looked lost. She reached up, running her fingers lightly over his curls, not too firmly, not wanting to get too sensual with her caress, and she knew how Tom was about having his hair stroked. Her hand cupped his cheek. “What are you really worried about?” she whispered.

“I…” he lowered his eyes. “I guess I just…I’m afraid of what this is going to mean.”

“For what?”

“For my career. I mean, if I take the script, and ask that the scene be dulled down, it might cause… problems. Might make me less hirable. And if I don’t take the script, it means my field of choices is much smaller.”

“I understand. It’s hard when our beliefs – however new or unsteady they are – come up against the demands of the world. But you’ve been in lots of films where you didn’t have to simulate sex. You’re in a major blockbuster now. You’re already pretty marketable. You might be selling yourself short. You don’t know unless you try.”

He sighed against her hand. “I guess this is when I have to have faith,” he mumbled.

She gave him a little pinch to his ear. “Yup. But I still love you. And I’ll pray for you.” She winked.

He grasped her hand, and stood up. He stepped around her to the small dresser, and slid open the top drawer. He pulled out a small ring-shaped box.

Her heartbeat accelerated. She could only scowl at him in confusion.

“I’m over here so much, I figured it was smarter to keep it here. I brought it from London.” He knelt down, in front of her, in the spare room, looking at her with those eyes made of the bluest blue she could imagine.

“And you hid it right under my nose?”

“I know you don’t keep anything in those drawers, why would you need to look?” He opened the box, and she gasped. Literally gasped.

The ring was a giant heart-shaped amethyst, surrounded by two layers of tiny diamonds, tracing the shape of the heart. The diamonds continued along the sides of the gold band, stopping part-way down.

“I can’t wait any longer, Cosette,” he said, holding up the ring to her. “I want you to be my wife. I want to start my life with you. I don’t care how many scripts I have to pass up, if I wind up doing community theater.”

“Yes, you do,” she smirked, but her eyes were watering.

“You’ll still have to be patient with me. I’m new at this. But I give you my word that I’ll always put you first, no matter what.”
Cosette thought of a thousand ways to tease him for that, but none of them were right for this moment. She was overwhelmed by the sight of him, on his knee, in front of her. Looking so hopeful, as if she could possibly say no.

“Please be my wife.”

She offered her hand for the ring. “Yes, Tom. If you’ll be my husband.” A few tears slid down her cheeks as he slipped off the London skyline and put it on her middle finger, where it just fit. He glided the amethyst into its place. “I guess it’s a good thing I don’t have any hobbies,” she said, “because all my spare time is going to go into planning a wedding.”

“We can get you a planner if you want,” Tom said, rising to his feet. “Because I’d much rather spend that time planning a marriage.”

She wanted to kiss him. But he had made it clear that they were going to wait. So she pressed her lips to his scruffy cheek and wrapped her arms tightly around his neck.

“I love you,” she whispered against his skin, over and over.
Three Years, Four Months Later

Chapter Summary

Pre-wedding jitters and happy endings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cosette stared at her reflection. It wasn’t every day that a woman was dressed for the day of her wedding – in fact, Cosette knew this was her one time, and while she never considered herself vain, she found herself enraptured with her own appearance.

Never in her life had seven months gone so quickly.

Tom had practically picked out the dress. She had also never known a man who was as enthusiastic about planning his wedding as Tom had been. Most men had the sort of put-upon, frustrated, but patient way of dealing with the hustle and flow, or rather the stop-and-start, of the enormity of such a ceremony. Not Tom. He was not just involved but full of suggestions and ideas. To the point where Cosette knew an incredulous expression became the second-oftenest way she looked at her husband-to-be.

“Tom, you can’t come with me to get my dress!”

“Why not? I’ve been involved with every other aspect of this wedding. I helped pick the bridesmaids dresses, picked the table decorations—”

“Yes, you’ve become a regular Bridezilla! Or Groomzilla, in your case.”

“No, Kong, not Godzilla. Groom-Kong.”

“See! You don’t even object!’

“Darling, I am getting married once in my life. I have to get every possible aspect of the experience in, you know me! I’m not getting another chance.”

“Well the appointment to taste the cakes is next week, you’ll be there for that. My mother and Chrissy are coming with me to get the dress. I invited Shelly, too, just to get another opinion.”

“If I can’t go with for the dress, I’m going to have Chrissy send me pictures.”

“Fine.”

“And if I see one I really like I am going to make you try it on again for me.”

“Tom! Can’t you wait until the wedding?”

“I’m already waiting for the wedding for one thing. I can’t reasonably be expected to keep all my anticipations at bay. Besides, fair is fair. You get to see the tux.”

“Fine.”
The dress, though. Tom’s love of her in shades of purple might have gone just a touch too far. Granted, she didn’t feel right wearing white, and this shade of violet that strayed very close to a gray-ivory, so pale and translucent, was very flattering on her. The bodice was covered in flutty petals, with the translucent shoulders and long sleeves giving her the modesty she wanted. The skirt was a confection of layers, where she rustled even with the movement of breathing. She had imagined more lace when she was younger, and pearls, and maybe some satin – although she’d never like that stuff, too slippery and heavy for her taste – but the second Tom insisted that this was the one, she knew. It was her dress.

The veil, at least, was lace. The palest lilac, a gift from her mother-in-law. Or the woman who would be her mother-in-law in less than a half hour.

“All right, you’re all touched up,” Connie said from beside her. Cosette blinked, forgetting for a moment that she wasn’t alone. The professional stylists that Tom insisted they hire, Connie for her make-up, and Stephen for her hair, were her left and right hands at the moment. Tom’s own personal stylist oversaw his wardrobe, and while Cosette had only seen it during fittings, she was pretty confident that woman knew her client very well.

Connie and Stephen both were starting to get to know her, as well, as they’d been Cosette’s “team” more than once – they’d done her for Tom’s movie premiere at the beginning of December, where she had walked the red carpet with him for the first time as his fiancée.

The announcement had gone out simply – she and Tom decided to take a selfie together, with her holding up the ring, and post it to his Instagram. It had taken off like a hawk after a meal – soon trending all over the internet. This was before the wedding bans had been announced, taking a page from a friend’s book and doing things like an average human being. His mother put the announcement in the papers in London. Tom did an interview not long after where he was of course asked about his future plans, to which he’d been minimally forthcoming. He would only say that the wedding was planned for the spring, before Easter, and that he was very happy. His smile had said more than his words, according to the interviewer, but Tom was determined to dial down the interest in his public life. He didn’t want to hide, but he wasn’t going to put himself and Cosette out there for all to see, like some kind of circus sideshow. He’d learned his lesson.

That never stopped the paps from trying, though. Especially when they discovered where Tom and Cosette were doing their marriage preparations. They would wait outside the rectory where they would meet with Fr. Francis, and snap pictures. Tom and Cosette devised a plan to wear the exact same clothes every time they went, to deter them, and it worked for the most part. It was a bit more tricky to keep them away from the wedding planner’s office, instead opting to make various appointments at Tom’s and Cosette’s homes, where security could keep the paps away.

