The Anchor
by in48frames

Summary

Following the season three finale, Tom discovers that Rachel is alive.

Notes

Hope everyone is doing okay today. If you haven't watched S3, spoilers follow.

In the first episode of S3, we found out that Rachel died. In the last episode, so did Tom's dad and Tex, so Tom decided to get off the ship and take care of his kids. In S4, somehow Tom is going to get back on the ship, but I propose instead that he finds Rachel (who is not ACTUALLY dead, she didn't even have a funeral, come on) and lives happily every after bye.

This is going to be 4-ish chapters. Title and lyrics from The Anchor by Bastille. Hope you enjoy.
Chapter 1

Let those fools be loud, 
let alarms ring out, 
'cause you cut through all the noise.

Let the days be dark, 
let me hate my work, 
'cause you cut through all the noise.

When Chandler steps off the end of the gangplank, he's met by a man in a suit who shakes his hand and introduces himself as their driver. The kids are already in the car, and as they walk over, the driver tells him that he's received special instructions from the president to take him to a certain safe house. Chandler doesn't much care, just wants a house with a bed and some reasonable amount of security. He can't shut down, not now that he's the absolute, absolute last thing his kids have, but he needs to at least... decompress.

He sits in the back, Sammy on his lap and Ashley curled up against his side, and they watch the city pass by through the car windows. None of them have been ready to talk, yet, though the kids do keep bursting into tears at random.

They drive out, far out of the city, trading buildings for trees and smooth pavement for bumps, the tires of the SUV crunching slowly over them. They must have driven five hours by the time they start up a road winding up the side of a steep, forested hill. Midway up there's a hidden driveway, and half a mile up that there's a big old house, sturdy-looking.

The vehicle comes to a stop, and Chandler helps the kids down off the high seats. As he's making sure the seat belt is free of the door and closing it, he hears from behind him, "Dad, someone's here!"

Hand moving automatically to the holster on his hip, Tom whips around and sees—he's dreaming. He fell asleep in the car and this is a dream. He looks around, up at the wind rustling the trees, hears the birdsong around him, tries to find confirmation that it's a dream.

Rachel had stopped to crouch down and introduce herself to the kids, but now she straightens up and walks toward him, and he needs to... pinch himself, right. He reaches for the inside of his bicep, the thinnest skin, and pinches hard, inhaling sharply at the pain.

When he looks up again, she's still coming toward him, and it must be a slow-motion dream because he has time to look at her. The last time he saw her was after that party, dressed to the nines, but he must not be dreaming about that. He can't quite place this, but she wore it more frequently, a plain top and jeans, little makeup and her hair half pulled back. The dream must be combining two different events, because he's seen her like this but not in a place like this. Actually, as he looks around again, he's certain he's never been here before. Well, dreams can do that.

She stops walking in front of him, where he's been standing stock-still for however long that took, and looks up at him, furrowing her brow. He stares back at her, wide-eyed, still trying to take in every tiny detail.

Finally, she says, very quiet, "Are you surprised to see me?" and Chandler shuts his eyes at the sound, feeling his chest tighten. Next, he feels her soft hand on his arm and opens his eyes as she says, "Tom," and he looks at her again. "I asked if you were surprised to see me."

"It's a dream," Tom says faintly. "Nothing ever surprises me in a dream."
She'd taken her hand away as soon as she touched his arm, and now she crosses her arms loosely over her chest and says, "I see." She looks at him a moment longer, then adds slowly, "Well, as far as I know it isn't a dream, but maybe you'll feel better after you eat."

It's hard to focus on dinner, but once everyone's stacking their dirty plates it becomes nearly impossible to believe this could be a dream, so he asks Rachel if they could go somewhere to talk. She leads him to the bottom of the backyard, where an old wooden porch swing is set up between two trees. The kids have come outside with them, but stay on the steps under the light, ostensibly giving them privacy.

As they sit down, he turns to face her, not wanting her out of his sight, while she simply faces forward until he says, "I thought it had to be a dream."

Then she looks at him seriously and nods.

"What—happened? I don't understand any of this."

"I haven't been privy to much," Rachel replies, looking out over the yard again. "I passed out in the hallway and woke up here. At first I thought, now, here's the worst case scenario, trapped somewhere with the enemy, about to be tortured, and so on. But no, someone—the president, maybe? Who is the president?—wanted to keep me safe. Not sure why, considering they haven't even given me access to a lab."

Chandler closes his eyes, trying not to laugh or sob or both, and says roughly, "I'm glad they did. Keep you safe."

He feels her shift on the swing before she says, "I asked them—I kept asking them if you were all right, if you knew. All they would say was that... it wasn't safe. They had to keep me safe. First and foremost. Bullshit, probably."

When he opens his eyes, she's turned just a little bit toward him, watching his face, and he presses his lips together, shaking his head. "We had to take the White House. If they'd known about you, they would have been sure to kill you. I'll find out who put you here and thank them myself."

Her eyes widen, her mouth dropping open slightly, and he can't bring himself to tell her yet. There's too much, and it's too painful. He looks away, shaking his head again, and she touches his arm, just as briefly as the first time.

Blinking quickly, trying to stave off another wave of grief, he looks back at her, holding his hands out, palm up, and saying, "Can I—?"

She tilts her head, not entirely sure what he's asking for, but shifts toward him, and he moves forward slowly, closing the gap and wrapping his arms around her waist, drawing her close to his chest and holding her. As soon as she realizes what he's doing she sobs, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck, and then he can't hold back his tears anymore, shaking silently in her arms and trying not to cry on her top.

It's still his fault—all of it, every second she suffered—but to have one godforsaken death reversed is more blessing than he's ever deserved, and his heart is breaking and stitching together at once.

As soon as he can pull away without embarrassing himself, he does, rubbing one hand over her back and then releasing her fully, turning his head away and drying his eyes on his shirt.

They go back inside almost immediately, and Rachel shuts herself in her room while Chandler helps his kids settle in, finding fresh clothes in the dressers and showering before settling into bed with wet
hair, both of them in Ashley's bed and Tom sitting with a hand on each of them until they fall asleep. They both cry a little more, and he sits there like a stone, aching with all he cannot heal.

When he comes out of the room, Rachel's door is still shut, so Tom turns off the lights and goes into his own room, closing the door behind him. There are guards outside, not that anyone would come up here for any reason other than... well, killing them all. He keeps his weapon close, finds it almost impossible to relax. His room is at the back of the house, and he stands at the window for a while, watching the yard and the woods around it.

Then he opens his door and crosses the upper floor to stand at the window over the front door. He moves silently, keeping the lights off, and a few minutes later he hears Rachel's door open and close, her light tread on the servants stair at the other end of the house. Sweeping his gaze over the front yard one more time, he turns away and walks down the main stair, following the soft glow of light into the kitchen, where Rachel is standing in front of the quietly hissing kettle, both hands on the counter.

"Hey," he says quietly, moving to the fridge.

"Hi," she says back, glancing up and then returning her attention to the kettle.

He looks into the fridge, thinks about heating up some milk, then looks back over at Rachel and says, "Could I have a cup?"

She smiles softly at that, eyeing him for a moment before saying, "Of course," and reaching up into the cupboard for another mug and the tea. She barely has to move to do it, and he steps over to her side, opening the cupboard again and admiring her immaculately organized tea station. Meeting her eyes, he returns her smile, then sits down on the far side of the kitchen island, leaning his forearms on the counter and watching her.

Her movements are precise and routine and everything about her is exactly the same. He wants to trace her outline with his hands, feel for himself that every part of her is where it belongs. He's held her in his arms and he knows that she is real, is solid, is nothing close to a ghost, but he's still having trouble believing it.

When she finally sits down across from him, wrapping her hands around her mug and staring down into it, he sighs and looks down at his own mug.

"Thank you," he says, and then, belatedly, "How are you?"

"I'm well," she says, nodding once and taking a sip of her tea. "It wasn't so serious a wound; I'm sure you've had worse."

"How are you otherwise?" he asks, and she looks up sharply before turning back to her tea. "Have you been alone here the whole time?"

"Yes," she says shortly. "I'm fine." Looking up again, she eyes his clothes, studies his face, her expression softening, and says, "What aren't you telling me?"

Stomach twisting, he bows his head and closes his eyes. "It's bad," he says, and when he opens his eyes Rachel has moved her hands to grip the edge of the counter, staring at him. "They—they took my kids. They—they killed my father." He keeps his eyes on her hands, watching her knuckles turn white. "It gets worse. Rachel, I'm so sorry. They killed Tex."

She gasps, and he lowers his head, closing his eyes again. "Are you sure?" she asks, and he nods.
"I watched—I saw it happen. I was there—I, I should have stopped it."

"No," she says, voice thick, and when he looks up she's dashing tears away from her eyelashes. "No, of course not. It wasn't your fault."