Truthfully, though, everyone had been rather positive and supportive. On that red carpet, Cosette had been nervous, and Tom insistent that she stay with him. He wanted the world to see her, to see them together, to make it clear that there was no more questioning, no more doubt. She was his other half – had been even before it became official. The interviewers that talked to Tom were polite to her, oohing and aahing over the ring, asking about a date, to which she and Tom had agreed not to answer except to say, “In the spring.”

Cosette’s attention was drawn by Christina entering the room. As the “matron of honor,” as they called her, though younger than Cosette, her deep royal purple dress was a bit different than those of the other bridesmaids, with a bit more flare to her skirt to hide the remains of her pregnancy. Oh, the teasing that had commenced! Not even a month after giving birth, Christina grumbled, and she had to shove her butt into a formal gown. It was Cosette’s revenge for making her do the same for her own wedding, she claimed.
“All right, Alexandria’s all fed and watered, and snoozing with Henry’s mom,” she announced. “Did you have to breast feed in that dress I made you wear?”

“No,” Cosette answered, “Tom made me pump so that I wouldn’t have to.”

Christina grunted. “I hate pumping.”

“And that’s why you had to half-undress to feed your child.”

“Well, you’ve got professionals to put me back together, thank God. Least you can do.”

So fast. Her new niece was still fresh out of the oven, and it seemed that she’d baked overnight. Cosette was pretty sure her own pregnancy hadn’t gone that quickly, not by a long shot, but between helping her sister, returning to school, planning a wedding, raising a child, and chiefly, preparing for a marriage, there had literally been no time to breathe.

“Nervous?” Christina asked sympathetically.

Cosette found herself shaking her head. She wasn’t nervous. She was a bit jittery because this was the culmination of a lot of work, but she wasn’t afraid. She had every confidence that she made the right choice. Which was a bit unnerving because she felt she should, at least, be a bit trepidatious, as this was a big fucking deal, after all.

"Where are we going to live?"

“I figured your house is bigger, I’d sell mine.”

"That’s fine for now, Tom, but what about the future?"

“Well, I guess I just…I didn’t think you’d want to sell your grandmother’s house.”

"I would."

“You would? Why?"

“It’s a house, Tom. She gave it to me to help me, not to pin me in place. When we have more kids, we’re going to need room. And you need a study. Plus I’m sure we’ll need space for some entertaining.”

“I can use the spare room. And you have that huge downstairs, it’s practically as big as the house. We could section if off into a few rooms.”

“You want to stay here in L.A.? Permanently?"

“I wouldn’t dream of taking you away from your family.”

“And yet you’d let me take you away from yours? There’s no reason we couldn’t spend some summers at your house. And Christmas needs to be fair. We can split it between your parents and mine. Some time here, some time in London. I’m Catholic – we get twelve days for Christmas, you know. It doesn’t end until Epiphany and that’s when you’re supposed to get the presents, not on the 25th.”

“Spain does that too.”

“Well,” Christina said, “I think we’re just about ready to go. It’s almost four.”
“Tom’s here?” she asked. Tom was always late, for everything. It didn’t matter what it was, he would say three o’clock and arrive at three-fifteen. She’d taken to calling it “Tom-time” and just automatically added fifteen minutes to whatever time he said. Sometimes she would tell him a half hour early just to make him arrive on time.

“Oh, yeah, long time now,” Christina said with a laugh. “They did the groom pictures while they were still putting you in the dress, before anybody showed up.”

“Good.”

“You sure you’re okay?”

Cosette chuckled. “I’m fine, Chrissy. Really. I’m not going to go play Runaway-Bride, I promise. I’m just a little tense.”

“Yes, I can relate. I felt that way too.”

Cosette let out her breath between pursed lips. She was excited…and she also felt a keen sense of dread, which she couldn’t quite identify the source. It wasn’t like she was giving up her freedom – she knew what she was gaining was worth much more than what she was losing. And it wasn’t like she and Tom hadn’t talked everything over, and knew there were many more conversations to be had.

Still…there were horror stories she’d heard that lingered in the back of her mind. Stories about people who changed the minute the rings were on and the vows were said. Would Tom still be the same? Would he change? Would she?

“Chrissy?” Cosette heard herself saying, and turned from glaring at her reflection in the mirror to see her sister attentive, expectant. “When you and Henry got married…was he different? After?”

“Different?”

“Yeah, I mean, did things…come up that you didn’t think of before?”

“Of course.”

“Oh.”

“Is that what’s bothering you? Cozy, I know you like to plan everything down to the last detail, but this isn’t like that. This is life. It changes, and unexpected things happen. You can’t worry about it. You were so excited for today last night, enjoy it! You’re going to have the best time if you just let yourself.”

“I know.” Cosette carefully sat herself down in the chair they’d set up for her, so as not to crush her dress. “I’m not…I don’t know how to explain it. I just don’t want him to be disappointed that he…that he decided to make this commitment with me.”

“Or vice-versa.”

“Yeah, that too.”

“This is a leap of faith,” Christina said. “But I’ll tell you something. I know I’ve only been married three years, and that’s not anything compared to others, but…in the little time I’ve had, I know that somehow, you become…more. More yourself, if that makes sense. More of who you always were all along, but you didn’t know it before. And he does too. Henry has. Not always for
the best, but…he tries so hard to make sure he’s putting me first. So I make sure I’m putting him first. I know not everyone does that, so many people don’t realize that’s what marriage asks you to do. But you and Tom do.”

“Mom and Dad,” Cosette sighed, “I mean, they didn’t, did they? They almost broke up.”

Christina shrugged. “They made mistakes. It happens. They survived it, and some would say they’re stronger than ever.”

“I don’t want to be boring like them,” Cosette grumbled.

“Boring is in the eye of the beholder,” Christina laughed. “Although I doubt you could be boring, married to Tom.”

If Tom didn’t get his cold sweat under control, he was going to ruin his tuxedo.

He’d taken off the suit coat, and the vest, and the tie, and even the white pressed shirt, having hung them carefully. He was in the single white T-shirt that he wore underneath all of it, trying to calm down.

He hadn’t slept the entire night. Not well, anyway. A few snatches, maybe at best a few hours, but when the sun started to rise, he went and ran. He had to have run seven miles, trying to work out his nerves.

Ever the professional, he’d shoved away and shaken off his feelings when Lori showed up to get him ready, nothing but smiles and charm. He chatted amiably, played soothing music on his iPod like he usually did with Lori, as they had similar tastes, and asked her about her husband and kids. Lori knew him best, had been dressing him for years, and he wouldn’t want anyone else to make him as devastating as possible.