"It was," he says fiercely. "Tex, my kids, my father... Darien... you, Rachel. I couldn't stop any of it. Why—why couldn't I—" He's trying so hard to keep it together, but all he can do is press the heels of his hands against his eyes, try to hide his shame.

Her stool scrapes against the floor, and a moment later she's at his side, wrapping her arms around his chest and pressing her face to the side of his, saying just as fiercely into his ear, "It's not, it's not your fault, not any of it."

It is, he thinks, and instead of saying it he turns his head and reaches for her face, pressing his open mouth hard against hers. She makes a surprised sound in the back of her throat but doesn't pull away, presses forward instead, holding his face in both of her hands and pushing off the floor with her bare feet. Exhaling hard through his nose, he turns his body more, slides both hands down over her back to her thighs and lifts her onto his lap. She makes another sound, wrapping her arms around behind his neck, mouth still pressed to his, and he wants to hear every sound that throat can make, he needs it.

Arms tight around her waist, he drags his mouth across her cheek and groans into her ear, "God, Rachel, please," and she says back, breathless, "It's okay, it's okay." Kissing her again, he keeps one arm around her waist and braces the other on the other, pushing his stool back and getting to his feet. She shifts her legs on his waist, hooking her ankles together behind his back, and he stops there for a second, leaning his weight on the counter and panting against her mouth.

"Rachel," he groans again, and she says again, "It's okay." He carries her into the living room, drops her lightly onto the couch and stands, tugging off his shirt as she does the same with hers. Bracing one hand on the back of the couch, he lowers himself over her and presses his mouth to her neck, smooths his other hand over the curve of her waist, up her side and over her bicep, pulling back to press his lips to her knuckles, trace his eyes over her body.

There's an ugly scar, but she's otherwise whole, her neck and chest flushing, and he looks at her mouth, lips red and swollen, and then finally stares into her eyes, pupils dilated and eyelashes damp, and after only a second of that she pulls him back down to kiss her. She arches her back, pressing her chest up into his, and he fumbles at her bra, his hands shaking. When he gets it off and tosses it aside he groans, cupping her breasts in his hands and starting to kiss down her body.

He drops his knees down onto the carpet, unfastening her jeans and tugging them off before moving back between her legs, and he's about to shift forward when she says, "No, no, no," grasping at his shoulder. He looks up, horrified, and she tugs him back up, saying, "It's okay, it's okay, just not that, it's okay."

"Okay," he says, hovering over her, not touching her. "Are you sure? I don't have to—"

"No," she says, "please, please," and arches her back again, fingernails scratching through his hair, and when he kisses her again she surges up against him, no hesitation, and he reaches between her legs with his hand instead, undoes his jeans with his other hand and pushes inside her.

She shivers and he wraps his arms around her back, holding their bodies pressed flat together as he tucks his face into the curve of her neck, exhales against her skin. She shivers again and he kisses her neck, a lump swelling in his throat as he holds words inside, all his might going to keeping them in, staying silent.
A moment later she pushes against his shoulders and he braces his hands on the couch cushion, raises his upper body and kisses her before she can try to avoid his eyes. Then he ducks his head back down beside hers, trying to keep his groans low, only hearing hers because her mouth is right next to his ear. Quiet as they are, her moans and whimpers are incredible, the fact that she's alive to make them is incredible, and he loses a few tears to the couch cushions, hoping she won't notice.

When she gasps and tenses under him and shakes apart a moment later, the tears double, but he lets them fall to the fabric and squeezes his eyes shut tight, almost too unfocused to finish.

"Hey," Rachel says, rubbing a hand over the back of his head. He's stopped moving without realizing it, and she speaks quietly into his ear. "What do you need?"

He exhales hard, turns his face into her hair, and says, "You could talk."

She hums, pauses, says, "Dirty?" and he groans, starting to move again.

"You could just say 'dirty' thirty times," he jokes weakly, but she has other ideas.

Wrapping her arm around the back of his head, she holds on and presses her lips to his ear, speaking in this low, raspy tone he's never heard from her before. "Dirty," she says first, like it wasn't bad enough in her normal voice. "Dirty like you fucking me on a couch in a safehouse. Did you ever wonder what else I'd done on this couch? I guess you didn't have time to wonder if I'd ever shut the curtains and slid my hands down my pants, or even left the curtains open..."

He'd already been close, but it still doesn't take much to bring him over, and, God, that image will be burned into his mind now. Rolling off onto the couch beside her, he lays there for a minute, trying to actually picture it properly. Rachel's already sitting up, looking around for her bra, when he says roughly, "Did you?"

She looks back over her shoulder, smiling like she hadn't meant to smile at all, and eyes him for a moment before saying, "I think I'll leave that one a mystery."

They put their clothes back on and walk slowly up the stairs, one on either side of the wide tread, several feet between them. At the top they hear, "Dad?" from Ashley's room, and Chandler nudges Rachel toward his door, hoping she'll be there when he gets back.

The kids are awake and upset, unhappy in an unfamiliar place and longing for everything they've lost, and he stays and talks quietly with them until they're ready to close their eyes again, stays until they're asleep and then stands up, bone-weary, and walks back to his own room. Rachel is curled up in his bed, asleep, and he climbs in next to her, pulling her in close and wrapping his arms fully around her.

"Hey," she says thickly, fingers curling in the material of his shirt. "Okay?"

He says on an exhale, "Yeah," and smooths one hand over her hair. "Go back to sleep."

She shifts closer, her cheek pressed to his chest, and wraps one arm around his back before stilling, her breathing evening out and her muscles going lax. Closing his eyes, Tom takes a moment to memorize this feeling before letting sleep take him.

Some time later, he wakes abruptly from a nightmare, heart pounding, breath short, to find Rachel watching him quietly, stroking a hand over his hair. He glances around quickly, listens for a moment, and says, "What?"

"Nothing," she says softly. "Just a nightmare."
He stares at her, still listening as he tries to settle his body and convince it there's no danger to be found. The house is silent, and he blinks slowly, not looking away from her. When his breathing steadies, her eyes drop to his mouth and she shifts forward, her fingers trailing down from his hair to his jaw. She kisses him, and he groans low in his throat, nudging her onto her back, and a minute ago he was certain he'd just woken up but now he thinks he must still be asleep, finding her body under his, finding himself inside her again.

In the morning, his bed is empty, and he stares at the ceiling for a while, questioning reality. Everything smells of her, but he doesn't trust his nose, doesn't trust his mind—twenty-four hours ago she was dead, so he gets up and crosses the upper floor in a few quick strides, knocks on her closed bedroom door. She opens it freshly showered, a towel around her shoulders, and he stares at her for a minute.

"Sorry," he says. "I—can I—" and he reaches out with one hand, touches his fingers to her bare arm. Solid. Cool on the surface, warm underneath. He exhales and shakes his head. "Sorry."

"It's okay," she says softly, staying on her side of the threshold, bare feet flat on the floor as she tips her head to look up at him. She doesn't move, doesn't say anything else, and he drops his head, nodding and turning away. Her door clicks shut behind him and he forces himself to keep moving, stopping at Ashley's door and knocking, poking his head in and telling the kids to get up and dressed.
Chapter 2

*Bring me some hope*

*by wandering into my mind;*

*something to hold on to,*

*morning, noon, day, or night.*

Days pass, and they seem to have an unspoken agreement to pretend it never happened; at least, Rachel does, and Tom doesn't want to push her, doesn't want to risk any part of this. He's not exactly surprised, and he still has her there, he has his kids, so he takes it one minute at a time. They all do.

When they've been there a full week, the four of them are hanging out in the living room, each doing their own thing, and the front door opens. The guards usually knock, but not always, and Tom just looks up from his book, making eye contact with each of the others in turn. He's not exactly surprised when Sasha walks into the room, either, but he is tired.

"Well, isn't this domestic," she says, sweeping her gaze around the room and lingering for a moment on Rachel.

Before she even makes proper eye contact with Tom he's up and crossing the room, looking back and saying, "I'll be right outside the front door." He takes Sasha's arm as he passes her and hurries her back out onto the front steps, turning her to face him. "What are you doing here?" he says, and she can't even focus on his face, staring over his shoulder though she can't see into the house.

"I'm here—" she starts, glancing at his eyes and then back over his shoulder. "That's Rachel?"

Shifting his weight from one foot to the other, he crosses his arms over his chest and says, "You know it is."

"Yeah. Wow. You must be—ecstatic, right? It's like a miracle."

"Why are you here, Sasha?"

She blinks, firming her jaw, and meets his eyes directly. "I'm here to see if you've changed your mind."

"I get it. I can't blame you. I still think you're going to change your mind, and by then it might be too late, but... I get it. You want to hide out from the world with your kids and the woman you love. Who wouldn't."

Her tone is flat, unwavering, and his mouth goes abruptly dry. He tries to swallow, blinking ahead at the line of trees across the yard.
"I think you're going to regret it," she says, pushing up onto her feet and stepping down onto the ground, turning to face him and reaching for one of his hands, "but if you're going to regret that, at least—" She gestures with her free hand, back toward the living room. "—tell her. Have you told her?"