The tuxedo was Gucci, and it looked amazing on him, even though Cosette got that little scrunch of her nose when she disapproved of a particular brand – Gucci had some rather unsettlingly racy commercials she didn’t approve of. But she had caught her breath upon seeing him with the deep purple bow tie he’d matched to it. He loved bow ties and rarely got to wear one, and insisted he have one for his wedding. She didn’t disagree.

Cosette…he could smell the stink of stress sweat in his arm pits and went for a wet towel.

He was desperate to start the ceremony, honestly – wanted to get it done before Cosette came to her senses and realized he was not good enough for her, that she was taking a horrible risk, being married to an actor. He was going to fail her, he was going to let her down, all of his kind did, sure, marriages could look great on paper but the always disintegrated, in five years, ten years, even twenty didn’t seem to be enough to ensure it. Why was it that actors couldn’t stick to these things? Why had not a single one ever succeeded? Most of them were in second or third marriages by his age, and even those who were still in first marriages, hadn’t been in them for very long. It was all a waiting game.

He didn’t want to do that to her. He didn’t want to let her down.

A knock on his door made him jump, and he hastily tossed the towel back into the bathroom. He looked at his clothes and wished he hadn’t taken so many off, but it was too late, whoever was at the door was coming inside.
Raymond.

“Hello,” Tom said.

Raymond took a look at him, half-undressed, and at the top of the tuxedo sitting on the hanger, and raised an eyebrow. “You all right?”

Tom gave a nod but didn’t feel convincing.

“You going to make me get my shotgun?” Raymond teased, although there was, just a little bit, a hint of seriousness in the twitch of his eyebrow.

Tom had to laugh. “I wouldn’t dream of it, sir,” Tom breathed.

“You’re having a little bit of a meltdown,” Raymond observed. “Are you reconsidering?”

“Not in a million years, sir,” Tom said without hesitation.

“I imagine it’s difficult, your father not being able to be here,” Raymond said.

Tom nodded. James’ health was too poor for another transatlantic trip. His mother was here, and she had made arrangements for a reception for them in London in five days’ time. It was one stop on the tour that Tom had planned.

He and Cosette had talked, at length, about what they wanted to do for their honeymoon. Tom wanted two weeks, minimum. It didn’t all have to be in the same place, he said, but he wanted two weeks’ time, just the two of them. Giselle was contracted to spend as much time as possible with Beatrice while she stayed with her extended family, alternating between her aunt and uncle and being a help with her new cousin, and her grandparents, something Tom was rather surprised Raymond and Isabella had agreed to. It wasn’t that they didn’t want to spend time with their granddaughter, but two weeks was a long time, and Giselle was going to have to do double shifts to make sure all things were managed without exhausting the older couple.

The honeymoon night, however, would be spent at Cosette’s home. Tom had requested this – having the entire house to themselves for forty-eight hours. It was important to him. A kind of reset between them, a way to over-write previous memories, he felt. Whether he was right or not remained to be seen.

Then, to London, and Tom’s home for three days. The reception his mother planned, and some quiet time together before taking off for Rome and Vatican City for a few days. Three days tour, and then…Hawaii.

While Tom had been there before, Cosette hadn’t. She’d always wanted to go, felt it was the ideal honeymoon destination. Tom planned everything – jet skiing, parasailing, snorkeling, but most of all, he rented a very exclusive and luxurious villa on a private beach.

His dreams from before had never left his memory, and he wanted very much to make them a reality.

Twenty-four hours ago, he’d been practically quivering with anticipation. But doubt had grabbed hold of his throat and threatened to suffocate him.

“I’m not your father, Tom,” Raymond said gravely, “but I am about to become your father-in-law, and I want you to know…” at this moment, he stepped forward and extended his hand for Tom’s. Tom took it, a handshake of sorts. “I want you to know that I’m proud of you. I know when we
met, things were very different, but I see how you’ve…how you’ve grown so much. How much you want to do right by Cosette and your daughter. And I am honored to call you son.”

Tom was going to cry. That hand on his throat had shifted and now it was inside, in a fist, threatening to choke him. He felt tears threatening and struggled to hold them back.

“I’m honored,” Tom managed.

Raymond nodded, and heaved a deep sigh. “Truthfully, I’ve been too hard on you. When I was younger than you, I married Isabella, and I didn’t take it half as seriously as you’ve taken marrying my daughter. But I will tell you, Tom, and I know this is unsolicited advice…my mistake with Isabella was not putting her first. For years. Even when Cosette was born. And in the end, I had to sacrifice my career and find something less…invasive.” He looked at Tom, and Tom felt that creeping, cold doubt again. “I’m not saying you have to give up acting, Tom. But remember, she comes first. I know that’s hard for your kind, because the role always comes first. It’s something elemental about you all, and I see how you’ve struggled against it, the narcissism that comes with your chosen field. It’s necessary, I guess, to sustain you. But it doesn’t help in a marriage.”

Tom sighed. “I’ve been…thinking that. I’m…I’m afraid. I’m afraid I’ll let her down.”

“It’s about your choices, Tom. And your choices, from what I’ve seen, have been good.”

Tom gave a little nod. Then he remembered. He hadn’t intended to share this with Raymond, but…

“There was a role. A script I liked, that was presented to me. I was very much wanted for the part, I found out. But there was a problem with it. There was a scene in it that was pretty sexually graphic. And I have a bit of a reputation for not shying away from those things.”

“Mmm,” Raymond grunted.

“I talked to the director about omitting it, if I was to take the script. They didn’t understand why I would be bothered, and I didn’t really feel…comfortable explaining it to them. In the end I passed on it.”

“Does Cosette know about this?”

“Yes. We first talked about it, I asked her what she thought. She said it was my decision. I mean, it’s not like filming it would have made me unfaithful to her, those kinds of scenes—”

“Yes, I know, I worked in the industry for a while. Although usually they’re much more humiliating for the woman than the man. Crews, especially in my day, can be pretty insensitive.”

“Yes, well…I decided it wasn’t worth it. I’ve moved on to something else. Something Cosette brought to my attention, actually.”

“Some scripts came for you today.”

“Oh? Did you look at any of them?”

“Well, you said I could, so…”

“Which one?”

“There is the cutest one, but I don’t think you’d want to do it.”

“Cute?”
“Well, kind of cute. At least I thought so. It’s about a man who illustrates children’s books, writes a little of his own, and he comes to a school to do a thing called ‘Author Day’ and winds up getting involved with one of the teachers.”

“A romantic comedy, then?”

“With a bit of a dark twist. He’s schizophrenic.”

“Ooooo…a dark edge. I kind of like it.”

“I don’t want to influence you. I just thought it was cute.”

“Of course you did, you’re a teacher. Although cute and schizophrenia don’t really go together. I’ll read it first.”

“You don’t have to, Tom.”

“No, I want to. It’s something I certainly haven’t done before.”

“I guess every serious actor needs to do something silly. Like yesterday I caught this movie with Jennifer Lopez, ‘Maid in Manhattan,’ and Ralph Finnes was in it. I thought he looked kind of like you.”

“I have been compared in the past. But I don’t think a children’s illustrator with schizophrenia is exactly silly. I’m intrigued, honestly.”

“Whatever you want to do, Tom. Incidentally, if they ever remake The English Patient, I think you’d be perfect…”

Tom had wound up loving the script, the dark romantic comedy aspects of it, something very different for him. He was worried it would sound like they were laughing at the harrowing aspects of schizophrenia, but Tom was prepared to do a lot of research and the director was determined to be not just respectful but supportive, giving the movie a positive, hopeful ending.

“I’m impressed,” Raymond said. “That’s a good start. Although don’t think it’s a one and done kind of thing. There’s always going to be another script, another hurdle to jump over.”

“I like to think I have high endurance,” Tom said, feeling just a little brighter than before.

Raymond grunted again, this time with a roll of his eyes and a quirk of his lips into a half-smile. “I’m going to find that lady who was helping you get dressed. We’re almost ready to get started, you can’t have a thread out of place if I know you movie-stars.”

Tom let out a chuckle. “If you would, please, I’d appreciate it.” Raymond gave him a nod and left to do just that.

Putting her first…Tom knew that was important. On their rings -- which were simple gold for him, and gold studded with tiny diamonds to match her engagement ring, which it would slide right along to reside forever on her left ring finger – he’d had their names inscribed, with the date of their wedding. On his ring, her name was first, then his – “Cosette and Tom.” And on hers, the reverse. To remind each other to put the other first.

After a reapplication of his deodorant, Lori got him back into his suit and made sure he was camera-ready. Although this was far more important than being in front of a camera.
He took his position at the altar, waiting for the procession to come through. He watched as his beautiful little daughter, over three years old now, and surprisingly mature for her age, walked down the aisle first, sprinkling the mixture of confetti as best she could, which was just enough to put a little sparkle in the purple velvet strip rug they’d laid out. She smiled at her father, not fully understanding what was happening, but knowing she was dressed in an adorable dress of varying shades of purple, Mommy’s color, and gave him a little wave before Christina took her hand to bring her to the correct side.

And then Tom saw Cosette, and everything else vanished.

Their eyes locked and stayed steady. He couldn’t see anything other than those violet orbs, smiling at him, but not overtly – instead with a smooth, mellow kind of knowing, a quirk in them as if daring him to go through with it, a twinkling that teased him to a maddening point.

Did she know what she did to him? He thought, maybe, for that brief time, perhaps she did.

Her father gave her over to him, as the ceremony said – they’d done this in rehearsals, and Tom was good with rehearsals, and he remembered every bit and step. Her cool, smooth fingers tangled with his and still, he didn’t want to stop gazing into those eyes.

“I just don’t want you to be disappointed.”

“Why on earth would I ever be disappointed?”

“Because the girl you slept with three plus years ago didn’t have stretch marks and cellulite and… other things. Pregnancy changes you. Not everything is in the same place as it was before, if you catch my drift.”

“Cosette, I lusted after a gorgeous young woman and had a one-night stand with her. I fell in love – real, permanent love – with a mature young woman whom I adore and would happily die for. I want to make love to you, not just your body.”

“Yes, but my body is involved, and I know you have memories, so I wanted to prepare you.”

“You honestly don’t have any idea, do you? I will worship every mark that little girl left on you, because if it wasn’t for her, this wouldn’t be happening, now. I know that. If she hadn’t come into our lives, you would have moved on, I would have moved on. Instead, she kept me in your life long enough for this to finally happen. I will be grateful for that for every moment of my life.”

As he spoke the vows, he wasn’t repeating them. He was saying them from his heart.

“I, Thomas William Hiddleston, take thee, Cosette Annamarie Mitchell, to be my lawfully wedded wife….”

“I, Cosette Annamarie Mitchell, take thee, Thomas William Hiddleston, to be my lawfully wedded husband…”

This kind of insanity only happened to a person once, right? She couldn’t understand how people did this more than once. It couldn’t feel the same a second time, this was utterly unique, this pounding in her head and in her heart, the keen awareness she had in her hands, his skin against hers in such a public place, everyone witnessing them making these vows.

The ceremony itself was supposed to be small. Intimate. There had to be over a hundred people in
the congregation, though, which was not what Cosette would ever have called small. A fair combination of her family, immediate and extended, which was barely half the crowd, and the rest all of Tom’s friends and associates, and the few who could drop everything and fly across the pond to be at his wedding, in addition to his mother and sisters.

Yet she was unaware of any of them. Only Tom existed.

His smile, his eyes, so calm and knowing, so sure and confident, holding her steady, reassuring her with the enormous love she saw in his face. She’d been worried about the future, about the unknowns, but Tom would tell her that the future was an adventure, and he was happy to go into it with her.

He’d said the next time he kissed her, she would be his wife. She almost didn’t know what to expect from that kiss. When he was told to kiss his bride, Tom stepped closer to her, and pressed warm, dry lips to hers, firm but chaste.

She had to remind herself that she couldn’t kiss him again, not for a while. But when they processed down the aisle, out the door, he pulled her to him and kissed her again. This time it was much more intense – he’d been controlling himself on the altar in front of everyone.

“Now look what you’ve done,” he sighed as they waited for the reception line to gather around them.

“Me?”

“Mmm. Now that I’ve started kissing you, I’m not going to be able to stop.”

“I guess that’s why we waited, then,” she said, bumping him lightly.

She felt more than heard Tom groan as he took her hand, settling in for the huge line of well-wishers. It took more time than the ceremony, but Tom was always the consummate professional, and she knew he liked the attention, he always had. But still, he glanced at her continuously, that smile always on his lips, and he would kiss her hand, her cheek, and occasionally her lips at every given opportunity.

More pictures. This time of the entire wedding party. This took another hour, which Cosette had to force herself to endure patiently. It helped that Tom was there, smiling at her, whispering things to her. Things she would not repeat to any living soul. Things that made her cheeks pink and later on would show in the photos as that happy glow that brides always seemed to have.

When it was over, and they were free to leave for the reception, which would host twice as many people as the ceremony, and was still considered “small,” they were shown to the limo amid the cheers of their loved ones, and once in the car, she threw herself at Tom, kissing him in a way she hadn’t since that very first time they were together.

Only this time, there was nothing but joy.

8 8 8

She was HIS now.

Completely his.

In spite of the ruffles of purple that made it darn near impossible for him to get his hands around her, she was here, in his arms, kissing him.
Tom didn’t think he could be happy with just kissing, but he’d never had a physical relationship with Cosette before. It was new territory, and he didn’t want to explore too much too fast. He was already feeling the slippery rush of anticipation turning into experience, and experience always went too fast. He wished he had the power, not for the first time, to slow time down, so he could savor these things.

What he really wanted to do was savor her. But that had to wait.

Experience again went too fast. They were now at the reception, and the party began. Food, music, cake, and his favorite, dancing.