He shakes his head, but says, "There's nothing to—"

"Please." She winces, holding his hand gently in hers, and he wasn't expecting this. "Don't lie to yourself now. Tell her."

Looking over her shoulder, keeping his eyes on the woods, he blinks, and she sighs.

"I want you to be happy." Leaning in, she kisses him lightly on the cheek and starts to pull away.

As their hands separate, he says, "You won't stay for dinner?"

Already a few feet away, she says much louder than necessary, "You don't want two of us in one place Tom, I promise you!" She presses a kiss to her fingers and throws it to him while walking way, calling back even louder, "Love you!"

That was absolutely intentional, and he sighs, staying out on the steps a little longer and watching the woods, trying not to think.

Walking back into the living room, he smiles reassuringly for the kids, makes glancing eye contact with Rachel and tries to convince himself he isn't a coward as he turns away into the kitchen to start dinner. It's no good, anyway; she follows him in and leans against the kitchen island, watching him.

"The children assure me that woman is on our side," she says, and he turns slowly to face her, his stomach dropping. She looks down, focuses on her hands there on the countertop.

"Yes," he says. "Rachel, I'm sorry. She was on the ship with us. She's safe."

"Never mind." She fakes a smile down at her hands, and he can't move forward, can't touch her. "I did wonder why you wouldn't want her in the house with us."

"Did the kids say anything else?"

She frowns, shaking her head.

"Sasha—that's her name—Sasha and I have been... friends... a long time. She—"

"'Friends',' Rachel echoes under her breath, making air-quotes with her fingers, and Tom stops.

"Do you have something to say?"

"No." She smiles again, slightly less fake and slightly more humourless. "She's very beautiful," and then, after he just stares at her for a moment, "You can be honest with me."

"What should I be honest about, Rachel?"

"Friends?"

"Yes. We're friends."

"Like you and I are friends?"
He smiles back, just as humourless. "Not for a long time."

Pressing her lips together, she nods and taps her fingers on the countertop, silent for a while, and just when he's about to get back to making dinner she says, "There must be other safe houses, don't you think?" and his stomach drops all the way down to his feet.

"Sure," he says blankly. "Of course. We've intruded, I'm—I'll just tell the kids—"

"No," she says quickly, "I didn't mean—I just don't want to get in your way."

"Rachel." He stares at her, and she stares down at her hands, tapping more anxiously now. "You have a right to your own space. If you want us to leave—"

She shakes her head back and forth, reaching up a second later to swipe at her eyes, and Tom can't stop himself from stepping forward, wrapping his arms around her and holding her gently. "Sorry," she whispers, gripping at the sides of his shirt. "I don't want to be alone, I'm sorry."

"I'm here," he says. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Is that why she came?" Rachel asks, sniffling. "To ask you to go back?"

He grunts, a kind of confirmation, and she takes a step back, looking up at him and swiping messily at her eyes again. His fingers twitch but he leaves them at his sides, knowing that if he touches her now it will be too much.

"You said no."

"I left for a reason," he says quietly, holding her gaze, "and then I got here." Blinking, he lets his eyes drop, studies her lips and reaches for her waist but doesn't bend. "You don't want me to go."

She stares up at him, and he wants to believe she was just about to shake her head when Sammy runs in calling for Dad and she takes an immediate step back, turning and finding another corner of the kitchen to be busy in.

After dinner, after bedtime, there's a soft knock on Tom's bedroom door and he opens it to find Rachel looking very serious. He waves her in and she steps to the centre of the room, turning to him and solemnly raising her chin.

"What if you change your mind?" she asks, and he steps past her to sit down on the edge of the bed, gesturing for her to sit beside him. Of course, she doesn't—just turns to face him and keeps that serious face on.

"What's worrying you?"

"Nothing," she says defensively; he gives her a look and she turns her face away, eyes fixed on the corner of the bed. "I just want to know what will happen to me if you go."

"That's not in question," he says, and she narrows her eyes, lips pressed hard together. "Rachel. You can't think—I would never just leave you here. You know that, don't you?"

She closes her eyes, shaking her head vaguely. "You didn't even know I was here. You didn't know what you were getting yourself into."

Closing his own eyes, Tom slumps forward, letting his head hang down. He's so tired. He never expected this to be easy, but he never imagined it would be this hard. He doesn't know what to say,
what to do, how to make this work.

After a moment, he feels Rachel's hands move through his hair and slumps further. She takes another step forward, cradling his head against her belly, and says softly, "I don't mean to be difficult."

"I know," he replies, keeping his eyes closed. "I know that. I promise I'm trying."

She doesn't say anything, just smooths her hand down over the back of his head, keeps stroking it as Tom raises his hands to wrap around her waist, lifts his chin and turns his face to press the side of it to her belly, and then wraps his arms around her waist, holding her tighter. They stay like that for a while, Rachel off-balance and letting Tom hold her weight, her hands braced on his shoulders.

That's peace, there without a need for words and her in his arms, but that never lasts.

For now, Rachel shifts her weight back a bit, sliding her hands down under his chin and moving back enough to bend down and kiss him, and he cranes his neck up toward her, her cool fingers on his cheeks and his hands splaying over her back. He keeps his hands innocent, part of him worried that he pushed last time and this time needs to hang back. Rachel is tugging at his shirt a moment later, tossing it on the floor and then pulling her own off and ditching it too.

'Hanging back' is seeming like more and more of a bad idea, especially when Rachel nudges at Tom's shoulders and flicks a hand at him, indicating for him to move back and up the bed. She turns and switches off the overhead light as he does so, and he grunts a little in displeasure, trying to make out her shape in the dark as she bends to remove her pants. He shoves his own jeans off his legs and she crawls up the bed to meet him.

Reaching for her face, he draws her in until he can kiss her again, threading his fingers through her hair and cradling the back of her head. She braces one hand on his chest, sitting on her heels for a moment and kissing him deeply before pushing up on her knees and moving to straddle his waist. He can see her outline and the glint of her eyes as she looks up at him, meeting his eyes and letting a beat pass.

His hands land on her thighs and he inhales carefully through his nose, his eyes widening as he watches her watching him, as her eyes drop and the corner of her mouth ticks up and she finally moves to take him inside her.

Later, he falls straight into a nightmare, his hands covered in blood as he tries to grasp Rachel's hands, her arms, anything, the blood slick and sliding. He has to get a grip on her or she will die, but it's hopeless. He can't do it.

He's repeating her name desperately, pleading with God and the devil to let him save her, when he wakes up—abruptly, heart pounding, and there she is in front of his face, her eyes open and darting as she says, "Hey, it's okay, it's okay," one hand flat on his cheek.

He blinks and there are tears and he doesn't know if his face is already wet, doesn't know how long he's been crying and how vulnerable she's seen him, but he blinks again and there are more tears and he can't stop them.

"It's okay," she says again, soothingly. "It's okay."

It's really not, but all he can do is wrap his arms around her, pull her in close to his chest and close his eyes, focused on the solidity of her and the answering tightness of her arm around his back. "I'm sorry," he whispers, and she shifts even closer.

"Why?" she says quietly back. "Why are you sorry?"
He can't answer that, can't hear her tell him again that it wasn't his fault, so he just hunches his back, presses his lips to the top of her head, and she sighs.

In the morning, his bed is empty, and they pretend it never happened.

Other than the stomach ache this gives him, it's sort of okay. The difficult relationship they have in private remains private, and around the kids Rachel is just Rachel. After Tom asks the guards for age-appropriate school books, they each take a kid and work through them together. Rachel is kind and gentle and brilliant and the kids slowly but surely fall in love with her.

It's almost okay, almost normal—or it would be, if it didn't hurt so much.

They take it one minute at a time, one lesson, one long walk through the woods at a time. When she was here alone, Rachel worked a large section of the yard into a vegetable garden, and the kids are thrilled at the opportunity to help weed and watch the babies grow. The more active they are, the less they cry and the better they sleep, and Tom will gladly take all the help he can get.

A week passes. He counts by Sundays, and tries not to count the times Rachel knocks lightly on his door—once, twice, and another week has passed. There's no pattern to it that he can see, not that he lies in bed on the nights she doesn't show, staring at the ceiling and trying to figure out if he's done something very right or very wrong.

A month. Six weeks, and Rachel stops coming to his bed, stops coming down for breakfast. Her behaviour doesn't change, otherwise, and all he feels able to do is keep an eye on her, pretend everything is fine the same way she does. She's there for the kids, and Tom is secondary. It's fine.

Two months from the day they arrived, Kara comes to see them.
Massive apologies for the very long delay. The good news is a) I will now post once a week until the story is complete, b) the story will be 6 chapters total instead of 4. If you are still here and reading... I love you. For best results I would reread the first two chapters but that's just me.

Let the parties end
when we lose our friends,
'cause you cut through all the noise.
Let the years roll on
'til the static comes
'cause you cut through all the noise.