There was so much. There were so many people, people he liked, people he loved, people he didn’t get to see enough. Yet he clung to her, even though it was only the beginning, even though he would get to wake up with her in the mornings (as many as he could in spite of his needing to be away at times) for the rest of their lives. When they were parted, just because there were so many guests and so many wanted to give their well-wishes, and it was impossible to keep up with the flow if they stayed together, Tom made sure she was at least visible out of the corner of his eye, and at the first opportunity, he make his way back to her side.

The speeches – there were many who wanted to say things, but the newly married couple agreed that it couldn’t go on all night, so only a few were given a formal opportunity to lead a few toasts.

Then Tom had to grab the mike and blubber like an idiot for who-knew-how-long, until Cosette finally came to him and kissed him in front of everyone and put him out of his misery. Snatches of the things he’d rambled on about would come back to him over the years, but there was one overall theme – how much he loved her.

After cake – a huge delicious cake in various flavors, as Tom had been unable to decide on a favorite, and Cosette had to agree that more was better in this case – there was dancing. His favorite part.

Tom had personally loaded the DJ’s list with songs that made him think of him and Cosette. His favorite one was “You’re the First, My Last, My Everything” by Barry White. There were others that he would keep on his ipod for a very long time, and in years to come he would play them for him and Cosette to dance to, privately, in their living room.

The dancing went on for a long time. A very long time. Mostly because he couldn’t stop himself. He was just so unbelievably happy, and he could hold her close to him, build and savor the anticipation. It was realizing she had long since ditched her lovely heels for comfy white ballet flats in order to save her feet that brought him to his senses.

It was a little after midnight when they finally left the reception and went back to her house. Their house. Their home.

It was nothing like their first time.

Nothing.

It was sweet and slow and tender and full of love and understanding. And later it was a bit more frantic but that was okay, too, because they knew each other in a way they didn’t before.
It wasn’t even really about sex. Even though sex was involved. It was about being together, being as
close as two human beings could get. There was laughing and teasing, a bit of awkwardness as they
learned each other in a new way.

Tom was beyond the most sentimental version of him she’d ever seen. In fact, she felt like he’d
been possessed somehow, but by an entity that only breathed affection and sweetness. There was a
freedom with him, to be playful one second and intense the next.

Even though she was exhausted, by five am Cosette knew she wasn’t going to get any sleep. She’d
caught bits here and there, but being wrapped up in Tom was too new, too enjoyable and she
wanted to savor it.

By six, however, restlessness took over and she needed the bathroom anyway, so when she got up,
she went into the kitchen and started to pull out the items she’d stored away to make them
breakfast. She began to mix the batter for the pancakes, and wondered when Tom would want to
get up. She doubted he’d get annoyed with her if she woke him, but the day and the night had both
been so long, so full, that she didn’t have the heart to be so selfish and pull him from some much-
needed rest just so she could be with him.

He would be there. He had promised to be there for the rest of their lives.

Once the pancakes were made, she put them in the dish with the eggs and cream, and layered them
with chocolate chips and slices of bananas. She popped the casserole into the oven and set the
timer. Next on the list was the bacon – baked, not fried, and it tasted just as good, in her opinion.

Maybe it was too soon. She sat down at the dining table, and her eyes landed on her copy of Jane
Eyre, sitting on the counter underneath a pile of unopened mail. It had been a bit since she’d been
able to curl up and read it, one of her favorite pastimes.

“How many times have you read that book?”

“Jane Eyre? I don’t know. I don’t really read all of it, I just go over my favorite spots.”

“I know you had the movie out. Fassbender…”

“He’s really good as Rochester. What? You can’t be jealous.”

“I played a Rochester type once. Crimson Peak, remember?”

“Yes, and you were sleeping with your sister.”

“I was not. My character was, Thomas Sharpe. Not me.”

“Sorry. Incest is not romantic. Besides, if Rochester had been Catholic he would have had grounds
for an annulment because they hid his wife’s mental illness from him before he married her. No
contest. A shame the Anglican church is not so open minded.”

“Oh ho! Those are fighting words, darling.”

“My point is that he’s sympathetic.”

“And Thomas isn’t? His sister manipulates him!”

“He is an abuse victim, yes, but he’s complacent in horrible things. Rochester takes perfectly good
care of a crazy woman who regularly tries to kill him and bites visitors. Sorry. He wins. And just
because Fassbender is easy on the eyes is not a reason to be jealous.”

“There are other adaptations of that book. Why not one of them?”

“Because this one has the right mood. And I love that scene when he’s sleeping on the floor in front of her room.”

“Hm. Well, I know how to win you over the next time we have a fight, then.”

She found herself wondering how it would be – their routines merging together, even though to a large extent they had their own rhythm already established. But living under a roof together, sharing a bed, sharing the most intimate parts of themselves…she had a brief vision of the two of them in her large main bathroom, each of them at a sink (as the bathroom had two), him shaving while she curled her hair. Would they get in each other’s way? Occasionally snap in impatience? Would he complain about her dark hair clogging the sink, would she get sick of picking up his socks?

Of course. All of that would happen and more. But they would learn, and adjust. They just had to communicate.

It sounded so easy, she thought with a rueful smile. But this was just the beginning of their marriage. They would figure out how to get through it. They were the only ones who could.

Then she was startled by the sound of Tom calling her name. But something about it sounded wrong.

8 8 8

"Cosette?" Tom called, groggy, disoriented. He slid over the bed, his brain spinning. This wasn't happening. This wasn't real. He was dreaming, wasn't he?

He was in her room. His body had the familiar after-sex ache. He had slept so hard, he was so exhausted he didn’t remember the moment he finally rolled over and passed out, but he knew that he was here, with her. Coming out of that heavy of a sleep left his brain disoriented, and it couldn’t grasp a time, it couldn’t comprehend why he would be in her bed, unless…unless…

No, no, that was years ago. Right? Wasn’t it? His brain wouldn’t wake up, it felt like he was still dreaming.

One foot made it to the floor but his body was stuck. "COSETTE!" Even to his own ears, the cry sounded desperate and pathetic, and when she came flying through the doorway, in the same damn robe, Tom's heartbeat accelerated to the point where he was sure he was going to go into cardiac arrest. His arms were raised, like a child desperately reaching for its mother, and she was in them almost instantly.

"What is it?" she asked, her face pinched with concern. His arms were around her then, crushing her to him, on the bed between his legs. It took serious effort not to wrap his legs around her as well. "Tom?" Her voice sweet and soothing in his ear, her arms around his ribcage, hands rubbing his back. She pressed a kiss to his cheek, to his lower jaw. "I'm here, it's okay, whatever it is...I'm here."

Her smell flooded him; he shut his eyes and let it surround him, let reality ground him. Finally, finally, his brain reached full consciousness and computed the time. It told him he was wrong, that...
it wasn’t *that morning*. "I'm sorry," he breathed. "I'm so sorry...I just..."

"What?" she prompted, so gentle.