The kids greet Kara at the door, hugging her waist and starting to chatter immediately. Tom lets them drag her into the living room while he goes to the kitchen for glasses of juice and mugs of coffee, and when he comes back they're in the middle of a story he can't follow. Setting the drinks down on the coffee table, he slides Kara's coffee in front of her and offers an understanding smile before sitting down at the other end, just observing.

The kids are all lit up, talking with their hands and bouncing on the cushions, and he can't decide whether he's relieved that they seem happy or guilt-stricken that a simple visitor is rare enough to pump them up this much.

They do seem happy, though. Considering the four of them have been living here for a while, mostly half-following curriculum stolen out of the nearest abandoned middle school and gardening, they have a surprising number of stories to tell Kara. Stories about baking (messes) in the kitchen, about tearing through the woods collecting leaves and flowers and, when they're brave enough, insects.

Stories about Rachel picking caterpillars off her vegetables and gently relocating them, including one in a homemade terrarium in Sam's room.

That's the other thing. They adore Rachel, and he can't help but feel a twist in his stomach at that. The fact that they seem happy, living with the two of them—that this weird blended family is working, and yet...

When they've talked out some of their pent-up excitement, Tom allows them to take Kara on a tour of the garden if they promise to go straight up to their rooms after.

They are all too happy to comply, instructing Kara as to where she can and cannot step, and showing her some of their favourite vegetables. Every word out of their mouths is an echo of Rachel.

Standing on the far side of the garden, Tom looks up at the window of Rachel's room that is visible from here. The curtains are drawn, no sign that they've been disturbed since she went to bed last night, and it's now a couple hours past noon. Kara will go up to speak with her when they're done down here, and Tom is more than ready for the vague dread of waiting to be over.
They all tromp back inside, and Tom watches the kids up the stairs and into their rooms, then offers Kara a fresh cup of coffee, and when that's made, finally sits himself down on the couch.

"How are you?" he asks Kara, and she gives him a look.

"We're fine," she replies dryly, "or I wouldn't have come." Waving toward the stairs, she adds, "They seem really happy. I'm guessing you'd attribute most of that to her."

He opens his mouth, not even sure what he'll say, but Kara waves him off.

"They obviously love her a lot. What about you?"

His heart skips at least one beat, but she isn't asking that "How are the two of you getting along?"

Tom draws in a deep breath, mostly to mask that shot of misplaced adrenaline, and settles back in the couch. "Fine. We stay focused on the kids."

"What—" Kara starts, tone sharp, before taking a breath in and saying more calmly, "What does that mean, Tom."

He tips his head back, narrowing his eyes at the ceiling, not that tears are stinging the backs of his eyes but more as like a preventative measure. When he looks back down, he says, "She doesn't want to talk. I'm giving her space."

"So you've tried to talk to her."

He looks away, pressing his lips together, but doesn't shake his head.

Kara was the one unlucky enough to knock on his door at 3am and tell him that Rachel had been shot, the one to drive him around the city from morgue to morgue looking for her body. The one who had to sit with him in the parked car when they'd run out of places to check, while he stared out the front windshield in silence. She was the only one who had any idea what Rachel's death had done to him.

"I can't risk losing her again," he says finally. "I'm not going to push her."

"Right. Okay." She takes another deep breath in, then blows it out with some force. "It's a good thing I'm here." Off his look, she adds, "Don't worry, I'm not going to say anything. I just want to see where she's at."

"Right," he says back, not entirely convinced.

"Now, as for the reason I'm here," she says quickly. "We're securing a house within shopping and school distance from St. Louis. Of course, you can stay here, but the benefits are freedom, independence, putting the kids back in school. I'll just... go talk to Rachel and figure out if we need to secure two houses."

She raises her eyebrows and he sighs, nodding. Once she's gone up the stairs he goes into the kitchen to refill his mug, then sits back down on the couch, not straining his ears and not counting the minutes and definitely not on the edge of the seat for the entire... hour and twenty-six minutes Kara is upstairs.

When Rachel's door finally opens, he knows by listening that Kara walks out alone and shuts the
door again behind her. She goes to each of the kids' rooms, then brings them downstairs and asks if it would be all right to take them into the woods for a walk, meeting Tom's eyes and nodding him upstairs at the same time.

He smiles for the kids' benefit, though his stomach sinks with dread, and sends them off, before standing at the bottom of the staircase and staring up. Worst case scenario, she tries to kick them out again, more successfully this time. Right? Worst case scenario, she decides she never wants to see him again. Okay, that's pretty bad.

Even if he wanted to delay the inevitable, it's not exactly possible here, so he climbs the stairs slowly and opens the door. She's sitting on the edge of her neatly made bed, her feet dangling only a hair from the floor. Her shoulders are hunched, her hands braced on either side of her legs, and she looks small, especially when he walks around to stand in front of her. He's looming over her, something he tries never to do, but sitting next to her could just make this worse. Whatever this is.

"Hey," he says, and she glances up in acknowledgement but doesn't smile. "You needed—?"

She nods, swinging her feet slightly before standing up and walking the small distance available to her, so that he is by one end of the bed and she's by the other, and they can face each other across six or seven feet of bare floor. She still looks small, if not more so with perspective and distance and bare feet. Not that it matters.

"Is it about," he begins, after she doesn't seem to want to start, "our living arrangements? I don't want you to think there's anything you can't ask for. Whatever you need, if you don't want to be alone or if you do want to now, as long as we can talk about it, solutions can be reached. If—" He's rambling, but she just watches him do it, staring at him across the room. Maybe silence is the way. Raising both palms in a helpless gesture, Tom forces himself to stop and wait.

They stand there, staring at each other, and Rachel waits to be sure he's done speaking, then waits some more, then opens her mouth as if to speak and closes it again, clasping her hands in front of her and taking a deep breath. Another stretch of silence, and then Rachel takes another breath, straightening her back, and says, "I'm pregnant."

Oh. His eyes drop to focus on her belly, her hands held together just in front, and he blinks several times, reminding himself to breathe. His stomach twists, and he closes his eyes, brows drawing together. "Rachel..." he says. "I'm so sorry."

When he opens his eyes, she's staring at him, frozen in place, expression stark. As soon as their eyes meet she blinks and her gaze falls a few inches. She rocks back on her heels, hands clasping even tighter, and says, "Right. Of course."

"Rachel—"

"That's all I needed to say." She turns, showing him her back and fiddling with something he can't see. "You may go."

He could almost laugh, if he didn't feel like his stomach was seconds from turning inside out. "Rachel, please. Just sit down and talk to me."

"We talked. You made yourself very clear."

"No. I didn't. Please, Rachel. Please, please." In another time, another place, he might care that he's practically begging, but not here. Not now.

She flicks one hand and turns, keeping her eyes fixed on the floor as she steps over to the bed and
sits down. He exhales hard, closing his eyes again briefly and moving to sit with a significant gap left between them, half-turned to face her.

He stares for a moment, running his eyes over her, and she stares at her hands, head bowed. "Rachel," he says finally, "I'm sorry that I was irresponsible. I'm sorry that you never asked for this. I... I'll be with you every step of the way, no matter what. You know that. But I'll be happy to do it. I'll be—I—please know that this is the furthest thing from a disappointment for me."

She reaches up to swipe at her eyes and Tom has to force himself not to reach for her. "You're going to feel obligated, regardless of what you say now. Of course you'll love the baby, but... I didn't want to stick you with me."

He could laugh, again—in another world, another universe. Nodding slowly, he says, "Okay, if you feel like you'd be stuck, I understand. We'll work something out."

She turns her head, staring hard at him, and after a second he smiles a little. She presses her lips together, rolling her eyes. "I didn't mean that."

"It would be okay if you did," he says gently. "This has all been... crazy, I know. We've taken over this house. If you wanted—"

"I don't want that," she says, quiet but firm, looking down at her lap.

He lets that pass, keeping his massive sigh of relief as close to silent as he can manage, and stares down at his own lap. Part of him wants to just confess, tell the truth and relieve himself of this burden, but she's going through enough today and he won't put more on her.

Instead, when the silence has drawn out long enough, he says, "What should I tell the kids?"

When he glances over, Rachel's staring wide-eyed at the wall opposite.

"I know it's not... true, but I don't think there's any way to make the truth age-appropriate. I can tell them we're... dating?" "Dating," she mouths, making those air quotes again, and he can't help but smile.

"You won't show for a little while, so we could introduce the relationship now and the pregnancy later. Give a little buffer."

She looks at him for a minute. "Sounds like an operation." She pauses, and opens her mouth once in an aborted attempt before managing to say, "I'm sorry to make you lie."

"You're not making me do anything." He pauses, then adds, "They might... ask questions."

"For instance?"

"I'm guessing Sammy will want to know when we're getting married."

She snorts, then goes silent for a moment before adding, "We've been here two months."

"A valid adult point."

"Right."