"I woke up and I was here alone, and you were in that robe when you came in and for a moment I felt like...like it was...it was *then.*"

She knew. She knew exactly what he meant. He felt it in a wave that shuddered through her body. "Oh God, Tom...I'm so sorry. I was...I was making breakfast and I didn't think--"

"No, no no," Tom said, finally unclenching his arms so he could look down at her. "No, it's not your fault." He rubbed his face with one hand, the other keeping her close, snug around her waist. "I don't know...I just...it felt like a nightmare, like no time had passed at all and I was right back where I started."

They fell silent for a moment, and when Tom looked at her he could see the wheels spinning in her head. Her hands were in her lap now, and he could see the guilt on her face. "I was awful to you that day. I'm so sorry. I should never have--"

"No, stop." His voice was slightly shaky, but he was shaking off that awful feeling now, his eyes landing on her wedding ring, and he reached for it, pulling her hand to his lips and kissing it. "No, that...that isn't what I meant. You never have to apologize for that. Never again."

"But--"

"No," he said, a bit more forcefully this time. "I know what happened that morning. I know what you were going through. You did the best you could with the circumstances. I put you in a terrible position. I didn't think of your feelings at all, I didn't really love you, I just wanted what I wanted from you and I didn't put your heart and your soul first. That wasn't the person I was then." He pulled her closer. "So I don't want any more guilt over that."

She sighed, her face perplexed and still emotionally charged. "I could have been more compassionate about it."

"I wouldn't have listened. I still didn't understand." He sighed, deeply, rubbing his eyes again. "Look, there's something...something I probably should have told you some time ago but...I couldn't figure out a way to tell you without making it sound...I don't know. I guess I was afraid it would come across as me boasting about it. Not that I was terribly proud of it."

She frowned. "What?"

He started to rub her upper arms, up and down, hands sliding across the smooth fabric of her robe. He realized he hated the damn thing, was going to talk to her about getting rid of it, but right now he needed physical contact with her, and wanted to soothe her apprehension as well. "It's not...I'm not keeping secrets from you, not those kind, it's...it happened about a year after we decided...after I went back to work, moved out. I was in London and I wound up reconnecting with an old RADA friend, her name was Lindsey, she mostly sticks to theater in the local area. She'd just gotten divorced and we wound up getting together several times for breakfast or lunch...you know how I am about breakfast," he added with a bashful little smile, then realized with horror-- "Wait, did you say you were making breakfast? Is it--?"

She smiled at him, her hand going to his shoulder as if he were going to jump from the bed. "I have timers. I have the pancake casserole in the oven, it's fine. It still has a way to go. And the bacon. I know it's not a full English, but---"
He let out a breath of relief, and then, impulsively, kissed her. "I love your pancakes," he murmured against her lips.

"Mmmm." She curled a bit more in between his legs, pulling her own all the way up onto the bed. He brought his other leg up and this time did wrap them around her, loosely but still creating a protective ball around them. "Go on, Tom," she whispered.

"Anyway," he huffed. "We started to hang out together a bit, and somehow...somehow it came out that she'd been harboring feelings for me, for a long time. That she was in love with me." He started rubbing her arms and back again, more to comfort and steady himself than anything, but he could see the apprehension return to her expression. "I didn't return her feelings, but...it seemed that finding that out seemed to set something off in me...I mean, it had been a long time since I'd been intimate with anyone and I felt it was starting to take a toll on me. And I suddenly found her attractive. Like knowing she felt that way about me had lifted a veil. I couldn't seem to shake it off. She was embarrassed to be around me though, worried about how I was going to see her, she was...it took some effort to get her comfortable again, and I told myself I didn't know how I felt about her, that maybe we could...that maybe it was possible. But I knew, on some level, it was just a physical thing, it was...it was lust. Cosette. I know it now, but then, I was still so muddled in my head..."

He drifted off, his brain flooded with memories he couldn't keep straight. He knew he'd behaved horribly. Flirting with someone who already was invested in him. He knew that Lindsey's feelings for him had made her miserable, convinced he could never return them. He should never have given her hope. He'd made it so much worse.

"So what happened?" Cosette asked, her face calm now, determined, as if expecting some confession of infidelity. Even if they hadn't been together at the time, he knew it would hurt her to hear about him having sex with someone else.

"Nothing," he said. "I mean, not that. It didn't happen. Somehow, we wound up at her place, I was desperate to get things back to normal and at the same time I was practically obsessed with her, physically. Lust had eaten into my brain and wouldn't let up. She let me come over and we had pizza and wine and watched a movie...and we somehow started making out. She wanted to have sex. I wanted to have sex. But then it hit me, like a sledgehammer, what I was doing. How...low I was. How I was totally using her. I didn't love her. I was totally going to take advantage of her feelings for me to...relieve myself. Get my rocks off," he added with disgust.

"Tom," Cosette whispered, and it wasn't reproachful. She was actually sympathetic.

"No, let me finish," he said, his fingers leaving her to run through his hair. "I stopped it. She objected, said it was okay for us to...that she understood that she couldn't expect me to just fall in love with her, that it was fine if it was just this one time, she just wanted to be with me, even if it was just once, like that. And...and suddenly you were there." He gestured to her with his hands. "In my head, I could hear you as clearly as if you were beside me."

Her face was startled.

He nodded. "You said that a real man respects a woman even when she doesn't respect herself, that he protects her when she won't protect herself. That he doesn't take advantage even if she wants to be taken advantage of. Her consent to be used changed nothing. It was still using her. So I stopped and I told her the truth, and it hurt her...so much. God, her face." He shut his eyes, tears threatening with the memory of that pain. So much pain...how doing the right thing hurt so much, especially when you knew you'd gotten yourself into the mess. But it had to be stopped.
Cosette's hands were on his cheeks, stroking his face. "It's okay, Tom," she whispered, her lips very close to his.

"I left. I was afraid to leave her, she was in such a state, but I knew me being there would only make it worse. I called a mutual friend and asked her to check on Lindsey. Said I couldn't do it because I had been awful to her. Thankfully she didn't ask too many questions. She knew how Lindsey felt about me. But I just...I knew something in me had changed. And I knew, without a doubt, what you went through that morning. It never fully hit me until that moment. But I knew. And I totally understood how you had every right."

Cosette's face opened in surprise. And then, without warning, she flung herself at him. Her arms wrapped around his neck and she pressed her face against his cheek. "Oh Tom," she whispered, her breath hot against his neck.

He pulled her closer, tears starting to drip down his cheeks. "I'm sorry, Cosette," he said, more out of reflex than anything. He still didn't feel exonerated of what he'd done, how he'd hurt Lindsey. They'd never spoken again. He didn't realize he was saying it out loud until he felt her lips on his.

"You...you are a good man, Tom," she told him, her face wet with tears, either his or hers or maybe both. "You did the right thing. I'm so...I'm so proud of you." Her lips slid over his cheeks, his chin. Her fingers threaded through his hair, stroking him. "You have to forgive yourself," she said against his ear. "You did the right thing."

"Not soon enough," Tom muttered.

She gave a little laugh, he felt it against his neck. "Really? Imagine how you would have felt the next morning. Imagine how she would have felt. You would have tried to tell her it didn't change anything, but you would have known, she would have known, it would have changed everything. You have no idea the mess you might have made, so much worse if you hadn't stopped it when you did. I know. You were so much better than me. I just...your heart is so good, and I know now I should have trusted in you sooner."

"I don't know if I would have been trustworthy before then," Tom said, pulling back to look down at her. His thumbs went to her cheeks, wiping away her tears before his lips followed with kisses. "So please never apologize to me for that morning. I know what you went through. I wasn't ready to treasure you and love you and protect you before then."

She fell silent, turning over his words. "Maybe it was a bad idea to be here, this morning," she said. "Maybe--"

"No." He pressed a finger to her lips. "I wanted to be here. I wanted to write over the slate. Except maybe I want you to get rid of this robe," he said, his fingers clutching at the fabric on her shoulders.

Instantly she pulled back and untied the robe, shimmying out of it. She tossed it away. "Better?"

"You sure?"

"It's a robe, Tom. I can get another. But I can never get another you." Her nightgown underneath was long and in that shade of purple he loved on her so much. The spaghetti straps bared her skin to him, and she was warm under his hands. He pulled her closer.

"How long do we have till the casserole is done?" he asked.

"I can go shut the oven off."
"Hurry," he rasped, moving one leg to let her go. She shot off and was back in seconds. She practically attacked him.

"I love you so much," she told him, over and over again. Each time pushed the pain back a little more. He relished how much those words, from her lips, meant to him. He always knew how he longed to hear them, but the strength of their impact now, said with such abandon, with such passion without ever flagging, nearly undid him.

Maybe he hadn’t loved her like this, then, with the kind of selflessness required to pledge your life to another human being, but he’d loved her, as much as he was capable. He had always loved her.

He never doubted that he always would.

8 8 8

They had talked about this before. More than once. But it was inevitable.

“But why not?” Beatrice whined. It was actually more like “Whyyyyeee? Naaaaaaah?”

Hence, the growing tantrum of a three-year-old.

It was late afternoon, and they’d brought Beatrice by for a few hours to spend some time with her parents. Tom and Cosette had prepped her for the last month on the thought that both Mommy and Daddy were going to be away for a whole two weeks, a lifetime for a toddler. At first they were just met with puzzled eyes, but upon repetition, Beatrice seemed to understand that there was going to be a separation that would not last forever. It would end, and Mommy and Daddy would be back.

And living in the same house.

Tom had started moving his stuff over five months ago. Slowly. A box of books here, some personal items there. Not much in the house was necessary, certainly not most of the furniture, although both he and Cosette discussed completely re-doing the living room and the bedroom of Cosette’s house to reflect the both of them. Which Cosette had no problem with, as most of it was her grandmother’s old furniture and had never really reflected her own tastes, it had simply just always been there and Cosette was used to it. Beatrice’s room was the first monumental change she’d made to the house since Gran died.

Beatrice asked questions. Not easy ones, either.

“Daddy gonna live here,” she had said, faithfully repeating what she’d been told many times, once after a particularly large amount of Daddy’s books were placed in the spare room. The bed was just put into storage in favor of Tom having his own study, and Beatrice marched into the room to examine the changes. Then made her announcement.

“Yes, sweetie,” Cosette assured her.

A thoughtful pause. “So where he seep?”

Cosette drew a heavy breath. She looked to Tom, who was sitting at his desk, also newly placed. This was something they had talked about, too, but not in detail.

“In Mommy’s room. We’re getting a new big bed and we’re both going to sleep in it.”

Beatrice considered her mother. “Like I seep in your bed sometimes?”
“A little bit.”

"Why he seep dere? Why not he seep in his own bed?” Emphasis on “own.” Beatrice liked to define things with this word, such as, “my own self.”

Tom was trying not to laugh. Cosette wanted to strangle him.

“Because after mommies and daddies get married, like your daddy and I are doing, they have to share a bed.” She knew she had slipped into teacher mode, being perfectly calm and unflappable in the face of what would have turned Tom into a stuttering mess.

“They has to?” This seemed suspect. And shocking to the three-year-old.

“It is a rule,” Tom chimed in.

“Why?”

A fair question. Cosette arched an eyebrow at Tom, who was also waiting for her to answer.

“Ask Daddy,” she said.

Beatrice obediently rounded on her father. “Why, Daddy?”

“Um…” Oh, sweet revenge. “Well…ah…you see…Mommies and Daddies love each other very much, and don’t want to be away from each other, even at night.”

“But you and Mommy away from e’chother all the time!”

Cosette smothered her chuckle behind her hand.

“Because we aren’t married yet,” Tom said, inspiration striking.

“But we will be,” Cosette added.

“Kay.” She seemed to buy it, but then, because she had both her mother and father’s combined intelligence, it seemed, she added, “Why you not married before?”

By this point, Tom had made his way over to Cosette, and took her hand. At the question, he looked down at his daughter, startled.

Cosette decided to put him out of his misery. “Because we weren’t ready.”

"Not ready?”

"Nope. Sometimes mommies and daddies just aren’t ready. But we are now, so we are getting married.”

“Kay.” Thus appeased, Beatrice headed back to her room on the way to the living room, grabbing a blankie on the way.

“Um,” Tom said, “that was…”

"Quick thinking, yes, but it won’t work forever,” Cosette sighed. “One day we’ll have to tell her.”

“We will?”

“Probably. I don’t want her to think that our situation is…normal.”
“In all fairness, it’s not that abnormal. I know a decent amount of people who’ve had kids before they get married.”

“Don’t you want better for her than that?”

“Every parent does,” Tom said, “but I also don’t want her to think she’s a failure as a person if... well...”

Tom had a point. A very good point. It was a conversation they’d been having in pieces and parts for some time.

“And we have to be careful picking the age she’s at,” Tom added. “Because I don’t want her thinking anything about herself because of...”

“Of course not,” Cosette quickly agreed. “But,” she added, suddenly feeling a little bit defensive, “ask yourself what you’d do to the guy she brought home if she wound up making similar choices to the ones I’ve made.”

Tom paused. And the tips of his ears slowly started to turn red. “Yeah. Good point.”

“But I guess lightning could always strike twice.”

He looked at her. “Let’s hope it’s a non-issue.”

“Let’s hope.”

But now Mommy and Daddy were going away. Without her. And suddenly this was not acceptable.

“I wanna go!” Beatrice cried. She looked positively pathetic, big blue eyes filled with tears, full on sniffles. Apparently, all the excitement of the last few days was just too much for her and now it as culminating in a breakdown of sorts.