They fall silent, then he says, "We have been here two months. I'm not expecting anything from you."
She smiles a little, looking back over at him. "You've been very kind," she says, "but maybe you should."

He goes still, staring down at his hands, open in his lap.

"What, Tom?"

"I can't," he says. "I'm terrified to."

Finally, she closes the space between them, getting up and sitting down beside him, wrapping her arm around his back and leaning into his arm, slipping her other hand into one of his. "I'm right here," she says quietly, her body soft against his side, but solid. "I'm not going anywhere."

"You can say that," he says, voice low, "but you can't know it."

Slipping her hand further into his, she curls her fingers around the side of it and squeezes. "Okay, love. You're right. But I'm here now."

He shifts his arm, waiting for her to make room and then wrapping it around her waist, turning and wrapping the other one around as well, holding her tight. "I love you," he says, when he can't keep it in a second longer. "I love you. I love you."
When the kids come back and Kara leaves, they sit them down in the living room and tell them that they're 'dating.' The kids trade a look.

"That doesn't make any sense," Ashley says. "You're with us all the time and you never leave the house. How could you be dating?"

Good question. "You guys go to bed really early," Tom says. "And you can date someone without going to restaurants all the time."

"So you date in the house?" Sammy asks.

"Yep."

"Dating is just a word for when adults who like each other spend time together," Rachel adds.

"You like each other?" Sammy says incredulously.

"Obviously," Ashley says, rolling her eyes. "They probably kiss each other a lot, too."

"Eww," Sammy says, scrunching up his nose and staring accusingly at his dad.

"Sorry, bud. She's right about that one."

Sitting back, Sammy crosses his arms, still staring. "Are you getting married?"

"Don't be stupid," Ashley says. "Where would they get married?"

"Ashley, apologize."

"Sorry. But you're not getting married, right?"

"We would tell you if we were," he says, then adds when they give him a look, "No, we aren't getting married. If anything changes, you'll be the first to know."

They aren't exactly thrilled with that promise, but Tom doesn't know what more to say to convince them. The kids avoid eye contact, their postures stiff and unyielding, and then Rachel slides forward in her seat and rests her forearms on her knees.

"Do you mind my living here?" she asks, and almost before she's gotten the words out, both kids are staring at her, horrified.

"No!"

"Of course not!"

Rachel smiles. "Okay, well, I know you and I are connected—" She gestures in the space between them, like there's a line from her to both of them. "—and you guys are connected to your dad—" She
gestures to that space, as well. "—but now your dad and I are connected as well." Now the space between her and Tom, catching Tom's eye as she does it, then looking back at the kids. "Does that make any sense?"

The kids have softened considerably, and they watch Rachel and Tom thoughtfully, so Tom reaches out and carefully takes Rachel's hand, holding it in his own and letting them fall to rest on the couch between them. The kids watch that, too.

"So," Ashley says, her eyes locked on their hands. "We're all linked."

"Yes," Rachel says. "Well, if you'd like to be."

"You've learned a lot from Rachel, haven't you?" Tom jumps in.

Sammy says, very seriously, "Rachel is the smartest person in the world."

Ashley, showing the restraint of her years, adds, "She does know everything."

"What else is she good at?"

Rachel tugs on his hand at that, turning to him and hissing, "Tom," but the kids are already talking.

"Gardening."

"Obviously. Also the caterpillar thing." A shudder from Ashley.

"I like her stir fry."

"Yeah, and her smoothies are really good too. Oh, and she always smells good."

"She gives good hugs, and sometimes good piggy back rides when she feels like it."

"She's fun to hike with because she'll hold your hand and explain things and pick up bugs and offer to put them on your hand but only if you really want to and she never makes fun of you if you're scared."

"So," Tom cuts in. "Do you think it's okay for me to like Rachel?"

That gets enthusiastic agreement, before a slight confusion at what they've really agreed to. In the end, though, the kids hug both Rachel and Tom tightly and run to wash up for dinner, and the issue is largely forgotten.

Upstairs after dinner, Tom closes the bedroom door most of the way behind him, moving to sit on the end of the bed and reach for his shoes. He doesn't quite make it, stopping with his elbows on his knees and letting his hands and head hang for a minute. Once he does actually manage to untie and remove his shoes, he's about to tug off his socks when the door pushes in a little and Rachel pokes her head through. She catches his eyes and smiles, barely, the softest curve of her lips, and he gives her something similar in return as she steps through the gap and puts her back to the door, easing it closed until the latch clicks.

She stays there, tipping her head back against the wood but keeping her eyes on his, and he just stares in return for a moment. Rachel's wearing a tank top and pyjama pants and there's something to the set of her face now, something like the outfit is vulnerable, yes, but she isn't presenting it to him with bravado, with a wall up. She seems vulnerable, almost, but he thinks he must be reading too far into it.
Then she steps forward, taking slow but measured paces to cross the floor and stand right in front of Tom, not stopping at a respectable distance but smoothing her hands over his shoulders and up his neck as she steps in again and cradles his head against her belly.

He can't cry now. He can't. But he raises his hands to hold her waist, gentle enough but pressing in feel the slight give of flesh under cloth, and he inhales deeply and exhales a sigh.

"Is it okay if we just sleep?" she says, and his response is automatic.

"Yeah," he says, voice slightly rough. "Of course, sweetheart."

A second later she whispers, "I'm sorry," and he pulls back to look up at her, surprised.

"What? What are you talking about?"

She half-smiles, half-winces, closing her eyes and shaking her head. "I don't know."

"Okay, baby," he says, smoothing his hands up her back. "It's okay."

She looks down at him, her fingers coming up to trace along his jaw and linger at the corners, thumbs caressing the curve there. When she leans down to kiss him, it's so soft he feels a shiver race down his spine, tipping his chin up to meet her. Pressing forward, she lets her hands curl around the back of his head, fingers brushing through his hair as she kisses him so incredibly slowly that he eventually forgets to breathe and breaks it, pressing his forehead to her chin and panting against her neck. She holds him and laughs, and he gets to his feet, wrapping his arms around her fully and holding her for another minute.

Bending to kiss her again, he says, "I love you," against her lips and when he straightens she beams up at him, so bright that he can't do anything but stare at her and then kiss her again.

He goes to change and finds her, this time, sitting on the edge of the bed instead of asleep in the middle. With the opening of the bathroom door she'd turned, and now she looks and asks him, "Do you have a side?"

He did have one, with Darien, but he doesn't want to bring her ghost into this. "I think the way we've been sleeping is fine. You stay on the right, if you want, and me on the left."

With that, Rachel climbs on top of the bedcover, lying on her back on her side of the bed, so Tom shrugs and follows her lead, so that they're both flat on their backs in the middle of the bed on top of the covers.

"Not sleepy yet?" he guesses.

"It's been a day," she says back, and holds her hand up beside her, between them.

Working on instinct, Tom holds his hand up, too, and they brush palms then align, palm-to-palm and Rachel's fingers closing and carrying very easily to her side of the bed, to rest on her belly. Tom doesn't mind losing his hand too much. He glances to his hand's new home and thinks about that wonderful, marvellous area of her body.

"How are you feeling?" he asks.

"I am perfectly well," she tells the ceiling lightly.

"Morning sickness?"
"Only what falls within normal ranges."

He only has her hand to squeeze, so he does, and she looks over, watching him when he says again, "How are you feeling?"

"You know what," Rachel says instead, "I just had the thought to wonder if 'dating' such as it is necessarily includes sleeping in the same bed."

"Rachel," he says dryly, "in a month you'll be pregnant, so I somehow see far more of an issue in not sharing the bed." He manages to shift closer, just close enough to rest his chin on her shoulder and say, into her ear, "How are you feeling?"

It doesn't take much, now—she rolls a little toward him and he rolls a little toward her. She tucks herself against his chest and he wraps his arms around her.

"I'm fine, Tom," she says quietly, there where it's safe and her face is hidden and she can speak. "No one likes to vomit, and here we have to do it one to three times a day every day for... statistics vary. So it's unpleasant, and I'm tired, because the fetus is taking things like nutrients and calories that I used to use—" She seems to direct that last down at her belly, but affectionately. "—but other than that, I am fine."

He debates the wisdom of his next question for a moment before asking, "Happy?"

She tips her head down further, so he has no idea of her expression, but when she says, "Yes," he can hear the smile in it. "I'm happy. I never expected this, especially... well, I thought I might not ever see you again. I never expected that it would go like this. And I know you apologized for that. But this is the way it is. As long as you are willing to keep on, as long as you—care for me... I'm happy."

Air fills his chest, or so it feels, like his whole body expands every time he takes a careful inhale. His eyes are damp but not leaking, which he has to count for a victory at this point. He wraps his arms tighter and drops his head, trying to reach to kiss the top of her head. "That makes me happy," he says roughly.

They fall asleep on top of the covers; Tom sleeps through the night; when he wakes up, Rachel is there beside him.
It's been a long time since Rachel could choose whether or not to be alone. On the ship, she had about ten square feet of space, and guards, plus people everywhere other than her bed. When they brought her here, she enjoyed the enforced solitude for about a day—just until the novelty wore off. Then she'd never been more alone, other than perhaps when she'd lived with her father.

Even when Tom had arrived with the children, that hadn't been her choice, and the house hadn't been hers anymore.

Waking up in his bed, though—reaching for him with one hand before she's fully awake, finding his arm and moving closer instinctively—that's absolutely, one hundred percent her choice, and it feels altogether different.

"Morning," he says gruffly, and she shifts closer still, tucked up against his side.

"Good morning." She keeps her head down, eyes on her hand as she smooths it over his t-shirt, palm stroking over soft cotton and hard muscle underneath. "How did you sleep?"

He huffs a little laugh and she does look up then, meeting his eyes and then pushing up off the bed to kiss him, leaning over him and brushing her hand across the stubble on his jaw.

When she pulls away and meets his eyes again, hers are damp and she blinks at him for a moment, then he says, "God, you're beautiful," and she drops her chin, resting her forehead against his cheek.

"Don't be silly," she says. "I need to brush my teeth."

"I need to shave. Am I still beautiful?"

She grins, but stifles it before she lifts her head to narrow her eyes at him thoughtfully, looking over his face while her thumb absently strokes his lower lip. "You'll do," she says, flicking her eyes back up to his and then kissing him again, settling her body on top of his and combing her fingers through his hair.

Before they can get lost in the moment, there's a banging on the door and Rachel jumps, rolling back onto the bed and sitting up.

"Dad!"

"Come in, Ashley," Tom says as he sits up beside her, resting one hand at the base of her neck in reassurance.
Flinging the door open, Ashley starts to step inside but stops short when her eyes find Rachel, staring for a second and then looking back at her dad and saying, "Sammy's throwing up."

Speaking of... Rachel's stomach twists and she moves behind Tom to the edge of the bed closest to the bathroom. "Go ahead," she says, "I'm just going to..." and rushes to the toilet, dropping to her knees and vomiting bile.

When she's finished, she heads back to her room and lies down on her bed for just one quick minute, falling asleep instantly and waking up some time later when the bed dips with Tom's weight beside her, his eyes calm and steady on hers. Blinking slowly, she reaches for him and he gives her one of his hands, using the other to stroke over her hair.

"Sorry," she says, her free hand coming up to rub at her eyes. "Sammy okay?"

"Low fever," he says, hand cradling the back of her head, thumb smoothing over her cheek. "I'm not worried, but we could certainly use your expert opinion once you're up for it."

She squeezes his hand, nods, and he smiles at her.

"What do you need?"

"I need, um..." Rolling onto her back, she squints up at the ceiling. "A shower."

"Hmm." He's still smiling when she glances back at him, his hand shifting to rest flat on her belly. "Sammy's back in bed, Ashley's reading."

"You wanna join me?" It's half slurred, and she shakes her head, blinks hard and pushes herself up to sit. "I mean—"

He leans in, cups the side of her face and presses a kiss to her cheek. "I got it. If you can make it to the shower unsupported, I'm in."

She goes first to the sink, brushing the sour taste out of her mouth and watching in the mirror as Tom strips down to his underwear and turns on the shower, testing the water until he's satisfied and then turning back and meeting her eyes in the mirror, toothbrush halfway between her mouth and the sink. Distractedly, she rinses the toothbrush and her mouth, then wipes her mouth slowly with a hand towel, her eyes still on him as she sets the towel down and leaves her hands on the counter.

Tom crosses over to her, standing behind her and placing his hands over hers on the sink, and they meet eyes in the mirror again. Tom frowns, and Rachel drops her eyes, looking at herself in the mirror instead.

"Change your mind?" he asks, and she smooths her hands down over her top, tugging down on the hem.

"I'm not sure."

Gently turning her until she's facing him, he holds her face in his hands and looks into her eyes, then pulls her in and wraps his arms around her. "I can just go."

She's silent a moment, then says, "No. It just, it seems easier for you."

"What, this?" He steps back and gestures to his nudity and Rachel nods, so he puts up one hand to count off. "One, I'm a man—that one's huge. Two, I'm Navy. Three, I have small children. Nudity has kind of become a nonissue."
Rachel smiles a little, reluctantly, still pretty freaked out.

Again, he steps toward her, cradling her jaw and kissing her. While they kiss, he smooths his hands down over her torso and up under the hem of her top, fingers tracing over her belly, onto her back. When she’s some notion of relaxed, he says against her lips, "Can I take this off?"

She nods, and he does, and kisses her again. His hands rest on her waist, then smooth down to the small of her back and up, slowly, to cover the whole of her back. He reaches the nape of her neck and continues up into her hair a bit, scratching lightly at her scalp, then moves back down and touches her bra—and the tension returns instantly.

"What about this?" Rachel hesitates, and Tom says, "You can say no."

"No, it's—I want to."

He waits a second longer, then unclasps it, moving back just enough to allow her to slip the straps down off her arms, letting it drop to the floor, and he shifts forward again, palms gliding over her back. She clings to him, and he brushes her hair back, pressing his lips to the skin just below her hairline.

Exhaling shakily, she nudges him away. "Go," she says, nodding to the shower. "I'm being ridiculous."

"You aren't," he says, turning away and walking back to the shower. "But you can be." He drops his underwear and steps into the shower, and she unties her pyjama pants, letting them fall and pushing her underwear off her hips, stepping out of them and joining him in the shower. When he feels her behind him he turns, stepping out of the spray and taking her into his arms, ducking his head and pressing his lips to her ear. "You can be as ridiculous as you want. I'll still love you."

She exhales again, hands sliding up over the wet skin of his back, and says, "Really?"

"Really," he says, and steps back with her into the spray, both of them closing their eyes as the water beats down on them.

"I just don't like being difficult," she says a moment later, "but I can't seem to stop."

"Let's try something easy, then," he murmurs, nudging her back a bit and guiding her gently to turn until her back is against his front. He wraps one arm around her waist and slides his other hand down between her legs and she gasps, her eyes springing open. "Okay?" he asks, and she makes a sound she can't name, leaning back against him. "Rachel."

"Yes, yes."

He holds her up with one arm and touches her with the other, and he's right, this is as easy as it gets. When she comes, and sags against him, he doesn't let her slip, not even a little.

Then she turns, pressing one hand to his chest and walking him back until his back hits the wall, and his eyes widen, as if he wasn't expecting this. She smiles, slipping one hand up into his hair and the other one down to wrap around him. He traps a groan and starts to tip his head back against the wall, but her hand is there and she gently urges his head down until she can look him in the eye, and she holds him there as her smile grows.

She wants to see his face, while she works him up, and he seems to get into the game, fighting his eyes closing and trying to keep his locked on hers. He closes them when he comes, and she presses kisses to his cheek and jaw, rubbing the back of his neck and kissing him properly when he's able.
They bathe and wash their hair, and then Rachel reaches for her towel and dries herself, stepping out and moving toward the sink while wrapping it around her torso. It's only when she turns back to the shower that she sees Tom standing there, dripping, with a slightly forlorn expression on his face.

"Oops," she says. "Didn't think that one through, did we." She glances around quickly, finding the towel she uses for her hair hanging from a hook on the other side of the bathroom and offering it to him. It's comically small, and she presses her lips together hard in an attempt to keep from laughing, but once he sees her face he allows a small smile and she starts giggling.

Walking back over to him, she braces a hand on his chest and pushes up on her toes to kiss him, though she has to break the kiss after a moment to laugh. "Sorry," she says, resting back on her heels and smiling up at him. "I'd better fetch some clothes from your room so you don't accidentally traumatize the children."

He smiles back, wryly, and takes another kiss before releasing her to go out into her room and dress in jeans and a long-sleeved tee. Towel around her shoulders, Rachel peeks out into the hall before tiptoeing down it, carefully dodging the kids' partially opened doors and slipping into Tom's room. At the dresser she pulls out jeans, a t-shirt, underwear and socks, not taking the time to really choose his outfit, a joy she'll save for another day. Arm full, she tiptoes back and closes her room door behind her before walking into the bathroom and handing him his clothes. She kisses him again, then goes to sit on the end of the bed to wait.

Her wait is, of course, interrupted by a knock on the bedroom door. "Rachel?" a small voice asks, distinctly Ashley's. "Is my dad in there?"

Crossing the room in a few long strides, Rachel opens the door just enough to talk, since she didn't bother to shut the bathroom door. "Hi, love," she says, smiling. "Your dad just wanted to use my shower, but he'll be right out. What do you need?"

Ashley smiles back, though she still looks slightly disturbed. Before she can reply, Tom's hand covers Rachel's on the inside of the door and he pulls the door open the rest of the way, wrapping one arm around Rachel's waist as he leans against the door.

"Hi, Ash—sweetie, what's wrong?"