“But Auntie Chrissy needs you,” Cosette soothed her, stroking her hair and back. “She needs help with your new cousin, and you were going to help her, remember?”

Beatrice’s reply was just to shake her head before burying it against her mother’s chest.

It took time. Tom was a bit beside himself, torn between desperately wanting to appease his daughter and also very much wanting Cosette to himself for just a little while.

“Am I being selfish?” he asked a few hours later, when the worst of the tantrum had passed and Cosette made Beatrice something to eat, before the exhausted little girl took a nap on the couch in the living room.

“Selfish about what?” Cosette asked as she finished cleaning up.

He took her into his arms. This felt good, being able to touch him and be touched by him, however, whenever. She wrapped her arms around his narrow waist and rested her head against his upper chest.

“I guess this is the main reason why people get married before having kids,” he said into her hair.

She giggled into his chest. “So they have time to get sick of each other before they never get any alone time again?”
His breath puffed against her hair with his laugh. “I guess. I guess it also makes you appreciate each other and the precious moments you get to enjoy once they’re few and far between.” Then he grew silent for several long moments and Cosette pulled back.

“I take it you’re not excited to start on making more anytime soon, then?” she prompted.

“That’s the weird thing,” Tom said. “I am. The idea of having five, seven, eight kids with you…I guess we’re a bit privileged, though. I can afford to hire cleaners for the house and nannies to give us a bit of off time.”

“You know,” she said, and realized she hadn’t said anything about what she was about to tell him, and wondered how it would go down, “I have been thinking. Of, maybe…taking some time off.”

“Time off?” he echoed.

“Of work. I mean, I survived a year of being away with Beatrice.”

“And it made you miserable.”

She shook her head. “There were so many other factors. Adjusting to being a mom for the first time, and…and you.” She watched him carefully. She didn’t want him to start feeling guilty. “But the bottom line is, as much as I adore Giselle and as fantastic a job as she’s done, I don’t want other people raising my children.”

Tom seemed to consider her words carefully. “Well,” he said, his tone diplomatic. “Whatever you wanted to do, I would support you a hundred percent. And I can’t help but like the idea that maybe you and Beatrice, and our future children, could maybe travel with me, at times. And that we could spend a bit more time in London. But, I also know that if you leave your school again, it might not be possible to go back. You might have to start fresh at a new place. Would you want to risk that?”

“That’s one of the reasons I hesitate, I admit,” Cosette sighed. “I can’t expect them to just hire a long term sub every time I want to leave. And if I did, it would be longer than a year. At least until Beatrice starts school, or maybe not until the next one does.”

“And how soon would you want this next one to come along?” Tom asked with a raised brow.

She smirked at him. “We can discuss it. But within the year wouldn’t be out of the question, would it?”

“Pregnant within the year, yes. Giving birth within the year, no.” Tom’s eyes twinkled. “I want a bit more adjustment time than that.”

“Like I said, we can discuss it,” she said, giving his arm a playful pinch. Then she sobered. “I have to say that I wouldn’t want Beatrice to go to the same school where I was teaching.”

“You wouldn’t?”

She shook her head. “I’ve always felt it’s a conflict of interest. I’ve never been able to stand it when I’ve had to teach my co-workers’ kids. You’d be surprised how many teachers do the exact same things as parents that they bitch about when it comes to the students’ parents.” She sighed. “But I have been there a long time and I know it’s an excellent school. I’d love Beatrice to go there.”

“She can. Even if you decided to stay around a few more years it wouldn’t be that big of a deal if she was in pre-school or kinder there, would it?”
“Maybe not.” She shook it off. “We don’t have to talk about this now, make any decisions. Beatrice will be fine when she wakes up, she’ll be happy to go play with her cousin—”

“And we will be on a plane in the morning,” Tom finished before he kissed her.

8 8 8

It was everything he dreamed of.

The beachside villa that he had found after a few months of searching was exactly like he’d envisioned it. Totally private, with doorways and open windows so large it seemed that entire walls were missing, leading directly onto their private section of beach. The only truly walled area was the bathroom, which was huge, with an open shower and a deep sunk bath big enough for at least three people.

At night, the bed was surrounded by gauzy curtains and the delightful smell of the salt water and cooling sand, and once only had to glance over the edge to see the twinkling stars over a dark roiling ocean. The sound of the crashing waves was a lullaby of sorts – over the sounds they made themselves, unheard by any other human ears.

The first day, they’d made love nearly non-stop, save to eat and sleep. The trip to London had been a bit hectic and there was not nearly as much alone time as Tom would have liked, although they made up for it during the nights they spent in his London home. Rome was beautiful, and there was so much to see, but being in her company and talking about all the things they saw and the places they visited was enough to keep him satisfied.

But here, in Hawaii…it was just them. Being them, alone, private, nowhere they had to go or anything to do – unless they wanted to.

And the real bonus for him was getting her to wear the royal purple string bikini he’d bought.

“That isn’t a swimsuit, Tom,” she teased. “It’s scrap material masquerading as something to wear. Why even bother? Why not just make me walk around naked?”

“I’m game if you are,” he replied. At her look, he laughed. “Come on, darling. Nobody’s going to see you in this but me.”

“Honestly, I expected more lingerie,” she said, taking the small box that held the bikini.

“This seemed more appropriate to the setting,” he said, watching as she pulled out the top, the string delicately pinched between her fingers.

He really had expected to need to convince her more, but she had a devious streak in her – which he had already glimpsed, and looked forward to seeing more of in the future – and made him help her put it on. It left so much skin exposed that he then had to help apply sunscreen just about everywhere – which was also quite fun.

Truthfully, having sex on a beach was not ideal. Sand got in places where you never want sand. Even being on a towel didn’t help. Thankfully, there was some outdoor furniture, a mini bungalow with a futon laid out under it, so usually they managed to make it at least there if not all the way to the villa. Still, the shower basin was usually filled with a thin layer of grit at the end of each day, which Cosette made Tom wipe out (as she claimed it was his fault it was there to begin with).

Cosette religiously made him apply sunscreen to his face—or did it for him. “Can’t let the goods get damaged,” she teased.
“Once again, a reminder of how you love me for my looks.”

“Oh, yes, because you bought me this swimsuit to show off my brain,” she retorted.

His reply was to toss her on the bed. Which made her laugh. Which made him laugh. And it was just like in his dream.

The sun caught on her rings as she reached up for him, and he grasped her hand, kissing her finger just below where the bands rested. He gazed down at her, feeling like he could literally die from the emotions roiling in his chest.

“I love you,” he said, his voice rough.

She nodded, her smile more brilliant than the sun. “I love you.”

God had been so good to him. He didn’t deserve it.

He promised himself he would live the rest of his life trying to.

Chapter End Notes

So that’s it for now, although I do have ideas lurking for a sequel -- maybe a trilogy. The middle one won’t be nearly as long, though.

I figured since Michelle and Tom didn’t get the “happy ending,” I wanted to post this to prove that yes, sometimes it does work!

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