Her face is twisting up a little more, though she tries her hardest to hold onto her smile. "I just didn't know where you were," she says. "I thought you were probably in here but you never have been before so I felt like I didn't know where you were."

In one move, he releases the door, gently detaches from Rachel, and steps forward to hug Ashley. "I'm sorry, honey. We can leave the bedroom door open when we're in the bathroom, maybe that would make it more obvious where we are."

Ashley nods, stepping back and wiping at what might just be damp eyes. She's okay, and she smiles, at Tom and Rachel both, and they smile back at her.

"What did you need, love?"

"Oh, yeah. Can we have lunch? I'm kind of starving."

"Absolutely," Tom says, stepping back into the doorway. "Can you check if your brother feels like eating, and wait for us downstairs? Rachel and I need to talk about something real quick."

Rachel misses Ashley's reply to that as Tom swings the door shut, and she's turning toward the bed feeling the vague sense of dread that comes with 'we need to talk.' She knows better, she really does
—and yet.

Sitting on the end of the bed, she folds one leg under herself and clasps her hands in her lap, staring down at them.

Tom sits down facing her, and after a moment he says, "Rachel," and she looks up, seeing a smile on his face and finding a matching one on hers almost automatically.

"Yes?"

"We need to talk about Kara's news."

It takes a second to click. "The house?"

"Yeah." He nods, and his smile vanishes as he waves his hand nervously and adds, "Or, well, it doesn't have to be one house, if you—obviously, you do have that choice."

"And you," she says gently, "and Sam, and Ashley. We all have that choice."

He just looks at her for a moment before reaching one hand out for hers. "It's safe to say that none of us are going to use it, then."

"Right." She smiles again, giving his hand a soft squeeze, and glances at the window that looks out over the back yard. "I'll be sorry to leave my garden," she says, and gets up to walk over and lean on the windowsill, "and the woods, and the house itself. It'll be quite something to live among people again."

"I'm coming over," Tom says from the bed, and a moment later, "I'm behind you." He reaches out to rest his fingertips on the outside of both arms, and even with all that warning she starts at it, and hates herself for it. He steps forward and wraps his arms around her waist and she relaxes back against him, sighing. "Are you having second thoughts?" he asks.

"No," Rachel says without hesitation. "I'm glad for my time here, with all of you, and I'll be glad for my time wherever we end up. But I'll mourn this place, as well. Have you ever missed a place like that, like it almost had a human soul?"

"No," Tom says, turning his face into her neck so that the next words are muffled. "I don't think I ever stayed in one place long enough."

"Well, it's probably better not to. I bring this angst upon myself."

"Or you just have such a huge heart, some part of it is bound to be hurting at all times."

She presses her lips together and presses back into him, silent, and he laughs against her neck.

"Lunch time," he says, squeezing her again and then letting go.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

My playlist for this fic is here.

\begin{verbatim}
All the time, all the time,
I think of you all the time.
All the time, all the time,
I think of you all the time.
\end{verbatim}

Suddenly, this is normal, like jumping into a lake when the water's almost the same temperature as the air and you can barely feel the difference. It's easy for Tom and he makes it easy for Rachel, despite her inexperience and her nerves. Very little has to change, in reality. They sleep in the same bed and Rachel sheds her second skin (distance, distance, distance) and she looks away less, avoids him less, moves toward him more.

It's easy because this is the way it was meant to be, this is the way things fall into place when she stops fighting every single second of her life.

It's so, so easy.

So it's like a shock of ice water the moment that first week ends and Sasha walks through the front door, once more, unannounced. Rachel only has time to freeze in place and turn before Tom is walking into the hall from the kitchen, dish towel in hand, and she gestures to Sasha.

He stops for a moment, surprised, and Sasha walks forward, holding her hand out for Rachel to shake.

"Rachel," she says. "We never did get properly introduced."

"Right," Rachel says, looking automatically to Tom before forcing herself to meet Sasha's eyes and smile. "Sasha. Lovely to meet you." It isn't a very good lie.

The next moment, Tom's arm is around her as he ushers her away a bit, holding one finger up for Sasha to wait. He places himself between them, a wall, and waits until she looks up to meet his eyes. Then he smiles.

"I'm sure she's just checking in," he says, "or trying to get under my skin, but either way, it isn't you, okay? You're fine. We're fine."

She looks up at him, breathing slowly, and says, "Of course." She can't quite bring herself to smile, but he leans down to kiss her anyway, his hands spread on her back, steady.

Without moving away, he shifts his mouth to her ear and says, "Join the kids in Sam's room. I'll come up when we're done." He rubs his hands up and down her back and adds, "Relax. I love you."

She does smile at that, beaming as he straightens up and smiles in response. He walks her to the stairs and squeezes her hand before leaving her to climb, and her stomach drops and she doesn't look back.
In Sam's room, the kids are building a space station out of Legos. Rachel sits on the floor and offers pointers as the only person in the room who's actually been inside anything approaching a space station—which is, in this case, anything at all related to any field of science.

They don't get far before Tom is pushing open the door and calling the kids to him, speaking with them quietly for a moment and then sending them downstairs. He walks over to Rachel next, offering a hand to help her up and then drawing her into his arms and holding her for a moment.

"Sasha's taking the kids out for a bit," he says. "I thought I'd make you supper."

"Okay," she says back, opening her eyes when he releases her and takes her hand to lead her downstairs.

They descend the stairs in silence, and he leaves her at a stool and moves to the sink to wash his hands.

Almost as soon as she's settled, she blurts out, "What did you tell her?" and he shuts off the sink, turning to look at her.

Walking back around the island, he sits on the next stool and slides hers nearer, as close as it will go, then rests his hands on her thighs and says, "Not much. She looked at me and said, 'You're happy. You aren't coming back.'"

"Are you happy?"

He looks at her strangely before smoothing his hands up around behind her, pulling her slowly forward until she's in his lap, and she presses her knees into his hips, hooking her feet around the poles on the back of his stool and wrapping her arms around his neck.

He keeps one arm tight around her back, the other hand coming up to cup the back of her neck, and says, "I'm happier than I've been in a long time. Which... feels... awful, sometimes, but if all I can do... if the only thing I'm good for in this godforsaken world is to keep my own family safe, then God, I'm happy to be good for it."

She's crying before he's done speaking and his grip tightens reflexively.

"Sorry, sorry, I should've just said yes."

"No," she laughs. "I'm—no, I'm just pregnant. I'm a mess."

"A beautiful mess," he says quietly, relaxing slightly. "Not that I would use that word, but you know you're so beautiful."

"What were we talking about?" she says, and laughs again, shifting without really moving away. "I think you were going to make dinner."

"I can make dinner," he says, smile in his voice. "If you're done crying, I'll make dinner."

"I'm done, I'm done."

Leaning back, she wipes at her own face and then lets Tom take over, cradling her face and drying it with his thumbs as she braces her hands on his shoulders. When he's done, he kisses her, both of them smiling into it.

Sasha leaves and Rachel realizes that it actually is okay, maybe. The kids help move all of Rachel's
things into Tom's room, and ask for her to help tuck them in at night. It's normal, and easy, even though it's something Rachel has never done before. It's easy, and starts to become normal enough for Rachel to stop marvelling at how normal it feels every single day.

On one of those normal nights, she's tucking Sam into bed when he says, half-asleep, "Thanks, Rachel. Love you."

She presses her lips together, trying to stave off tears as she leans over to kiss his forehead. "Love you too, sweetheart. Sleep tight." Standing up, she switches off the lamp and walks to the door, wiping her eyes with one hand and reaching for Tom's with the other.

He takes it and leads her back to their room, where he presses a kiss to her hair and says, "I'll be back," before leaving the room and closing the door behind him. She stays frozen there for a moment, in the middle of the room, and listens to his steps descend the stairs. When she can't hear him anymore, she moves slowly to change and brush her teeth, her ears still tuned to a returning tread.

Nothing.

She sits down on the edge of the bed, leaning on her hands and waiting. This bed still doesn't feel like hers; theirs, yes, sure, but not hers.

And he's not coming back.

So she gets up and opens the door silently, listening once more and then crossing the landing and stepping into what once was her room. Climbing into the neatly made bed, she pulls the covers up to her ear and closes her eyes, trying to convince herself that sleep is possible.

When she wakes up, she feels something solid against her side, and reaches out with her hand before opening her eyes to find a wall of pillows and Tom on the other side of it. She doesn't always startle awake when touched; certainly it happens far less often now than on the ship, and rarely when they've gone to bed together. The fact that he's done this is both a sign of his infinite care for her and a reminder that everything seems wrong.

She tosses the nearest pillows down the bed and kicks at the further ones, clearing the bed and waking Tom up in the process. When she's done, she moves just a little bit closer, so it isn't the entire bed between them, and then she looks at his face.

"Rachel," he says, and she hasn't met his eyes but she doesn't plan to, just nods to show she's listening. "I'm sorry about last night."

She trains her eyes on his chin and attempts to fortify herself before asking, "What happened?"

"I was faced with a question," he says, "and I had to find an answer before I could sleep. But in the end, the only answer I could find was to ask another question."

That... was not helpful, and the look she gives him conveys her level of tolerance for nonsense.

"Okay, that sounds like a terrible novel about an unemployed English professor. I'm sorry, and I'm sorry for leaving you alone, and I'm sorry for scaring you. But the question is for you.

"Rachel..." He keeps his eyes on hers, even as she doesn't look back, and inhales slowly. "Do you love me?"

The human brain's primal response to a threat: fight, flight, or freeze. She knows this isn't a threat,
isn't anything close to it, but her body freezes, her breath halting in her chest, saliva drying up, fingers curling against the sheets.

After a moment, he says gently, "You can say no," and she smiles, her eyes locked on his chin.

"Why would I ever say no?"

He exhales hard, eyes closing briefly, and when they open again she meets them, still smiling. "I just thought, maybe... there was a reason you weren't saying it."

Shifting closer, she reaches a hand out to run down his arm and find his, bringing their hands up between them and looking down as she says, "About a hundred reasons." She faces him again and adds, "None of which have anything to do with you. I think I just got used to not saying it."

That, she thinks, was too revealing, but as she looks back at him and sees the soft edge of love in his eyes, she relents and gives it all up. "I had to keep it to myself for a long time, and so I got good at that. Not so good at the other."

His expression doesn't change, and she basks in the warmth of it for a moment before leaning up to kiss him. It's the first time she kisses him less because she wants to and more because she wants to put off the next step, which is absolutely ridiculous considering she just said it in other words. Still, she takes a moment, focuses on his touch, then pulls back and sighs, letting her eyes trace over his face before finally looking into his eyes.

"I do love you," she says, and takes another careful breath to stave off tears. "I haven't spent much of my life in love, but—I've never been as certain of it, either. I love you." She closes her eyes, and the tears find their way past her lashes. "I love you," she says again, and Tom drops his chin to press his lips to her forehead, gathering her closer in his arms.

"I'm so thankful for you," he says back, and she can't help breaking down into full tears, shuddering silently as he tucks her under his chin and wraps his arms tight around her. After a minute, he asks somewhat nervously, "Still the pregnancy?"

"Yes!" she says, laughing and pulling away to wipe her face and show him a smile. "You've seen me on some of the worst days of my life, in which alternate universe would I ever cry like this?"

"True, but you also know how I respond to tears."

"Something like a mother polar bear."

"So you spend a few months in the arctic and now you're an expert on polar bears?"

"I know quite a lot about a great many things."

He nods like that's an established fact, then says, "What can I do to make it up to you?"

Turning onto her back, Rachel looks up at the ceiling and says, "What, precisely, are you making up?"

"Leaving you," he says seriously. "Letting you down. Giving you reason to doubt me."

She turns back to face him, placing one hand on his cheek. "You are too hard on yourself," she says, "but I was mildly concerned about you being in a different room of our house, so let me think, how can you make it up to me."
Her first thought is sex, and her second thought is also sex, if more specific. She doesn't like asking for things, especially when it's such an ordinary thing that you normally wouldn't have to ask but she's already made it difficult for both of them.

"Tom," she starts, watching her hand as she moves it to comb through his hair, "do you remember the night you arrived?"

"Of course."

"Do you remember... what I said no to?"

He looks stricken, like she's brought it up as punishment, and she isn't sure if this is going to work at all.

"This is a good thing," she says reassuringly. "If, that is, it didn't scare you too badly when I said no, because I know it did. But if you can, if you're willing, I'd like to take back that no."

"Really," he says, slightly wary but considering her closely. "It's not always a no for you?"

She drops her chin, shaking her head. "I could never bear to be that vulnerable around anyone," she says, before looking up and bringing both hands to rest on his cheeks. "Anyone but you," she says, and smiles as sweetly as she knows how.

He smirks, just long enough and smug enough for Rachel to get nervous, and then he says, "You won't regret it," and she leans back a bit, eyebrows going up.

"All right, I don't need any convincing. I'll just take a quick shower—" She starts to turn but Tom catches her in his arms and brings her in close to his chest, pressing his face to her hair.

"No," he says, and she frowns a little.

"If you'll only be comfortable after a shower, my love, you can of course have a shower. I just like the way you smell now."

Well, when you put it that way. Rachel tends to like the way Tom smells before his showers too, which has scientific explanations she can't seem to access right now but which can probably be put down to 'primal.' She is slightly nervous, but only because of her past experiences. There's no way Tom will make this anything less than heavenly for her. So, if he likes her smell, he can have it.

"Okay," she says, laughing. "You'd better commit to that standpoint now."

"Trust me," he says.

"Oh, I do. I haven't a single doubt."

He stays with his face in his hair for a bit, his chest rising and falling against hers, then he moves her hair out of the way and presses his mouth to the underside of her jaw. Easing her back onto the bed, he slips his hands up under the hem of her top and smooths them over her belly. She sighs, shifting under him, and lifts her arms for him to pull the top off over her head.

Returning his mouth to that same spot below her jaw, he grazes his hands over the entirety of her torso and she shivers, goosebumps breaking out in response. Pulling back, he sweeps his hands up on either side of her neck to frame her face and looks into her eyes.
"Okay?" he says, and she smiles, nodding. He smiles back and stays there for a minute, just looking at her as her smile drops away and her hands come up to cradle the back of his head, and then he moves in to kiss her and runs his hands back down over her body.

As he moves his mouth to follow after his hands, Rachel closes her eyes and reminds herself to breathe, the only sounds her own breaths and the shifting of her hips against the sheets. He pauses a moment near her belly button, whispering words to the foetus somewhere inside her abdomen, and Rachel makes a mental note to find (steal) an ultrasound machine if they stay here much longer.

Pressing a last kiss to her belly, he slides his fingers under the waistband of her pants and underwear and Rachel tips her hips up for him to pull them off. When he moves back in between her legs, she really has to focus on drawing in a full breath, her fingers curling around the sheets at her sides, even as he hovers there without touching her.

"Tom," she says, squeezing her eyes tighter shut. "For the love of God."

"I'm here," he says back, humour in his voice, and she feels his hands run over her thighs, up over her hips and belly and back down to lift her thighs up onto his shoulders, only to stop moving again when she squeaks slightly at the movement. "Rachel..."

"I'm fine, Tom, for God's sake."

He laughs, his breath brushing against her, and Rachel huffs out a breath, twisting her hands in the sheets and then pulling when he finally puts his mouth on her. She tugs on the sheet in order to keep her hips still, his hands smoothing over her belly and down over her thighs.

A minute later he gently detaches and she gasps at the shock of air before he covers her with his hand, moving up beside her as she tries to regain her bearings.

"What are you doing?" she asks, and he presses a kiss to her cheek before speaking into her ear.

"I have an idea." He slips one hand under her and rolls onto his back, guiding her up over him and then up further, until she's kneeling over his face and she grabs for the headboard, leaning her weight on it and dropping her forehead down to rest on the back of her hand.

"Fuck," she breathes, and he wraps his hands around her waist, squeezing gently to tell her to lower herself down, which she does very carefully, exhaling hard when they make contact. "God."

It takes a little trial and error to get just right, but when they do Rachel is certain she's never felt anything as good, her eyes squeezed shut and her mouth dropping open as she pulls lungfuls of air in and pushes them out, leaning on the headboard and rocking against his mouth. He does something with his tongue and brings his hands down to cup and squeeze her ass, and some part of that worked or all of it worked and she's coming hard, knuckles white on the headboard as she tries desperately to keep from absolutely smothering Tom.

When the wave has passed and she's come back to herself, she's kneeling on shaking legs over Tom's face and she has no idea how she's ever going to move, afraid she'll just collapse there, but then Tom wraps his hands around her waist and picks her up like she's a doll, moving her as he turns until they're both lying together on the bed.

Tom curls around her and she takes a big breath and sighs, not wanting to move for a while as all her limbs feel like jello. She's worried about her muscles and should probably stretch before she does anything else, but for now, a rest.

"Love you," she says, and it gets a little easier every time she does, a little more like breathing.
"I love you too."

"You know you can be honest with me," she goes on, an echo from what feels like a very long time ago, a different universe.

"I know. I'm sorry."

"We're doing better," she says, on a sigh that doubles as a yawn. "We just gotta keep doing better."

"We will. We've got three kids to help us."

She goes silent, and sleep is dragging on her mind but she manages to say, "Never thought of it as a kid."

"Doctor versus dad," he says, smile in his voice.

"That okay?"

"Yes, love. It's more than okay."

She lets herself fall asleep, and they're both woken some time later by the strange ring of the sat phone, unfamiliar now to both of them. Tom rolls over to answer it while she stays where she is, trying to stay awake until he rolls back over and wraps himself around her.

"We have a move-in date."

THE END

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